

Power and Necessity of Abstraction in Marx

Roberto Nigro

Plato was obliged to have recourse to the “ideas” as philosophical concepts to put things in order in the Greek city. In a community of free men as rivals, each citizen lays claim to something. Then, how to judge the validity of claims? The city invents the *agôn* and Plato formulates a criterion for judging the validity of different claims: the “idea” as the authority managing rivalries.¹ Nearly 2400 years later, Alain Badiou, who claims to be a “sophisticated” Platonist, asserts that we must be capable of thinking how truths appear; he does not uphold that truths pre-exist in a separate “intelligible place” before becoming mundane and that they are born simply by descending from the heavens above; but the core of his argument is that a truth is a singular body that enters into a differentiating relation with an infinity of other bodies according to the rules of a logic of relation.² If in the Deleuzian and Guattarian interpretation Plato’s recourse to the “idea” emerges almost as the attempt to interrupt the *agôn*, the endless struggle among the claimants, in Badiou’s account, truth that appears is a pure multiplicity and such a multiplicity is plucked from the void.³ If ontology, as discourse on being, is historically accomplished as mathematics, one can reasonably call logic a formal theory of relations.

For more than 2500 years western thought has dealt with abstractions. And its history has not yet come to an end. Our civilization took shape in the form of abstraction. Philosophy, which was the main form our culture assumed, is a creative activity producing concepts; and concepts are given in the form of abstraction. One could assume that the form thought takes in the very act of thinking is the abstraction. But from what does thought abstract in the act of thinking? Moreover, does it make sense to say that it abstracts from *something*? If we call this *something* reality, how can we define the kind of relationship existing between abstractions and reality?

In order to disentangle some of these questions, I would like to turn my attention to Marx in the next few pages. There are several reasons to (*re*)-turn to Marx while posing this kind of question. Of course, one of the main motives depends on the crucial role that the question of abstraction plays in his work. But secondly, and probably more importantly, this is due to the peculiar pathway Marx’ approach opened up in contemporary thought. Setting out from the critique of both empiricism and idealism (which includes the critique of the empiricism of the subject and its inverse: the transcendental subject, the critique of the idealism of the concept and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept)⁴, Marx’s materialism leads to some of the crucial issues at the forefront of contemporary discussions in human sciences. His methodological and epistemological approach set the way to a critique of universals such as we know it today through the work of Michel Foucault, for instance.

But let’s explain some of the issues at stake in this trajectory step by step.

It is largely admitted that Marx inserted a radical break in people's historical and political consciousness, and that the Marxist theory of society did inaugurate an entirely new epistemological field. What is less acknowledged is the profound epistemological, conceptual, and philosophical revolution he introduced in the discursive space of modernity. Marx brought to collapse the soil of our knowledge (in Marx's terms, such a soil was referred to as classical political economy and philosophy as he had learnt it, from the tradition which ran from Plato to Hegel). But, by the same token, he deeply contributed to settle a new methodological and epistemological configuration of our modern knowledge.

Marx's project develops in the form of a critique. It is not the first time since the epoch of Kant that we hear speaking of critique. But for the first time critique means analysis of the historical conditions allowing discourses to assume their validity and their value of truth. The materialistic bases of Marx's analysis are set *against* the ideology of the eighteenth century and *against* the discourses of the classical economists. In both cases the notion of abstraction will come to play a pivotal role, since Marx intends to show how it has been distorted and mystified by *philosophes* and classical political economists. By the same token, he will draw on the notion of (*determinate*) *abstraction* to display its powerful effectiveness: this is the epistemological concept through which Marx introduced in the history of thought an unprecedented revolution.

Marx speaks of *determinate* abstraction in the *Introduction of 1857* to the *Grundrisse*. He writes: "It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false".⁵ So, according to Marx, to begin with the real or the concrete as a presupposition is as naive as false. Such a methodology, consisting in extracting from the real and concrete the abstract, is part of the Robinsonades of the eighteenth century.⁶ To this false method Marx opposes a methodology that takes *the concrete as a result*. This is the scientifically correct method. "The concrete— Marx points out— is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception".⁷ Therefore, the correct method goes from the abstract to the concrete, to the determination. Determination is the product of a theoretical approximation, which utilizes general abstractions, polarities, and dimensions for this end.

In other words, truth is an objective for the analysis and not its starting point. Marx destroys every sort of fetishism of the concrete and show "the path of abstract knowledge, rising from the simple to the combined," and in so doing helps us to discover, to invent reality. Instead of "simply reproducing" reality, abstraction is the thinking process that leads to grasp antagonisms, and contradictions crossing reality. At the same time, abstraction maps out lines of flight and possible ways out. That's the reason why abstraction also is an invention.

But to say that abstraction is an invention does not mean that Marx has passed from the critique of the epistemological realism, i.e. from the critique of empiricism, to a sort of idealism. In fact, idealism would only be the other side of the same coin.⁸ Antonio Negri shed light on this aspect, when he wrote: "The process of determinate abstraction, of the approximation and of the abstract conquest of the concrete is a *collective process*, of collective knowledge. The process of determinate abstraction is entirely given inside this collective proletarian illumination: it is therefore an element of critique and a form of struggle".⁹ In other words, when

we speak of abstraction in Marx we are confronted with a process of production of truth, which calls into question the political effects of producing and telling the truth. It means that there exist different degrees of abstraction: on the one hand, the abstraction, which seeks the real in the concrete (determinate abstraction), and on the other hand, the concrete seeking in abstraction its determination (the process of the tendency). That's the reason why abstraction is simultaneously genealogical analysis of the field of forces implicated in the historical process and strategic diagnosis of the field of possibility.

But what does it mean that abstraction heads towards the diagnosis of the field of forces and tries to capture them in a process that is both of invention and of production? Through this double process going from the abstract to the concrete (in order to find in it its determination) and from the concrete to the abstract (in order to discover new possibilities), what is explored is the side of the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other.

We have already said that Marx's materialism excludes the empiricism of the subject (and its inverse: the transcendental subject) and the idealism of the concept (and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept). Marx drove the philosophical categories of the *subject*, of *empiricism*, of the *ideal essence*, etc., from all the domains in which they had been supreme.¹⁰ For Marx, abstraction can in no way be search for essences, eternal truths, or universals. Marx thinks that philosophers have formed a false idea of what an essence is (and this error is so essential to them that one can hardly imagine a philosophy without it). As Etienne Balibar writes: "They [philosophers] have thought, firstly, that the essence is an *idea* or an abstraction (one would say today, in a different terminology, a *universal concept*), under which may be ranged, in a declining order of generality, specific differences and, finally, individual differences; and, secondly, that this generic abstraction is somehow 'inherent' (*innewohnend*) in individuals of the same genus, either as a quality they possess, by which they may be classified, or even as a form or a force which causes them to exist as so many copies of the same model".¹¹

Marx rejects both the *realist* position and the *nominalist* one. He does not accept the idea that the genus or essence precedes the existence of individuals; neither, as we have seen through his critique of the concrete as presupposition and starting point for the analysis, that individuals are the primary reality, from which universals are 'abstracted'. Marx is the thinker of the relation, of the cooperation, of what happens 'among' (*tra*).¹² Abstraction must grasp the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other. These relations define what individuals have in common and constitute the common at each moment in multiple forms. This *common* is not a pre-existing *thing*, what the abstraction would bring to language. As a concept, it is an abstraction that seeks the real in the concrete.¹³ Common would be this *transindividual* reality that abstraction let think. Transindividuality as such is "Not what is ideally 'in' each individual (as a form or a substance), or what would serve, from outside, to classify that individual, but what exists *between individuals* by dint of their multiple interactions," as Balibar points out.¹⁴

Marx's rejection of both nominalism and essentialism let us go one step further on the pathway of the critique of universals. Marx's analysis does not proceed from primary, original, and already given objects or notions such as universals, from which concrete phenomena should be deduced. It accounts for a logic of relations, for practice. By reading Marx we wonder how we can decipher what happens if we do not accept a priori the existence of ready-made notions. And Marx' method promptly provides us with an answer that consists in showing that the truth is the result of practices emerging from struggles, from class struggles

and social relations. Setting out from these practices and from the understanding of the forces at work, analysis must also be able to tell in advance what possible forms the development of historical and social processes might assume (what Marx would call method of the tendency).¹⁵

However, this critique of universals sketches out further issues in Marx's critique. Let's mention in conclusion a last aspect. Marx (and Engels) had been profoundly impressed by the reading of an influential work that appeared at the end of 1844 under the signature of Max Stirner. The work in question was *The Ego and its Own*. In this book, Stirner developed a critique of all universals inasmuch as universal notions are abstractions, which means that they are fictions, as he pointed out. Stirner was meaning (although this became much more clear later through Nietzsche's critique) that the death of God signals the end of metaphysics and implies the death of all universals (be in the form of God, Man, Church, Socialism, Revolution, or Christianity...). According to Stirner, these fictions, i.e. abstractions, are perverse dominations since they are used to substitute for individuals and the thought of individuals.¹⁶

Marx will respond to this critique through an analysis that highlights where resides the power of such abstractions. So, he poses a question unprecedented in philosophy: the question of ideology and provides an answer in terms of class. The division of society into classes is a condition to also understand the structure of thought and how ideas become dominant. Marx connects the question of production of ideas with the question of domination. By doing so, he does not take away the production of discourses from the field of struggles and practices in which they are constituted. As Balibar stresses: "Marx, for his part, was seeking rather to effect a critical distinction within the very use of the concept of 'truth' by relating every statement and every category to the conditions of its elaboration and the historico-political stakes involved".¹⁷ Therefore, one could say that by posing the question of ideology Marx was not putting the question of the metaphysical distinction between error and illusion, neither was he asking for the problematic of consensus. He was raising rather the question of the conditions in which discourses are elaborated and take their form and validity.

By keeping in mind this question, let's conclude then with a last (open) remark. We know to what extent Foucault's research on these and similar issues is today at the center of epistemological, philosophical and political discussions in the human sciences. We wonder whether it would be possible for Foucault to pose the question of *parresia*, as he did in his last courses at the *Collège de France*, without the theorizations we have lastly mentioned here.¹⁸ What trajectory could have taken his inquiry on the production of truth as result of social and governmental practices and his investigation of the political effects of telling the truth without Marx' problematizations? Of course, it is an *abstract* question, and not a *philological one*. A possible encounter for a coming research!

Notes

1 cf. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 9.

2 cf. Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2011, p. 26 and p. 32.

3 Without referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Paolo Virno develops a brilliant analysis of this topic, which could be referred to as the logical basis of metaphysics. We are thinking of the question of the "infinite regress" ("e così via, all'infinito"), as Virno points it out. He interprets the history of philosophy as the history of attempts to interrupt the infinite regress. Through an in-depth analysis of texts of logic, anthropology and philosophy, he provides us with an interpretation of the ground on which politics rests. See Id., *E così via, all'infinito. Logica e Antropologia*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2010, here p. 90 and ff.

4 cf. concerning this topic the crucial analyses of Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, The Penguin Press, London, 1969, pp. 227-229.

5 cf. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books, London, 1973, p. 100.

6 Ibidem, p. 83.

7 Ibidem, p. 101.

8 cf. Paolo Vinci, "Astrazione determinata," in *Lessico Marxiano*, Manifestolibri, Roma, 2008, p. 53.

9 cf. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx. Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Pluto Press, London, 1993, p. 47.

10 cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, op. cit., p. 228.

11 cf. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 29.

12 cf. Paolo Virno, *Cooperazione*, in *Lessico Marxiano*, op. cit., p. 83.

13 The notion of "common" is at the core of the analysis developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

14 cf. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 32.

15 The critique of universals and methodological issues connected with the ways of writing history are at the core of Foucault's historical and philosophical methodology and inquiry. Cf. for instance, what he says in Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 2-3. On the method of the tendency in Marx, cf. A. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, op. cit., p. 48 and ff.

16 cf. Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy (1967)*, in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, Verso, London/New York, 2003, p. 221-305. Also Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, op. cit., p. 33-36.

17 Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, op. cit., p. 46.

18 cf. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Courses at the Collège de France 1982-83* and Id. *The Courage of Truth. Courses at the Collège de France 1983-84*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2010.

Roberto Nigro is a philosopher. He is Program Director at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. He lives mostly in Zurich and works at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), where he is a researcher at the Institute for Critical Theory, ith, and a lecturer in BA/Theory, BA/Fine Arts (Department Art and Media) and in Master of Arts in Fine Arts (MFA). Specialist in Political Philosophy, Aesthetics, French and Italian contemporary philosophy, with a special focus on the thought of Foucault, Deleuze, Marx and Marxism, he is currently working on a book project on "Theories of the coup d'état since the 17th Century". He was an archivist at the Centre Foucault (IMEC, Paris); a visiting Scholar at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University, at the University of Paris X- Nanterre, at the Freie University in Berlin; an Assistant Professor at the American University of Paris and at Michigan State University; a visiting Professor at the University of Basel (center Eikones), at the ENS-Lyon and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris.