

# **Critical Thinking as Dialectics: a Hegelian-Marxist Approach**

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## **Introduction**

Admitting that the peculiarity of education doesn't merely lie in the acquisition of knowledge, as a compilation of data, but that it refers to the fostering, within the pedagogical relationship, of universal human capabilities, the ability to think being cardinal among them, and if, the critical examination of things is considered as the quintessence of thinking, then, critical thinking is an organic and fundamental element of the meaning of education.

Elements of critical thinking are to be found in the function of human intellect in general. In the present paper however, we will attempt to demonstrate that critical thinking in its most achieved form is identified with dialectics. Dialectical thought is the most authentic form of the mind's critical activity.

By dialectics we mean the faculty of the mind to grasp and represent the whole development process of its cognitive object. It is, in other words, our ability to perceive things as developing and changing, to understand the causes of their change, and to perceive the trends and directions of their future evolution. At the same time and for the purpose mentioned above, dialectical thought can also be considered as the faculty to perceive the interaction between opposite sides of the cognitive object, which (interaction) is also the "mechanism" constitutive of the cognitive object's transformation.

Given that thinking is not a passive reflection of reality, but the mental-orienting part of the socially and historically determined human action, the depth and wideness with which the mind perceives its objects are imprinted in the human activity and influence decisively the relationship between individuals and their world.

Consequently, the active shaping by human beings of their living conditions, as well as the conscious transformation of social relations are closely connected with the critical distancing from the surrounding prevailing reality, with the understanding of its internal contradictions and therefore, with the perception of the potential and prospects of its evolution. Cultivation, therefore, of our ability to think dialectically, concerns not only our thought but our practical activity as well. Especially, it

concerns our praxis consisted in struggle for social change and emancipation, which, in its most determined form, equals to class struggle.

In this text we shall treat critical thinking as dialectics, keeping always in mind that the pedagogical relationship as well as the educational process aiming at the cultivation of the dialectical mind is not confined to presenting to students the way things are, but, primarily, helps them understand how things happen and change, in order to enable them to actively participate in conscious actions for the shaping and transformation of their world.

From a methodological point of view, we shall rely upon some key ideas by K.Marx, in whose work dialectics was connected, on the one hand, with the most extensive and deep critical examination to date of the fundamental relations within the capitalist society and, on the other hand, with the detection of real, historically determined conditions for a radical social emancipation.

At the same time, we shall use extensively Hegel's theoretical contribution in the understanding and demonstrating of the qualifying characteristics of dialectical thought. The idealistic ideas in Hegel's work of course are in opposition to Marxist materialistic philosophy. However, his important accomplishments in the theoretical restructuring of dialectical thought became, after critical elaboration, an organic element of Marx's research method.

At this point it should be noted that Hegel's and Marx's ideas are a corner stone in the evolution of human thought. Ancient Greek philosophy was characterized by an intuitive, naive dialectical worldview, which however, perceiving the surrounding reality as totality, ignored the boundaries and peculiarities of its different sides. After that, the development and evolution of science followed an analytical direction, in the course of which different scientific fields were created. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, this analytical phase in the development of sciences was expressed, in the field of philosophy, by the establishment of the metaphysical mode of thought, which examines cognitive objects as detached, static and unchanging.

Hegel's and Marx's work inaugurated the era of the conscious use of the dialectical method. In V.A.Vazjulin's words,

in the field of scientific method, Hegel was the brilliant precursor of the new historical stage in the development of scientific method – of modern conscious dialectics, while K.Marx was the first one to present the application of this method in the field of a whole concrete science, that of capitalist political economy, thus becoming the initiator of the era of modern conscious dialectics. (Vazjulin, 2002, 13).

The ideas we shall now expand on emanate from the conviction that the theoretical heritage left by Hegel and Marx enables us to consciously cultivate and apply dialectical thought, the need for which, as we shall attempt to prove, is enormous, from both social and educational viewpoint.

### **Defining Critical Thinking**

“Critical thinking” is a prominent intellectual derivative of the Enlightenment tradition, a notion closely associated with the perception of human beings as active subjects capable of dealing autonomously with their own affairs while being able to work consciously for social emancipation and progress.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment, as a new contemplation of the mind, and its focusing on critical thinking was founded in the scientific progress observed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the appearance of classical science, whose methodology relies on analysis, experiment and the formulation of theories in the language of mathematics. The new science would deal a deadly blow on the prevalent, till that moment, dogmatic –theologian knowledge system by the establishment of the principle of logical-mathematic examination of all general premises and theories.

Furthermore, the philosophy of the Enlightenment would express the interests and intentions of bourgeoisie and its allies, at a period when it started questioning directly the ideological and political superstructure of the feudal society. Putting forth the capacity and right of the mind to critically examine all ideas and their foundation, the philosophy of the Enlightenment would, at the same time, legitimize the

examination of all social institutions, in regard to the degree of their correspondence to human nature and fundamental human rights.

The enlightenment philosophers incorporated critical thinking in their theoretical principles because, at the same time, they focused their political quest on the exploration of ways to change feudal society. Thus, as was to be expected, the theoretical critique on the Ancien Régime's ideas and institutions was transubstantiated in to a revolutionary political action.

In modern liberal bourgeois societies, the tradition of the Enlightenment remains ideologically powerful, especially in regard to the understanding and determination of the aims of education.

Fostering critical thinking is considered a specific trait of genuine education and one of the most important aspects of the educational process, in general. As it has been stated by Robin Barrow, "one might reasonably say that one clear goal of education is developing powers of critical thought" (Barrow, 1981, 45). For him, critical thinking encompasses various forms of ratiocination, such as coherent reasoning, conceptual clarity, discrimination in planning, discussion, explanation, etc. (Barrow, 1981, 45).

Moreover, critical thinking, a direct form of critical ability, is considered to be an educational aim with inherent value, pursued for its own sake: "the critical ability which ought to be the fruit of education serves nothing directly except for itself, no one except those who exercise it" (MacIntyre, 1964, 19).

The concept of "critical thinking" has been interpreted in different terms. John Passmore considers that critical thinking is rather associated with a "character trait", a "critical spirit", a "critical attitude", accompanied by key features such as: initiative, independence, courage, and imagination (Passmore, 1987, 197-198). Sharon Bailin draws a distinction between the theories defined as "descriptive conceptions", namely psychologically-oriented interpretations which identify critical thinking with the ability of "being proficient at certain mental processes" such as "classifying, inferring, observing, evaluating, synthesizing and hypothesizing" - and the theories which view critical thinking as a "normative concept", i.e. as a set of norms and criteria (Bailin,

1998, 205-206). The latter provide more philosophically-oriented interpretations of critical thinking, identifying it with the “assessment of reasons” on which various statements, beliefs, actions, etc. are founded (Bailin, 1998, 207-208).

According to Sharon Bailin when she refers to the recognition of a specific disposition in individuals who exercise critical thinking, it is the existence of a critical spirit and the individual’s readiness to base ideas and actions on the assessment of reasons that is the key component of the philosophically-oriented theories of critical thinking. (Bailin, 1998, 208).

In their discussion of the relationship between liberalism and critical thinking, Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker consider critical thinking to be an educational ideal, a normative conception with two components. The first one concerns the ability of assessing the reasons on which various claims, beliefs and/or decisions are founded, and the second one reflects a consistent and firm critical attitude, i.e. the individual’s disposition for assessing the reasons due to their awareness of the value of critical thinking. This attitude is associated with certain virtues, such as open-mindedness, love for truth, and the like. (Steutel & Spiecker, 2002, 62).

In his overview of the various perceptions of critical thinking, William Hare lists as its main features: a) “the conscious, deliberate rational assessment of claims according to clearly identified standards of proof”, b) “the appropriate use of reflective skepticism within the problem area under consideration”, c) “thinking which appropriately reflects the power and convicting forces of reasons”, d) questioning “the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning”, e) “thinking that facilitates judgment because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context” (Hare, 2002, 87).

It appears that the aforementioned views define critical thinking as something related to the thinking subject, as a set of general abilities and dispositions or as the activity of testing ideas, arguments and actions against the assessment of the reasons on which they are founded. In this regard, critical thinking is perceived as an attitude vis-à-vis something already existing, immanent and given, as a way to deal with existing

knowledge and existing ideas, as an analysis of the conclusions derived according to the rules of formal logic.

However, there is another aspect of critical thinking, which reflects the relation of thought to the cognitive process and the production of new knowledge, the penetration of mind into reality, the way in which thought comprehends reality.

Critical thinking as an activity involving the connection of different aspects of social reality, as a transcendence of the phenomenality of things and penetration into their essence, constitutes a cognitive process and is identical with the knowledge of things.

Max Horkheimer espouses a similar thesis when he suggested that in philosophy “criticism does not mean the condemnation of a thing, grumbling about some measure or other, or mere negation and repudiation” (Horkheimer, 1995, 270). “Criticism” is taken to mean an intellectual effort which “aims to coordinate the individual sides of social life with each other and with the general ideas and aims of the epoch, to deduce them genetically, to distinguish the appearance from the essence, to examine the foundations of things, in short, really to know them” (Horkheimer, 1995, 270).

For this reason, it is necessary to argue that critical thinking is not just something coming from outside to deal with existing knowledge; rather, it is an inherent component of the production of knowledge, reflected in the very structure of the acquired knowledge. This, of course, implies that critical thinking is not identical with any knowledge of things, e.g. information about the existence or mere description thereof. Critical thinking, precisely as thinking (i.e., work of the mind), has been associated with the deepest and most authentic knowledge. We shall attempt to clarify this below.

Here, it should be pointed out that, if critical thinking is utterly identical with the cognitive process and incorporated in its outcome (i.e., the acquired knowledge), then the possession and transmission of knowledge cannot be regarded as something external to critical thinking that would give rise to the dilemma of whether school should transmit knowledge or foster critical thinking (Hare, 1995).

In other words, I am arguing that the critical examination of a specific object is not just a subjective or random assessment thereof; rather, it is the way of knowing the object, grasping its internal relations and, consequently, it is the process which leads to the identification of thought with the object.

Insofar as one takes into account that critical thinking leads to specific cognitive results, then the teaching and assimilation of such results are directly linked to the cultivation of critical thinking. Teaching in a critical manner the acquired knowledge, while cultivating critical thinking, is by definition linked to the critical elucidation of reality, to the theoretical reconstitution and presentation of the cognitive object in a way that embodies critical thinking.

### **Critical Thinking in Two Different Social Ideals**

It would certainly be an omission not to acknowledge that critical thinking is not a purely gnoseological issue. The attitude towards it, the interpretation and the manifestations of critical thinking are related to human personality traits, conveying broader socio-political attitudes, ideologies and ideals. Besides, the cognitive interest in an object, the scope of inquiry, the consistency with which the individual reflects upon or judges the various sides of the object, is not just a matter of intellect but also a matter of consciousness, i.e. it has to do with the individual's awareness of their place in society and the social significance of their cognitive activity, of their aims and their life ideals with regard to broader social affairs and causes.

The relationship between the liberal political agenda and the ideal of critical thinking has already been referred to above. For classical liberal philosophy, critical thinking is fundamental to the autonomy of the person and the autonomous person is the final reason that justifies the liberal organization of society (Steutel & Spiecker, 2002, 63).

More precisely, critical thinking is perceived as a necessary virtue of citizens and, therefore, as a prerequisite for the sound operation of liberal democracy.

According to Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker, a liberal democracy needs citizens who “are able and disposed to assess critically the main lines of government interference and legislation, in particular by participating in the public debate about the ways a just



society should be organized”, and also examine “the relation between the liberal-political framework of rights and duties on the one hand, and determinate conceptions of the good life on the other” (Steutel & Spiecker, 2002, 64).

On those grounds, a liberal government is justified to provide comprehensive education oriented towards fostering critical thinking in children, so as for them to become citizens who are able to assess main lines of political policy and legislation, and also to attune their personal ideal of the good to the liberal framework of rights and duties (Steutel & Spiecker, 2002, 72).

Having said this, it needs to be pointed out that to maintain and provide the educational means to foster critical thinking, within the framework of the liberal political agenda, cannot exceed specific limitations which are inherent to the liberal ideology. A specific feature of liberalism is that it considers social relations primarily from the political and legal perspective while overlooks the interactions within the social system of production, the oppositions arising from the dominant form of ownership and, thus, social disputes and conflicts. Liberalism advocates political democracy as its ideal, without dealing with the substantial relations in a capitalist society, i.e. the relations of private ownership of the means of production, which universally reproduce class exploitation, competition and inequality. The social horizon of liberalism is limited to what Karl Marx called the “political emancipation” of society which, to his mind, was distinct from the cause of “human emancipation”, i.e. overcoming class oppositions among people (Marx, 1975b, 151-174).

Thus, to argue for the notion of critical thinking within the context of the liberal political agenda is inextricably related to evading any consideration of the capitalist society contradictions. For this reason, such support of critical thinking is undermined from the very beginning. The scope of critical thinking in the context of the liberal political agenda stops right at the point where it touches all those problems of the capitalist society whose theoretical and practical resolution requires from the person to detect the historical limits of this society and alternative prospects for humankind.

The notion of critical thinking takes on different dimensions when associated with the ideals and practices geared towards a radical change in social reality. From such a perspective, critical thinking emerges as a critical consciousness of the changing world conditions, trends and “mechanisms”. Here, critical thinking meets Paulo Freire’s notion of “conscientization”, whereby apprehension of social reality means “to apprehend the real world not as something that only exists, but as something that is to be, something that is being” (Freire, 1985, 168-169).

Critical thinking becomes most dynamic when it has been linked with the desire and the effort to understand developments and processes within social reality and their latent prospects, in view of changing it. If fostering the ability to think critically is a condition for true education, then any interest in such an education is inextricably linked to an active attitude vis-à-vis social reality, to the conscious pursuit of changing it.

In the modern era it was Hegel who conceived of the human world as a dynamic, evolving reality, being shaped by the World Spirit.

Hegel attempted to demonstrate the active role human mind played in the evolution of civilization and, at the same time, he became aware of the contradictory essence of things as the moving force behind their transformation.

Undoubtedly, these fundamental moments in his work bear the mark of the influence on him of the dynamism and contradictions of the emerging bourgeois society in the then most developed countries, such as England and France. At the same time, Hegel, trapped in Prussia’s social conditions, marked by the powerful remnants of feudal relations and the weakness of bourgeoisie, could not grasp the intrinsic contradictions of the human world in concrete social terms. For this reason, in Hegel’s thought the concept of contradiction remained vague, philosophical and abstract. It, furthermore, acquired a strong idealistic character, given that the contradiction of things was perceived as a contradiction of the absolute spirit, which, as alienated from itself, is transubstantiated in nature and society before it returns to itself, in the fields of art, religion and philosophy, through which it can reach self-awareness.

The critical element in Hegelian dialectics, which rejected the acceptance of historic-cultural constructs as given, recognizing their transient and changeable quality, was irrevocably undermined by the idealistic character of his philosophy, which ended up considering the Prussian monarchy regime as a culminating moment of the Spirit's course in history.

In Hegel's case we see the inevitable opposition between idealism and critical-dialectical thought. The idealistic detachment of ideas from the historical-social conditions, where they are derived from, and their contemplation as autonomous and self acting, as eternal spirit, results in the idealization of the ideas of a certain era and their conversion into a closed, dogmatic system, on the one hand, and in the idealization of the concrete empirical reality, which appears as a creation and incarnation of the eternal spirit, on the other.

In Marxism, critical thinking as well as the more general understanding of intellectual activity, takes on a different character. Marx's well known appeal in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach to change the world instead of only interpreting it, if examined under the light of the other theses, doesn't reveal any intentions of voluntaristic action, but is entrenched in the realization of the intrinsic link between a cognitive penetration into the world surrounding us and the social transformative praxis and it proclaims emphatically the well realized historical need for a new, deeper, radical change of society towards emancipation of wage labour from capital and abolishment of social classes.

Envisaging the world under the light of the interests of the emerging working class in industrial revolution conditions, K.Marx was led towards a critical examination of reality, more profound than that of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, in his effort to understand the foundations not only of political inequality, but also of society's division between opposing classes, of the emergence of class exploitation, of the state and of the dominant forms of false consciousness.

K.Marx applied the dialectical method in his study of a historically concrete object, the capitalist society, which allowed him to discover real - concrete social

contradictions, and to use them and the prospect of their resolution as the foundations of his communist social ideal.

Critical thinking, therefore, in Marx's work, is organically intertwined with a specific social-moral stance in favour of the emancipation of wage labour from capital and of humanity, at large, from all relations of exploitation and alienation. It was this social and moral stance which led K.Marx to the most consistent, profound and complete critical examination of capitalist society to date.

As regards the character of critique, we should here clarify that in Marxism, the critical examination of various ideas, ideologies and theories, in order to expose their flaws and shortcomings, is of particular but not absolute importance. In Karl Marx's thought, human misconceptions and delusions, particularly when it comes to historically typical mass misconceptions and delusions, are not just cases of false consciousness, but rather forms of consciousness objectively determined by the dominant social relations. Hence, critical thinking, as putting to test the dominant ideas and forms of consciousness, evolves in Marxism into a critique of the social conditions giving rise to them and an exploration of the preconditions for a radical change of such conditions. Karl Marx's statement on the critique of religious consciousness is illustrative: "once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and revolutionized in practice" (Marx, 1986, 29).

In Marxism, critique is not reduced to a mere theoretical schema viewing objective reality from the outside, limited to approving or disapproving judgments, to positive or negative comments; rather, it is allied to a person's profound knowledge and understanding, to the knowledge and theoretical reconstitution of its essence itself. The distinction between the essence of a cognitive object and its appearance is fundamental for Marxist gnoseology. As Karl Marx states, "all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence..." (Marx, 1981, 956).

The term "essence" in the Hegelian and Marxist tradition is defined as the internal determining relation between the sides of a developing object, which accounts for its

preservation, its reproduction, and also for its evolution and change. In other words, the essence is the fundamental self-contradiction of the object, its inner self-negation. According to Hegel, the sphere of Essence “is also the sphere in which the contradiction, still implicit in the sphere of Being, is made explicit” (Hegel, 1975, 165).

In the context of Marxism, critical thinking focuses on the historicity of things; its function is linked to the search for the causes of motion and change. If the internal contradictions of any developing object constitute the essential relation underlying its evolution, change and self-negation, then the critical examination of any developing object equals the theoretical reconstitution of its internal contradictions.

It is important to mention that in his seminal work, *Capital*, Karl Marx, critically reviewing the capitalist mode of production, described and analyzed its motion as a process of both self-reproduction and self-undermining, i.e. creating the internal conditions for overcoming capitalism.

Karl Marx did examine the essence of the capitalist mode of production, the generation of surplus value, constantly being focused on its contradictory nature, on the dominant role of difference rather than identity within the essence, unlike Hegel who perceives the motion of the essential contradiction mainly from the perspective of identity rather than difference of the sides.

According to the above, it could be argued that in Marx’s tradition critical thinking emerges as the ability of the mind to grasp the contradictions of the cognitive object in their dynamic interplay. Therefore, critical thinking interested in radical social changes is dialectical thinking. Critical thinking, as dialectical thinking, entails the deepest and fullest comprehension of the cognitive object, it is thinking in its most developed form.

Further examination of critical thinking leads to the study of the forms of thinking and their functions within the cognitive process.

### **The Transition from Understanding to Reason**

The notion of “thinking” has been approached thus far under the scope of a two-fold prospect of enquiry. When looking at thinking at work, it is clear that it has two forms and two levels of development: Understanding and Reason (German *Verstand*: Understanding, *Vernunft*: Reason).

Immanuel Kant was the first to elaborate on the difference between Understanding and Reason. He defined Understanding as the “faculty which secures the unity of appearances by means of rules”, and Reason as the ability of mind to reflect on Understanding, which “secures the unity of the rules of Understanding under principles” (Kant, 1968, 303).

Central to Kant’s theory of mind is his view that Reason, in its effort to formulate absolute truths which transcend the limits of experience, leads to antinomies, which are proofs of the flaws of mind.

Georg W.F.Hegel was the one to perceive Reason not as a problematic case of thinking but, quite to the contrary, as its supreme level, associated to the deepest and fullest knowledge and comprehension of the cognitive object. Hegel connected Reason with the ability of the mind to grasp the unity, the link between opposing concepts. This ability ensures the self-development of thinking, the motion of thinking within itself (i.e., within the concepts) not in an arbitrary fashion but rather in a way that is compatible to the contradictory, dialectical relations between the conceptual contents of the different concepts.

This achievement of Hegelian gnoseology was used in the thought of Karl Marx, most notably in the method of *Capital*<sup>1</sup>. Here, it should be pointed out that Hegel presents us the forms of thinking (i.e., Understanding and Reason), generally speaking, detached from the study of a specific cognitive object. Hegel is interested not in “the logic of the matter” but in “the matter of logic” (Marx, 1975a, 18). Unlike Hegel, Karl Marx is the first one to attempt to examine a specific object at the level of Reason,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the common points between the Hegelian and the Marxian views of Understanding and Reason. The real and significant differences between the two thinkers with regard to the subject at hand are only hinted at. Their clear and systematic study does not fall within the scope of this analysis.

exposing the internal dialectical relations, the contradictions between its sides, as historically determined relations.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx succeeded in moving from the level of Understanding (where the concepts and categories of bourgeois political economy stood) to the level of Reason, i.e. he managed to create a theoretical system presenting the dialectical relations between the concepts of political economy and, thus, mentally representing the essential relations governing the motion and evolution of the capitalist mode of production<sup>2</sup>.

Looking at the function of thought within the cognitive process, viewed in its entirety, it should be pointed out that thought is an ascent from the abstract to the concrete or, more precisely, a course from the sensuous concrete to abstract concepts and then from abstract concepts to the development of a system of concepts through verifying their internal affinities. Actually, the mind moves from the surface of the object to its essence (the essential relations governing it) only to return to the surface and interpret it based on the knowledge of the essence, as Vazjulin has argued:

The motion of thinking from the immediate to the essence as such and, therefore, to the phenomena and then to reality is the “mechanism” for the ascent of thinking from the abstract to the concrete (Vazjulin, 2002, 42).

The ascent from the abstract to the concrete is the way to study developing objects and explore the internal links between their sides.

Understanding is the form of thinking which immediately prevails in the first stage of the cognitive process (the motion from the sensuous concrete to the abstract), whilst Reason is the form of thinking which prevails in the course from the abstract to the concrete (Vazjulin, 1985, 174). The concepts formed through Understanding emerge

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, in *Capital*, thinking as Reason is inextricably linked to the development of political economy categories. Karl Marx has not left behind any systematic presentation of his method of dialectically examining the cognitive object, as developed in *Capital*. Decoding the method of *Capital* became one of the major Marxist research programmes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, implemented with the substantial contribution of Marxist researchers from the former Soviet Union. See: Blakeley, 1976.

as autonomous, given and unchanging, while the concepts formed through Reason emerge as interlinked and developing.

As it has been already mentioned before, the cognitive process starts from the sensuous concrete. But why are the data of sensuous perception designated as concrete?

Here is Hegel's answer to this question:

The concrete content, which sensuous certainty furnishes, makes this *prima facie* appear to be the richest kind of knowledge ... Besides that, it seems to be the truest, the most authentic knowledge: for it has not yet dropped anything from the object; it has the object before itself in its entirety and completeness. (Hegel, 1931, 149).

Through sensuous perception the object is perceived as a unified form, i.e. in its entirety. Sensuous knowledge is concrete precisely because it perceives the object in its entirety. However, as pointed out by Hegel, such knowledge is “the abstractest and the poorest kind of truth. It merely says regarding what it knows: it is; and its truth contains solely the being of the fact it knows” (Hegel, 1931, 149).

Sensuous perception informs us about the existence of a specific object, about its being. However, sensuous knowledge cannot tell us anything about the sides of the object or the relationships among them.

Thinking as Understanding functions here as a negation of the phenomenality of things, as a transcendence of the way things are given to the senses, because the image presented to us by the senses is false. The essential internal relations of the object, the ones that determine its birth and evolution, are not given in sensuous knowledge.

Thinking at its lowest level (i.e., Understanding) disrupts the unity of the sensual form of the cognitive object, distinguishing and separating its various aspects. In analyzing the data of the sensuous knowledge of the object, Understanding moves abstractly from the individual and random features of the object to the general and fixed ones.



As Hegel notes, “its activity consists, in general, in making abstraction” (Hegel, 1971, 226). Understanding is abstractive thinking *par excellence*.

In this motion, Understanding forms concepts which bring together the general, common characteristics and qualities of the different sides of the object.

The concepts formed through Understanding negate the sensuous knowledge, since the original concrete entirety of the form is lost therein and what is left is nothing more than just some general, common characteristics of the different sides of the object.

As Hegel put it succinctly,

no doubt thought is primarily an exercise of Understanding. ... The action of Understanding may be in general described as investing its subject-matter with the form of universality. But this universal is an abstract universal... In this separating and abstracting attitude towards its objects, Understanding is the reverse of immediate perception and sensation, which, as such, keep completely to their native sphere of action in the concrete. (Hegel, 1975, 113).

However, by negating sensuous knowledge, thinking distances itself from the real object, whereas the real object can only exist and develop in the unity of all its sides. The concepts of Understanding, insofar as they express the disruption of the object, the separation of its sides, are abstract, in other words one-sided, therefore static and unchanging:

Such thought, which produces only limited and partial categories and proceeds by their means, is what in the stricter sense of the word is termed Understanding. (Hegel, 1975, 45).

Nonetheless, the negation of sensuous knowledge, which is typical of the concepts of Understanding, is always inconsistent. From the moment that the concepts of Understanding are derived from the abstraction and generalization of certain data of living contemplation, their foundation is always dependent on reference to the empirical data from which they are derived. The legitimacy of the meaning of the

concepts of Understanding is not derived from their theoretical affinity to other concepts, within the framework of a conceptual system; it is derived from specific empirical cases which are abstractly generalized.

Understanding, as a level of thinking, separates the different sides of the object. However, once such sides are perceived as cut off, isolated, what unites them is not thinking, but rather living contemplation, the sensuous perception of the wholeness of the object. Thus, Understanding both negates sensuous knowledge and presupposes it and invokes it in order to ground its concepts.

The knowledge of a specific object, constructed theoretically through Understanding, is abstract; it is a farrago of unconnected elements, qualities, sides of the object, classified and systematized on the basis of their external, formal traits. This is why linking such knowledge with life, with the real object (not yet comprehended in its entirety), requires the help of examples, a return to the data of sensuous knowledge.

The concepts formed through Understanding are static, they do not interact with each other, they do not develop, they are dead, inert. Understanding, in general, benumbs the object, as given in its sensuous form, it turns it into a *mélange* of disconnected sides. Understanding is incapable of grasping and conceptually representing the internal affinities of the sides of the object, which make up the mechanism for its motion and evolution.

Thinking hemmed in at the level of Understanding perceives the world

as a multitude of determinate things, each of which is demarcated from the other. Each thing is a distinct delimited entity related as such to other likewise delimited entities. The concepts that are developed from these beginnings, and the judgments composed of these concepts, denote and deal with isolated things and the fixed relations between such things. The individual determinations exclude one another as if they were atoms or monads. The one is not the other and can never become the other. (Marcuse, 1999, 44).

The second, higher level of thinking, i.e. Reason, entails the ascent of thought from the abstract to the concrete, from the abstract concepts of Understanding to concrete concepts, to a system of internally interwoven concepts.

In the ascent from the abstract to the concrete, what prevails is the synthesis of the sides of the object as a synthesis of concepts, as a creation of a conceptual system representing the essential, determining relations between the sides of the object which make up the mechanism for its evolution.

Such relations are perceived as a contradiction, in other words as relations which affirm the object while negating it, which reproduce the object's identity to itself while causing the object's difference from itself, the object's evolution and change, its transformation into something else.

Karl Marx, in his well-known introduction in the *Grundrisse*, where he gives a rough description of his method, states that subsequent to the motion of thought "from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions", up to "the simplest determinations", an ascent begins which, in the case of the study of the economy, leads to arrival "at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations" (Marx, 1973, 100).

If Understanding deals with division and abstraction, Reason undertakes the reconnection, the synthesis of the divided sides. Reason, however, cannot exist without Understanding, because at the level of Reason the mind connects, unites what was hitherto distinct and separated. Reason presupposes Understanding while lifting it, transforming it, transforming its concepts, thereby deepening the cognitive process.

Reason does no longer deal with the data of sensuous knowledge; rather, it undertakes to test the concepts created by Understanding in its abstractive move away from the data of sensuous knowledge. Reason is precisely a critique of Understanding, a critical review of the content of its concepts in view of lifting their autonomy and discovering the links between them.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that Reason, precisely because it deals with concepts mostly (with the concepts of Understanding) and not with sensuous data, could be defined as thought which studies thought itself, a reflection upon the workings of thought. At the level of Reason, the effort to comprehend the object is associated with the critical examination of the way the concepts are constructed. This is why Reason, as dialectical thinking *par excellence*, as a dialectical conceptual reconstitution of the object, is associated with the reflection upon the laws of the cognitive process.

Within the system of concepts constructed through Reason, every single concept acquires a meaning and a *raison d'être* only through its link with the other concepts. In this way, Reason restores the internal unity of the object under consideration, as a theoretical unity of the multiple determinants of its various aspects.

Reason “apprehends the unity of terms (propositions) in their opposition—the affirmative, which is involved in their disintegration and in their transition” (Hegel, 1975, 119). The outcome of the work performed by Reason is “a concrete, being not a plain formal unity, but a unity of distinct propositions” (Hegel, 1975, 119).

With the system of concepts created through Reason, the object reemerges as something concrete, i.e. as a united object, not as the abstraction, the farrago of detached/isolated sides and qualities which emerged from the concepts of Understanding. Karl Marx notes that “the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.” (Marx, 1973, 101).

Reason restores the wholeness of the object, its concreteness, not through a return to the wholeness of the form furnished by sensuous perception but rather through constructing a system of concepts, i.e. a conceptual whole. This whole, as a “unity of diverse terms”, brings forth the necessary, essential links between the sides of the object, which were hitherto distinguished and studied separately by Understanding.

At the stage of the cognitive process where Understanding prevails, there is synthesis, but mostly sensuous rather than conceptual synthesis. At the stage of the cognitive process where Reason prevails,

the sides which were separated by Understanding are brought together in a conceptual rather than sensuous synthesis. (Vazjulin, 1985, 185).

Reason represents mostly the links, the interactions, the contradictory relations between the sides of the object, as well as between different objects, which determine each object's evolution, development and change.

Exposing the internal contradictions of a developing object also marks the culmination of the work of critical thinking. The ability of humans not to restrict themselves to the apparent sides of the object and mentally grasp the essence in pure form is a specific feature of their intellectual maturity. In the case where this particular theoretical-practical aptitude of humans was absent, both scientific knowledge and the successful guidance of transformative social action would have been impossible.

Consequently, fostering critical ability with the aim of radical social change is equivalent to fostering dialectical thinking, the ability to grasp the internal contradictions of a thing and seek their resolution.

Wherever in objective reality we encounter cognitive objects forming a totality of organically linked sides, each one existing only through its relationship with the others, and developing as a consequence of their internal interactions, dialectical thinking is the only way to comprehend them.

Given the importance of the dialectical method in the understanding of various natural phenomena, I would here like to underscore that society is a totality, par excellence, of organically linked sides each one of them existing as such in and through its relationship with the others<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the study of social phenomena, if its not

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<sup>3</sup> K.Marx defines bourgeois society as an organic system, claiming that in it "every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system. This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks." (Marx, 1973, 279).

reduced to a mere data compilation, but aims to their understanding, requires a consistent and systematic application of the dialectical method.

Dialectical thinking is mature thinking, thinking which penetrates the essence of the cognitive object, which truly gets to know it. Evald V. Ilyenkov puts it eloquently:

[...] “thinking” is nothing other than the ability to deal with each object intelligently –that is, in accordance with its own nature and not in conformity with one’s fantasies about it. Thinking is really functioning knowledge. ... Teaching how to think means, above all, teaching dialectics ... But dialectics is above all “the doctrine concerning how opposites can be and are identical (how they become identical), under what conditions they are identical, transforming themselves into one another, why the human mind must understand these opposites not as dead and frozen but as living, conditional, and dynamic”. (Ilyenkov, 2007, 76,78).

### **Beyond Positivism and Postmodern Empiricism**

Western education, just like Western science, are pretty much grounded in the positivist view of knowledge, which is nothing other than the absolutisation of Understanding, rigid facts, fragmented definitions and abstract classifications.

Positivism denies empirical knowledge giving precedence to the abstract, static generalizations of Understanding. It also denies the concept of the essence, of the universal links behind the individual sides of things. Only that which can be classified on the basis of generalized empirical facts exists. Positivism denies experience while remaining hostage to it.

As Herbert Marcuse notes:

The positivist attack on universal concepts, on the ground that they cannot be reduced to observable facts, cancels from the domain of knowledge everything that may not yet be a fact. (Marcuse, 1999, 113).

This is why the positivist laws, as classifications of the formal and repeated characteristics of things, see reality as a given, rigid order and “see society as a realm of natural harmony” (Marcuse, 1999, 349).

As plain constructions of Understanding, the positivist concepts pursue the generalization of the formal and the homogeneous and rule out diversity. Everything else that is considered that evades the canon is treated as an exception to the positivist rule, as insignificant. The positivist generalizations - right because they rule out diversity - fail to grasp the contradictory nature of things and, consequently, fail to comprehend the inner driving force of their evolution.

As a result, positivist knowledge in the schools of bourgeois society consists in a plethora of abstract, dead concepts, and this is why it cancels the living, creative thinking and undermines the understanding of reality in the extreme. As Erich Fromm notes, when facts “lose the specific quality which they can have only as parts of a structuralized whole”, then they “retain merely an abstract, quantitative meaning” and “all that matters is whether we know more or less” (Fromm, 2001, 216). Indeed, an educational system entrapped in a positivist view of knowledge focuses on and assesses only the quantity of knowledge each possesses.

The post-modern current of ideas rejected the positivist version of rationality, together with any version of rational, systematic, theoretical thinking, advocating the shift towards subjective, empirical, experiential knowledge. In abolishing every distinction between types of knowledge and in actually idealizing the spontaneous, daily lived experience, post-modernism imagined that it defended the identities and the voices of the excluded and marginalized groups from the homogenizing discourse of power. Theoretical thinking was denounced as holistic and totalizing. Lived experience was put ahead as the way out of the dominance of “scientific knowledge”, which, indeed, in advanced capitalism is a power estranged from society and performs a manipulative, oppressive and largely destructive function vis-à-vis humans.

Post-modern ideology, however, did not assume a critical posture toward lived experience. It did not critically approach the social attitudes and the behaviours of people who perceive their world through lived experience. Post-modernism

overlooked the fact that empirical knowledge, the empirical perception of the world, is limited to the here and now of things, it just ascertains their existence, their Being, incapable of comprehending their Essence, their causes, their internal contradictions. Experiential knowledge cannot distance itself from the surrounding reality and, for this reason, it cannot perceive possibilities and prospects for alternative social development.

Experiential knowledge hems the individual in immediacy,

where the immediately given form of the objects, the fact of their existing here and now and in this particular way appears to be primary, real and objective, whereas their 'relations' seem to be secondary and subjective. For anyone who sees things in such immediacy every true change must seem incomprehensible. (Lukács, 1971, 154).

In a state of immediacy, the "evident" appears true to consciousness. The evident, however, lacks historicity and all random, conjunctural, insignificant aspects immediately coexist with the fundamental and determining ones.

Experiential knowledge results in what in ancient Greek philosophy was called *Doxa*: a simple, arbitrary opinion on things, which is limited to the evident and the self-evident, to what everybody sees and hears and, for this reason, represents in most cases the content of public opinion and lived ideology. *Doxa* is the opinion of the uneducated person.

As Hegel put it,

The uneducated man remains in the state of simple sensuous intuition, his eyes are not open and he does not see what lies at his very feet. With him it is all subjective seeing and apprehension. He does not see the essential thing. (Hegel, 1986, 42).

The post-modernist contempt for the causes and the projects for radical social change and universal human emancipation inevitably annuls any need for a deeper study of reality and idealizes empiricism, the immediate experiential knowledge of the everyday microcosm.



Of course, it should be admitted that experiential knowledge, people's experience, what they see and hear first-hand, appear to be inextricably linked to their individuality. Experiential knowledge seems to be an intellectual asset they themselves acquired and, for this reason, it is evidence of their real history, of their true identity and voice.

Experiential knowledge, however, is not the way out of the dominant discourse or the dominant ideology; on the contrary, under certain circumstances, it is the proper condition for their imposition. Confronted with a discourse which presents the dominant relations and the dominant interests as given, natural and insurmountable, the most appropriate consciousness for the perpetuation of the social order is precisely the one entrenched inside the immediately experienced here and now, thus incapable of perceiving anything beyond the immediately existent. Rephrasing a distinguished concept of Paulo Freire, one would suggest that a consciousness trapped in experiential knowledge is a consciousness of silence.

It is impossible not to mention here Terry Eagleton's thesis: post-modernism and "high' cultural theory", entrenched in the local and the specific and rejecting the overviews of the world as oppressive, scarcely differ from conservative scholarship, "which likewise believes only in what it can see and handle" (Eagleton, 2004, 72). Their attitude is problematic, first and foremost, for an important reason, namely that: "At just the point that we have begun to think small, history has begun to act big" (Eagleton, 2004, 72).

In the face of a global capitalist economy, with a global division of labour, global antagonistic relations and global disastrous consequences for humans and the natural environment, which human thought can grasp and comprehend only theoretically (and likewise discern latent possibilities for alternative social prospects), entrenchment in experiential knowledge implies, in the final analysis, surrender to the "natural" course of things, submission to fate.

It is true that knowledge starts from the sensuous concrete, from the lived experience, and it is also true that experience is what first gives rise to social discontent over the

regime of exploitation of human beings by other human beings or the various forms of social oppression.

Nonetheless, a consciousness compatible with the struggle for social emancipation is inextricably linked to critical thinking. And critical thinking, as we can conclude from the aforementioned points, cannot be limited to the spontaneous everyday ideas about the world, even when these come from the excluded and the marginalised. The thinking that serves the cause of social emancipation is the one which transcends sensuous perception and everyday experience.

Of course, the transcendence of everyday experience cannot be achieved through the fragmented, abstract and static positivist theoretical concepts, given that

to leave empirical reality behind can only mean that the objects of the empirical world are to be understood as aspects of a totality, i.e. as the aspects of a total social situation caught up in the process of historical change (Lukács, 1971, 162).

The thinking that serves the cause of social emancipation also transcends the concepts of Understanding, ascending to the level of Reason. This entails that it approaches the various objects dialectically, as a set of interrelated sides, that it distinguishes between the essential, dynamic contradictions of each thing and instances of static oppositions, that it theoretically follows the intermediation of contradictions, that it explores conditions and ways for their resolution and consequently discovers prospects, views reality from its alternative perspective.

If the struggle for radical social change is directly linked to the critical examination and comprehension of society, then fostering the ability for the vein of critical thinking that opens onto dialectical thinking is a highly revolutionary cause, precisely because dialectics “includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction” (Marx, 1976, 103).

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