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The Concept of „Structure“ in *German Ideology*

Introduction

Historic materialism is a theory that individuates in the concept of „production-way“ an indispensable element, and in this sense a „structure“, to understand the historical modifications of the practical and theoretic behaviours of men. Therefore the analysis of this concept is a necessary premise to understand both what Marx intended by the term „overstructure“ and its connections with the structure - connections which, on the contrary, were at the heart of discussion after Marx's death. So I thought it was necessary to come back to *German Ideology*, the book that, with all its limits¹, expounded the materialistic conception of history in the widest way, for disputing the results of previous interpretations.

The starting point is what we can define his program, that is the whole of concepts and theoretic definitions which defines the field of research: „Diese Geschichtsauffassung beruht also darauf, den wirklichen Produktionsprozeß, und zwar vor der materiellen Produktion des unmittelbaren Lebens ausgehend, zu entwickeln und die mit dieser Produktionsweise zusammenhängende, und von ihr erzeugte Verkehrsform, also die bürgerliche Gesellschaft in ihren verschiedenen Stufen, als Grundlage der ganzen Geschichte aufzufassen und sie sowohl in ihrer Aktion als Staat darzustellen, wie die sämtlichen verschiedenen theoretischen Erzeugnisse und Formen des Bewußtseins, Religion, Philosophie, Moral etc. etc., aus ihr zu erklären und ihren Entstehungsprozeß aus ihnen zu verfolgen, wo dann natürlich auch die

¹ Principally two: 1) as the subtitle points out: „Critique of modern German philosophy according to its representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German socialism according to its various prophets“, the initial purpose of the text was continuing with the criticism of Young Hegelians towards which had been started with *The holy family*. However historic materialism asserts that history is connected with the concrete change of the ways of production, therefore historical materialism from philosophy, where it started, takes us to the study of the production-ways; 2) especially the first chapter, which explains historic materialism, is a little more than a sketch, full of notes, emendations and annullments, as the edition precisely shows included in K. Marx - F. Engels, *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA²)*. *Editions-Grundsätze und Probestücke*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1972, S. 31-119; that I was permitted to consult thanks to Rolf Hecker's concern.

Sache in ihrer Totalität (und darum auch die Wechselwirkung dieser verschiedenen Seiten aufeinander) dargestellt werden kann.“²

In this article I shall try to point out the elements of the concrete that Marx and Engels abstracted in the concept of production-way in order to conform it towards a total comprehension of human history, also including the aspect of the formation of ideas.

The assumption of historic materialism

Marx and Engels assert, criticising Young Hegelians, that men's ideas are not only illusions, but they come from the relationships that men build up in the production-way. Their initial questions, about the origin and ontological status of ideas, are first only because the purpose of the text is philosophical criticism, only in order to open to us a sense of a wider world, that also includes philosophy and culture as its parts³. Marx and Engels have always and coherently denied the conception of ideas as entities with an origin and a development independent from the origin and development of men. Ideas are human, they are entities we can only know in relation with men; only in this connection we can understand their importance in history, which is always history of men: talking about ideas without men makes no sense. Questions about ideas push Marx and Engels to break through the limit of Hegel and Young Hegelians' philosophy and to open the horizons of questions about men.

In fact, „the existence of alive men“⁴ is the presupposition they explicitly recognise as indispensable for the understanding of the formation and historical variation of ideas too: only living men have ideas. And if ideas are men's distinctive features, then the specific difference between men and other living beings is the element that can help us to understand their nature. This difference, full of unforeseeable consequences, is individuated by them in the concept of „determinate“ production of means of subsistence⁵. By this concept

² K. Marx/F. Engels, *Werke*, Bd. 3, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1958, S. 37/38 (MEW).

³ Then the Stirner criticism is only a „partial“ application because the principal research field of historic materialism is the analysis of social behaviours of individuals, the field investigated by Marx and Engels in the historic writings of the fifties.

⁴ „Wir müssen, bei den voraussetzungslosen Deutschen damit anfangen, daß wir die erste Voraussetzung aller menschlichen Existenz, also auch aller Geschichte konstatieren, nämlich die Voraussetzung, daß die Menschen imstande sein müssen zu leben, um 'Geschichte machen' zu können.“ (MEW 3, S. 28).

⁵ „Man kann die Menschen durch das Bewußtsein, durch die Religion, durch was man sonst will, von den Tieren unterscheiden. Sie selbst fangen an, sich von den Tieren zu unterscheiden, sobald sie anfangen, ihre Lebensmittel zu *produzieren*, ein Schritt, der