

Ontology and Marxism: From Marcuse to *Ch'ixi*
Epistemology

Ontología y marxismo: De Marcuse a la
epistemología *Ch'ixi*

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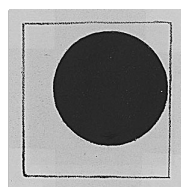
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Teoría y crítica para un presente desesperanzado: apuntes para el mundo contemporáneo

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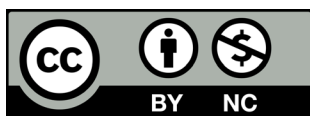
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Resumen: La teoría crítica de la Escuela de Frankfurt es bien conocida por su perspectiva de raíz marxista. Se trata de una concepción que es fuerte en el cuestionamiento de las relaciones de clase, la crítica de las patologías de la razón y la cultura de masas, entre otras temáticas. Sin embargo, la Escuela de Frankfurt (especialmente en su primera generación) no llega a cuestionar la colonialidad del saber o la raíz profundamente eurocéntrica del pensamiento filosófico hegemónico. A pesar de que los autores de la Escuela de Frankfurt no se abren a explorar directamente la relación de la teoría crítica con formas de pensamiento que difieren del eurocentrismo imperante, el presente trabajo decide explorar esta relación en el ámbito de la ontología. Más específicamente, se explora la relación entre el marxismo ontológico de Herbert Marcuse y la epistemología *Ch'ixi*. El establecimiento de esta inesperada conexión permite trazar puentes entre la teoría crítica y formas de pensamiento no-hegemónicas que se articulan más allá de las coordenadas europeas.

Palabras clave: Teoría crítica, marxismo fenomenológico, Herbert Marcuse, ontología marxista, marxismo latinoamericano.

Abstract: The critical theory of the Frankfurt School is well known for its Marxist-rooted perspective. It is a framework that strongly questions class relations, critiques the pathologies of reason, and mass culture, among other topics. However, the Frankfurt School (especially in its first generation) does not go as far as to question the coloniality of knowledge or the deeply Eurocentric roots of hegemonic philosophical thought. Although the authors of the Frankfurt School do not directly engage in exploring the relationship between critical theory and forms of thought that differ from the prevailing Eurocentrism, this paper aims to explore this relationship in the realm of ontology. More specifically, it examines the relationship between Herbert Marcuse's ontological Marxism and the epistemology of *Ch'ixi*. Establishing this unexpected connection allows for building bridges between critical theory and non-hegemonic forms of thought that articulate themselves beyond European coordinates.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Phenomenological Marxism, Herbert Marcuse, Marxist Ontology, Latin-American Marxism.

¹With the rise and the decline of the new left, the role of H. Marcuse in the theorizing of utopia has allowed the conceptualization of new social facts such as social movements. However, Marcuse, who possessed the most political temperament of the entire circle of intellectuals surrounding Horkheimer, has been overshadowed by his historical role as a political teacher and inspiration (Habermas 2001, 234). Marcuse's theoretical bet, as the Marxist and socialist that he recognized himself, has an obvious political component: the construction of a qualitatively different society. Nevertheless, the social movements that Marcuse discussed have been uniformly taken up by the global north. Either under the notion of intersectionality, or under the authoritarianism of the Polit Bureau, the racial and gender movements of the global south present a different proposal: imbrication or the *Ch'ixi* (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020).

The “working class still is the “ontological” antagonist of capital, and the potentially revolutionary Subject” (Marcuse, 1979, p. 20), but its transforming role has drifted due to the advancement of social measures that cover up exploitation. In this sense, exposing how, hand in hand with the Marcusean dialectic, it is possible to understand the political and organizational conceptual articulation of social movements of the south allows us to glimpse the path to utopia.

The *Great Refusal*, developed by André Breton, “who defended the total rejection of institutions, values and way of life in bourgeois society” (Kellner 1984, 279), can also be understood as the negation of different forms of: political, social and economic exploitation of the global north on the one hand, but, in turn, of the epistemic domination and awareness with which the north seeks to subjugate the emancipatory bets of the south on the other.

Consequently, and trying to appropriate the concepts and understandings of the native Americans, Rivera-Cusicanqui (2020) raises the *Ch'ixi* concept as an ontological and historical

1 This paper was prepared within the framework of the research project Political and Landscape Ontologies in Latin America financed by Universidad Libre, Colombia and the research project “Subjetividad sin exclusión: un estudio desde el contexto latinoamericano” financed by Fundación Universitaria Los Libertadores, Colombia.

element that enables the interaction in different ways, of different feelings and accidents in the same subject or the same society. The divided soul, not only as a metaphor but as an ontological category in which the different characteristics accentuated in the being are divided, is what in the Aymara language was called *pä chuyima* (Cusicanqui 2020).

Marcuse's perspective of socialism, understood as a "qualitatively different society, [which] must embody the antithesis, the ultimate negation of the aggressive and repressive needs and values of capitalism" (Marcuse 1974, 288), can be articulated under the *Cb'ixi* paradigm as a moment of contradiction, liberation not only economic or political, but also ontological. This moment, in any case, corresponds to Marcuse's early interest in developing a Marxist-Heideggerian model in which ontology, as a way of inhabiting the world, is represented in different ways in a single subject: the proletariat (Marcuse 2005, 1-33; 2009, 5).

1. Subjectivity and Proletariat:

The concept of subjectivity is a transversal element in the work and life of the different members of the Institute for Social Research (*I/S*). Whether from Hegel and his Philosophy of the Spirit, from Marx and his proletariat as a revolutionary agent or from the self as the internalization of Freud's drives, Frankfurt subjectivity is nourished by different traditions and, therefore, results in a multipolar concept that depends not only on the intellectual, but also of the work and the moment in which each author finds himself.

The centrality of the proletariat in Marxianism and Marxism has been a crucial point for the development and consolidation of critical Marxism and post-Marxism in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Kouvelakis outlined that "Marxism is guilty of *essentialism* and, as a consequence, increasingly [is] unable to capture the forms of subjectivation that prevail in contemporary conjunctures" (2021, 342) and, in the face of this problem, different theoretical bets have advanced to address the problem.

On the one hand, A. Negri and M. Hardt, with the conceptualization of a new historical

subject that can include the different figures of the oppressed, constructed their Multitude, a "class concept" (Negri & Hardt 2004, 103) that tends towards plurality as opposed to uniqueness².

For Negri and Hardt, Multitude is defined as singularities "that act in common" (2004, 105), and with this definition, as they explain, it is possible to understand what Marx and Engels called the proletariat or working class and many other forms organizational or spontaneous of singular individuals who come together for a common purpose. In that sense, Multitude corresponds much more to the notion of Collective Action that Mancur Olson (1971) developed in his work *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* where individuals come together to achieve a common objective.

The "working class" in the 19th and 20th centuries, Hardt and Negri outline, "is fundamentally a restricted concept based on exclusions. In its most limited conception, the working class refers only to industrial work and therefore excludes all other working classes" (2004, 106). Under this analysis, peasants, domestic workers, office workers and any activity that was not within the framework of industrial production could not be understood as part of the working class.

Thus, and taking into account that the authors of this paper consider that the diagnosis provided by Hardt and Negri is consistent, it is essential to evaluate how, from the critical tradition, the concept of subjectivity in Marxism can be diagnosed and reinterpreted in the light of the contemporary reality. For this purpose, the methodological framework on which we concentrate focuses on the notion of criticism, "the term criticism", Callinicos, Kouvelakis and Pradella outline, "implies not simply a negative or destructive criticism, but an attempt to identify the limits ignoring what leads to error" (2021, 3).

² Negri and Hardt use the concept of Unity. However, the translation we use here refers to uniqueness since the authors refer to the unitary, almost essential, concentration of the subject in a single concept. Uniqueness/unity, in the words of Hardt and Negri, consists of the "simplification of class categories so that all forms of work tend to merge into a single subject, the proletariat" (Negri & Hardt 2004, 103).

2. Herbert Marcuse: an ontology situated in Marxism.

The concept of subjectivity for Marcuse was a problem to study throughout his life. Whether in his doctoral thesis *Hegel's Ontology and Theory of Historicity* (1932), in his writings on Heideggerian Marxism, in *The One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and even in his *Paris Conferences* (1974), the question about subjectivity radical was one of the central themes to investigate.

Already in 1967 Marcuse outlined that “the ‘proletariat’ was no longer a revolutionary force in advanced countries” (2021a, 25), so the “expansion of the potential subject of change was necessary: working class in the strict sense (proletariat) to the ‘work force’ as the entire population dependent on capital” (Marcuse 2021a, 60). Marcuse’s central argument for this revolutionary proposal of Marxism was outlined in the fact that the Marxian proletariat, that is, the factory and peasant proletariat, had lost the transformative potential of reality.

Marcuse (1979) always asserted that the proletariat was the ontologically antagonistic class of the bourgeoisie, which is why he continued to contemplate a Marxist structure of society and revolution, but he found a tension between being in itself and being for itself. The proletariat was historically the subject called for the revolution (Marcuse, 1979, 20), since “no specific group can replace, the working class as the subject and agent of radical social change” (Marcuse 2021b, 64-65), but transformative consciousness, revolutionary, it no longer remained in this political subject (Bedoya Cortés, 2023, 244).

Thus, Marcuse envisioned in the New Left movements the possibility of a catalyst for radical social transformation. These movements, in any case, had a critical awareness of the existing reality; a radical subjectivity that would allow, according to him, to advance the process of human liberation.

Radical subjectivity refers to the development of a form of self-consciousness that finds present social and economic conditions intolerable (Kellner 1999, 3). The radical act is a rejection of these conditions and an orientation towards social transformation.

Thus, for Marcuse, the need for social change includes class struggle but cannot be reduced to it. There is a multiplicity of social groups in our society that seek social change for various reasons. There are multiple forms of oppression and repression that make revolution desirable. Therefore, the art form produced, and its revolutionary vision can be determined by a multiplicity of oppressed/repressed subject positions.

The subjectivity of individuals, their own consciousness and unconsciousness tends to dissolve in class consciousness. In this way, an important prerequisite of the revolution is minimized, namely the fact that the need for radical change “must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals” (Marcuse 1978, 3-4).

Hand in hand with this notion of liberation and the new multiple consciousness of the oppressed, Marcuse sought to conceptualize a Marxist ontology. This was due to the need to find a link between historical materialism and Heideggerian phenomenology and ontology since, as Feenberg (2021) outlines, Marcuse showed that the way of life that was presented in capitalism was essentially determined in its relationship with nature, and this was evident in the mode of production.

3. Marcuse’s ontological and phenomenological Marxism.

The relationship between Marxism, ontology and phenomenology was one of the most developed points in the seventies of the 20th century by different critical theorists in Europe and North America. Whether through the *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins* (1984) by Georg Lukács or *Marx’s Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx’s Theory of Social Reality* (1978) by Carol Gould, the intention to reconstruct or find an ontological notion in Marx’s work was one of the fundamental stakes of the theoretical exercise of critical Marxism.

Relating two traditions so apparently dissimilar would seem an aberrant exercise for orthodox Marxism and a titanic task for critical Marxism. However, Herbert Marcuse, due to his closeness to both Marxism and the ontolog-

ical-phenomenological tradition, sought early in his intellectual life to construct this theoretical relationship³. Marcuse foresaw in the roots of historical materialism the possibility of rooting phenomenological and ontological criticism, since, unlike transcendental phenomenology and existential ontology, historical materialism found in social phenomena the material determination of being. Likewise, the Berliner found in phenomenology and existential ontology the interpretive framework that allowed giving strength to the social situation of being beyond sensible phenomena.

Marcuse began by suggesting “that the world of beings is divided into species and genera, subsumed under the highest categories, and known through universal concepts, it is the philosophical substrate of the problem of essence” (Marcuse 2009, 33). In this way, Marcuse presented a direct relationship with the Aristotelian thought that he had built in *The Categories* (Aristotle 1982) a relationship that subsumed the material and immaterial world into classes according to qualities and numbers.

The tension between essence and existence, which was already evident in Plato and which Aristotle had reproduced, could only be overcome by Christian philosophy which, with the help of Thomas Aquinas, had managed to outline through the theology that “Essentia is [...] the internal structure of existence, in which it operates as a principle of form for each species of being” (Marcuse 2009, 34). When referring to finite beings, however, the sharp division between existence and ontology was transformed, according to Aquinas, into pure potentiality, a transcendental potentiality that allowed the subject to be situated existentially but continued with the separation between essence and existence⁴.

3 As seen in his writings after the 1930s, Marcuse abandoned the project of a phenomenological or Heideggerian Marxism.

4 In this regard, it is essential to highlight the criticism that Hegel made in his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, stating that “in the course of this contemplation of God through the understanding, the question of which predicates are appropriate or not suitable for what we understand comes to light. We represent as God [...] the concept as understood by the understanding is left only in the end with the empty abstraction of the indeterminate

Descartes, due to the *liberum arbitrium* that was brewing with the end of the Middle Ages, sought a logical foundation for the problem of essence. Thus, hand in hand with his *ego cogito*, he placed the being in the task of realizing all its potentiality and, in turn, in the words of Marcuse “he committed the original sin of modern philosophy [...] he placed a concept completely abstract of the individual at the base of the theory” (2009, 36).

The abstract individual, as the subject and essence of modern philosophy, condemned the subject of modernity to understand its historical situation and to rebel against it (Marcuse 2005a, 6), so philosophical criticism became a criticism of the pure thought. This philosophy renounced qualitative philosophical analysis, which was based on truth and a telos, namely “the correct theory of man” (Marcuse 2021a, 4). For this reason, and due to the renunciation by this philosophy that man “can better fulfill his specifically human faculties and aspirations” (Marcuse 2021a, 4), traditional theory subsumed its relationship with social reality (Horkheimer 2004, p. 58).

4. Historical materialism and the situated subject.

Historical materialism, as a theory that focused on production relations as a determining form of social roles and the living of subjects, made it possible to understand the situated essence, the potentially limited essence that the being found in social reality. Thus, “materialist theory transcends [...] the given state of fact and advances towards a different potentiality, proceeding from the immediate appearance to the essence that appears in it” (Marcuse 2009, 49).

Starting from the relations of production allowed, on the one hand, to generate spatio-temporal frameworks in which the subject was circumscribed, elucidating the ahistorical subject that idealist philosophy had outlined but, at the same time, it required transforming the individualistic and absolute subject that had upheld this tradition.

essence, of pure reality or positivity, the dead product of the modern Enlightenment” (Hegel 1986, §36).

Thus, circumscribing the subject under a determined environment under the economic relations of each time and place, proposed the introduction of Marxian social dialectics, namely, a struggle for recognition and improvement/defence between social subjects as a form of historical development (Bedoya-Cortés 2021, 83-84). This led, in general terms, to outlining a dichotomy between the oppressed and the oppressors which, in capitalism, was posed as the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In this antagonistic relationship between proletariat and bourgeoisie it was outlined that, in a reified world, where “work relations are no longer ‘essentially’ related to the potentialities of men” (Marcuse 2009, 37), due to division of labour, it is necessary to resort to social transformation to match human potential with the reality that determines them. Historical materialism outlined that, based on the prevailing economic system, the surplus value resulting from the process of transforming raw materials into commodities is appropriated by the bourgeois and not by the true – *wirkliche* – producer of the transformation.

In this way, a tension took place between reality – *Realität* – and effective reality – *Wirklichkeit* – since, apparently, it is the bourgeois who produces commodities through the use of available labour power and the proletariat, on the other hand, was commissioned to a job for which he received remuneration. This tension between appearance and reality, inherited from German idealism, had been transmuted by Marx and Engels to social reality, thus constructing a “materialist dialectic as social theory” (Marcuse 1978, 12).

Lukács clearly outlines how Engels when “in his eulogy on Marx, [...] speaks of the ‘simple fact’ that ‘people must first of all eat, drink, live and clothe before they engage in politics, science, art, religion, etc.’, it also speaks exclusively of this ontological priority” (1984, 83) because the material needs and its social and historical context, in any case, they determine the ontological course of human beings.

However, as Katz (1993) and Heinrich (2004) mention, Marx never developed a theory that treated the world universally, but rather, in light of the development of the productive

forces, each society had to carry out an analysis of the correlation of forces in order to propose a path for emancipation (Gramsci 2011). In this sense, the ontological, political and economic analysis in Latin America needs a specific contextual and historical analysis; an analysis that focuses on the – material – realities of Southwestern human beings and, furthermore, based on the fact that in South America classes did not appear under the same manifestations as in Europe, it is necessary to break “down the dimensions of the concept, of those elements the concept has synthesised or put together” (Modonesi 2019, 111).

Thus, understanding the “rationalization of economic life, social relations and the dominant intellectual forms” (Kouvelakis 2020, 44) as a form of social conditioning of subjects, is represented in wage-exploitation as the culmination point of knowledge and the social and productive roles of non-white people in Latin America.

In this sense, and taking into account that “[f]or Lukács the dominance of capital in production leads to the separation of the abstract, objective process of production from the personality, the psychic life and the distinctive, individual qualities of the people who serve it – regardless of whether they are their owners or workers” (Kouvelakis 2021, 45), it is essential to understand that in Europa, for example, it happens because there is almost any remarkable difference between subjects. However, since colonization, personality played and plays a specific role in the process of production since “personality” is a social construction developed by the differences between races and gender (Quijano 2014).

Thus, and understanding that “the ‘always irrational and thus only qualitatively determinable abilities of the worker’ (Lukács 1984, 94–95) that are violently subjected to the demands of a system external to them” (Kouvelakis 2021, 45), is that one can understand the clash of two conceptions of the world [*Lebenswelt*] between the European world and the colonized world: The abilities of workers were established by racial difference and, thus, it creates what has been called the racial division of labour. The historical experience, as “the fundamental common experience of the members of bourgeois

society” (Kouvelakis 2021, 45), allows us to understand the «clash of worlds» between colonizers and colonized.

The realistic ethos, “that accepts what exists and expands the circuits of subordination” (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020, 67; Echeverría 2000) has been followed by South American Marxism, reproducing the notions of progress typical of liberal thought and generating a theoretical framework that is responsible for continuing the political project of liberalism. However, the *Baroque ethos*, allow us to understand the resistance against the “internal colonization processes and subverts them while living with them” (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020, 68). However, the temporal-locative component of Ch’ixi – as a form of simultaneous articulation of the recognition of exploitation (subalternity) and the confrontation against the oppressors (antagonism) – allows us to understand the simultaneity that Echeverría outlined through his baroque ethos and his realistic ethos; namely that “the victorious forms are reconfigured by incorporating the defeated forms” (2000, xx).

Thus, analyzing how the material (ontological) conditions of the indigenous and black peoples of South America, through a Marxist Political Economy of race, can explain racial struggles as part of the proletarian struggle is raised as a necessary question to conceptualize Latin American contemporaneity (past-future⁵) and, in turn, counteract the “new academic canon, [using] a world of references and counter-references that establishes hierarchies and adopts new gurus: Mignolo, Dussel, Walsh, Sanjinés [who ,] [d]endowed with cultural and symbolic capital thanks to recognition and certification from the academic centres of the United States [...] they are in charge of giving support to the theoretical, racialized and exoticizing multiculturalism of the academies.” (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2010, 65).

5 The past-future is “that zone of friction where opposites face each other, without peace, without calm, in a permanent state of friction and electrification [...] [which] makes it possible for cognitive situations to arise that from the Euro-North American logic would be unthinkable, such as the idea that the past can be viewed as the future” (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020, 84), as spaces that, “simultaneously[,] are inhabited from the present” (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020, 84).

Thus, the interpretive work of a young Marcuse who attempts to redefine and correlate Marxism with a Heideggerian phenomenology allows us to glimpse the material, social, and cultural realities of indigenous peoples through their relationship with Ch’ixi epistemology. In this way, the construction of a life-world endowed with social reality and social and historical determinations that emphasize the ways in which the being/subject develops can be glimpsed in a new conception of Latin American *Lebenswelten* that, together with Marcuse’s critical Marxism, rejects any form of ontological approximation distanced from a concrete material reality but, at the same time, distances itself from dogmatic and orthodox readings of Marxism that seek to see in Latin American subjects the same social and historical dynamics of the Global North.

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