

Workers' subjectivity

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Abstract

The article praises Heinrich's work for its non-anthropological and non-individualistic reading of Marx and his methodology for explaining Marx's categories. His work is also relevant for his criticism of the social-democratic separation of the spheres of production and distribution and the voluntaristic conception of class struggle. The article advances some critical remarks on the undervaluation of subjectivity as a key to class struggle and the analytical relevance of work organisation.

Keywords

Michael Heinrich, Karl Marx, Subjectivity, Work organisation, Class struggle.

Heinrich's book reconstructs Marx's thought by availing itself of texts in the critical edition MEGA 2; it is a very different perspective on Marx's thought than the one which was popular in Italy in the Sixties. Following the reading of *Capital* by Althusser, Heinrich states that, before the break with Feuerbach's ideology, Marx's theory lacked historicity and depended on anthropology, individualism, and empiricism in his analysis of capitalism.¹ The book also contributes to understanding the role of Marx's categories and their dynamics, out of idealism and empiricism, for analysing the capitalist economy: the Aristotelian-inspired realistic theory of universals. Heinrich rightly points out in his interpretation that the dialectical development of categories already has as its objective presupposition the developed capitalist production considered as a whole. Therefore, the order of the categories is essential to determine the categories themselves – an order that expresses necessary relations between the categories.

From these reflections emerges a conception of science in which the object of science is never given purely as such but rather it is always subjectively mediated and reconstructed by scientists, their problems and research programs. In every theoretical field, there is a social conditioning, even of common sense, which Marx calls 'objective forms of thought', that result from the basic structure of the respective society.

Heinrich states that the difficulties Marx encountered in integrating the elements of classical economics discourse into a new terrain can only be overcome by considering his work against the backdrop of the theoretical field of classical economics and by identifying the epistemological breaks which allow to characterise his mature work as a true revolution.

As Breda² – Heinrich's book Italian translator – pointed out, the book is characterised by an iron logic that has the advantage of condensing the controversial points with great clarity, but it runs the risk of transforming what are dialectical elements of Marx's exposition into ambivalences and contradictions. For instance, a severe risk is to exclude any role of subjectivity.

Marx devoted memorable pages to showing how forms of socialisation of work already exist in production. If this was true in the production of the late 19th century, this is even more evident in the modern form of manufacturing dominated by machines. It is not by chance that the science of

¹ Together with the introduction to the Italian book, Bellofiore (2023), translated in this Symposium as *On Some Problems in Marxian Theory. A Discussion of Michael Heinrich's Science of Value*, see also Bellofiore (2018).

² See, in this symposium, Breda (2025).

management was born, which has as its central object the organisation of the company, the *organisation of labour* – the new central locus of class struggle – and as its main task the coordination of the different jobs. The ongoing processes of digitisation of manufacturing companies³ create a new autocratic automaton that is infinitely more coordinated than the mechanical one, making disorganising the process through struggles even more relevant. The progressive process of direct subordination to the capitalist logic of economic sectors that were previously only indirectly related to it, like the old professions, expands the logic of 'immediate' socialisation in labour activity as such to a wider area of society.

There is, therefore, the possibility of a point of view of 'labour' as an ideological and political construction by the living bearers of labour power: the workers. As subjects in a collective form, they can fight for an alternative social condition. The lack of attention to the possibility of the construction of an antagonistic labour perspective on production and society makes much of socialist politics hollow on the key central issues and hence disappointing. Here our joint analysis with Bellofiore on debt consumption and on the 'real subsumption of labour to finance' may be relevant.⁴ This development, essential in the recent phase of capitalism, has behind it the process of manipulating desire that I analysed with Rebecchi, and which is important for the analysis of subjectivity.⁵

On the other hand, in a very clear-cut statement, Heinrich clarifies the analytical roots of the social-democratic perspective. The capitalist buys the labour-power of the workers, which has an exchange-value and a use-value; its exchange-value is regulated by the quantity of abstract labour necessary for its reproduction; its use-value is the living labour they can perform. Value is generated by consuming workers. The consumption of labour-power produces a value greater than its reproduction, appropriated by capitalists as surplus value. From the market circulation perspective, this exchange is fair because the capitalist should pay the value of the commodity and not its consumption, i.e. its use value, from the point of view of Marx's value theory. Only if we follow Marx and consider both the sphere of circulation and that of production, it is possible to understand that this exchange hides an exploitation taking place in production, in the consumption of the labour-power purchased in from the workers.

Heinrich also emphasises an analytical point which is crucial against any voluntaristic idea about class struggle. The relative strength of classes it is neither autonomous or exogenous, rather it depends on the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. This statement is relevant especially today when many idealistic perspectives about capitalist society are widespread.

On the topic of the monetary theory of value, Bellofiore, in his comprehensive introduction to the volume, contributes to an appraisal of Heinrich's approach to the problem of money 'as a commodity'. He highlights the theoretical necessity of a connection between the two fields of the circulation and production of commodities. His quotation by Rosa Luxemburg on the production of a new value directly in the sphere of production makes it evident that the monetary form of the value is already present in the production process. Therefore, value theory in Marx, initially a monetary theory of labour value, should be reconstructed as a macro-monetary theory of capitalist production.

³ Caria, Garibaldo, Rinaldini (2023).

⁴ Bellofiore, Garibaldo, Mortagua (2019); Bellofiore, Garibaldo (2022).

⁵ Garibaldo, Rebecchi (2023).

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