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Marx and history: the limits of 'radical change' thesis

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to point out the limits of 'radical change' thesis in Marx's thought. According to this view, there would be a 'unilinear' and teleological conception of history in his period of youth. However, for some authors, at some point in his theoretical evolution from 1850's, Marx would break with this position and formulated a multilinear view of history. From a critical revision, it is intended to point the limits of this thesis from the analysis of Marx's theory of history that was already in consolidation in the 1840's. More precisely, in the texts *The german ideology* (1845-46) and *Poverty of philosophy* (1847), we can see that Marx's theoretical works of the mid-1840's is precisely against a philosophy of history, pointing limitations for the idea of 'radical change' in the theory of history.

Keywords: Marx; theory of history; 'radical change' thesis.

Marx e a história: os limites da tese da 'mudança radical'

RESUMO. O objetivo do presente artigo é apontar os limites da tese da 'mudança radical' no pensamento de Marx. De acordo com essa visão, no pensamento de Marx haveria uma concepção da história com caráter 'unilinear' e teleológico no período de juventude. Entretanto, para alguns autores, a partir de 1850, em algum momento de sua evolução teórica, Marx romperia com essa posição e formulado uma visão multilinear da história. A partir de uma revisão crítica, pretende-se apontar os limites dessa tese a partir da análise da teoria da história em Marx que já na década de 1840 estava em consolidação. Mais precisamente, nas obras *A ideologia alemã* (1845-46) e *Miséria da filosofia* (1847), percebe-se que os escritos teóricos de Marx da década de 1840 é precisamente contra uma filosofia da história, apontam limitações para as perspectivas da 'mudança radical' na teoria da história.

Palavras-chave: Marx; teoria da história; Tese da 'mudança radical'.

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Introduction

Even after the bicentennial of Marx's birth, his social theory has still provoked intense debate. As far as the theory of history is concerned, a very widespread thesis refers to a supposed historical determinism. In this assignment, therefore, there is a 'unilinearity' and teleology in history¹. The thesis attributed to Marx's social theory postulates that the evolution of humanity is supported by a teleology in history, that is, there would be a linear progression in human history in which a foreseen end, communism, would already be determined in its genesis. Marx's conception of history, therefore, "[...] would be compromised by evolutionary teleology - that is, for Marx, any dynamics (economic, technological, etc.) would necessarily and compulsorily direct history to an anticipated end" (Netto, 2011, p. 15).

On the other hand, some authors argue that Marx had this notion of history in his youth but, at some point, in his intellectual evolution he would have broken with this perspective. This position takes place in different authors such as Scaron (1980), Shanin (1983), Dussel (1990), Kohan (2003), Anderson (2010), Bianchi (2010), Lowy (2013) and many others². De Paula (2015) made an excellent systematization and names this perspective as 'radical change' thesis. We will follow similarly his systematization in the exposition of these interpretations of a change in Marx's conception of history.

¹ Although Marx's detractors always use this thesis, it is possible to identify within Marxism its defense. A critical synthesis of the 'unilinearity' thesis in Marxists can be found in De Paula (2015).

² We choose to deal with the main authors of every period of the 'radical change' thesis, adding Lowy (2013). However, De Paula (2015) made his systematization with several others authors.

These authors argue that there would be a radical shift in Marx's theory of history from the 1850's. Before this period there would be elements of a 'unilinearity' and teleology in history, but because of multiple factors - such as the contact with non-European civilizations, the Russian revolutionaries between 1870-1880, the discoveries about human prehistory, and so on. - Marx would have abandoned this view of human history, giving way to a multilinear view of historical development.

We intend to argue, following the steps of Augusto and Carcanholo (2014) and Miranda (2018), that already in the second half of the 1840's, Marx would reject and fought against philosophy of history with these characteristics by polemizing with the young Hegelians and Proudhon. Although the events exposed by the 'radical change' thesis authors are of great relevance to Marx's intellectual evolution and his greater understanding of social development, we argue that there is no significant break of his materialist theory of history of the second half of 1840. It's important to notice that this discussion is not about a 'epistemological break' as proposed by Althusser and others, as if the young Marx was concerned with philosophy and humanism and the mature Marx with science. This problematic is exclusive about a supposed 'unilinearity' in the conception of history and social development.

We argue that these events allowed a continuity in the understanding of history in its greatest complexity, but represents no decisive break in Marx theory of history. It is intended to point out that the analysis of Marx's writings of the second half of the 1840's, more precisely *The german ideology* and *Poverty of philosophy*³, provide a key to understand the limits of the 'radical change' thesis. Already in these writings Marx presents an opposition to a 'philosophy of history' so that human beings, although in a limited way, always can change the course of history. Also, it is important to notice that there is a variety of Marx's works that refute any historical determinism of his theory of history, such as *The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, the famous *Introduction of 1857*, *Grundrisse*, *Capital* itself and the writings about Russia (1870-1880). However, we are going to focus exclusively in *The german ideology* and *Poverty of philosophy* because the authors of the 'radical change' thesis argue that exactly from the 1850's Marx change his conception of history. So, it is given that from this period the element of a 'philosophy of history' no longer exists at some point.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to expose the thesis of the radical change in Marx's thought and to point out its limitations based on the Marxian theory of history. The use of those authors is simple, they are very significant in Marxist debate and the 'unilinearity' thesis is very widespread by Marx's detractors. By pointing out the limits of this thesis we also direct it to them. For this, in the first moment will be exposed the thesis of the 'radical change' in different authors. Subsequently, we propose to indicate the limits of this thesis by analyzing Marx's theory of history in the writings of the second half of the 1840's.

The 'radical change' thesis in Marx's thought

Simplified interpretations of Marx's social theory are very common. The main one undoubtedly is about a supposed determinism in history, whose social development would be determined by a fixed evolutionism: primitive society → slave society → feudal society → capitalist society → communist society (De Paula, 2015). However, some authors argue that Marx would break with this view throughout his intellectual trajectory. Within this perspective, Marx is credited with a deterministic vision of humanity in his writings of youth. However, at some point in his intellectual trajectory, from the 1850's, Marx would have broken with this perspective, giving rise to a multilinear notion of historical development. This notion is present in Scaron (1980), Shanin (1983), Dussel (1990), Kohan (2003), Anderson (2010), Bianchi (2010) (*Ibidem*) and Lowy (2013).

Kohan (2003) proposes that there are two paradigms in Marx's thought. In the first place, Marx would present a teleological vision of history and the progressive character of capitalism by bringing civilization to the 'barbarians'. This period is expressed, according to the author, as the 'paradigm of the *Manifesto*', whose greatest expression would be found in the ideas in the *Communist manifesto* of 1848. The progressive character of capitalism, which was written by Marx and Engels, was based on a teleological, 'unilinear' perspective of history. Such a paradigm would be linked to Marx's thought until the mid-1850's.

According to Kohan (2003), in the *Communist manifesto*, Marx and Engels emphasize the role of the bourgeoisie in bringing 'progress' to the rest of the world. The civilizing role of the bourgeois mode of production appears to the authors as the path to a superior socioeconomic stage. In the same sense, they

³ De Paula (2015) also argues in this way. However, the author doesn't focus his analysis in these writings. We intend to concentrate the argument in these works.

present the progressive character of the capitalist mode of production by inevitably incorporating the less 'developed' regions through the world market⁴.

Using as an example the progressive notions of capitalism in the *Manifesto*, Kohan (2003, p. 232, author's emphasis) argues that:

Unequivocally, it locates in the West what it calls 'the current of civilization' of world history, in a manner analogous to that used by the defenders of a universal philosophy of history that, in the end, ended up legitimizing economic preeminence, political and military Western over all other peoples and communities.

From the 1850's a phase of transition began. According to Kohan (2003), Marx's intellectual change occurs mainly in the texts on India⁵ and the formulation of the Asian mode of production concept (June of 1853), having as a final framework "[...] the article on Bolívar (January 1858) [which] is probably the last prolongation of the modern and progressive paradigm of the *Manifesto*" (Kohan, 2003, p. 236, word added).

The paradigm in Marx's thought after this period would reject philosophy of history. A multilinear view of history comes into play. More than that, a series of implications would take place with the emergence of the second paradigm. In Kohan's words (2003, p. 255, author's emphasis):

1) a critique of all universal logicist philosophy of history, of all prescriptions and supra-historical apriorist canon; 2) the prescription to base all historiographic and anthropological analyzes on empirical investigations; 3) the rejection of unilinear evolutionism and the adoption of a multilinear or pluricentric historiographic conception; 4) the opening towards the shared protagonism of multiple subjectivities in the world class struggle [...]; 5) the possibility that the practice of these new peripheral collective subjects overdetermined the internal struggle within the oppressor nation; 6) the abandonment of the Hegelian category of 'peoples with or without history'; 7) the condemnation of colonialism and capitalist expansionism no longer only in terms of ethical outrage but mainly in terms of historical rationality; 8) the complexity of the philosophical notion of 'progress', resignifying it not from the 'productive forces' but from the autonomous perspective of the aggrieved and oppressed peoples and social sectors; 9) the radical questioning of the modern dichotomy: East-field-barbarism versus West-city-civilization, admitting the plurality and coexistence of multiple civilizations; 10) the visualization of the asymmetry that governs the class-nation nexus in the 'mature' and developed capitalist countries and in the peripheral and 'backward' ones; and 11) the critique of all historical determinism and the conception of stage-stage development 'on the ladder', allowing it to elaborate in this way a much more flexible vision of capitalist development, at the same time accounting for the combination of unequal social relations, both within of each capitalist social formation as on a world scale.

Our focus is that before 1850 Marx would understand history as supra-historical, teleological. So, Marx's conception of history was profound changed by these events and from then on, any deterministic view of human development was excluded.

Scaron (1980), in the introduction of the texts of Marx and Engels on Latin American issues, proposes three stages of Marx's evolution. The first began from 1847 until 1856. At that time, both Marx and Engels, while at the same time not favorable to colonialism, seemed to justify it theoretically as necessary. That is, colonial abuses, although violent, would bring 'progress' to the other regions of the world. This period is marked by the articles on British domination in India, in which they can be interpreted as a teleological conception of history, and controversies over American protectionism.

The second stage refers from 1856 to 1864, a period marked by the foundation of the International. It is precisely at this time that Marx, along with Engels, even though they do not fully change their positions, denounce the colonial actions of the great capitalist powers in the non-European world, presenting a transition phase: "[...] it is the denunciation of the abuses of those powers and the vindication of the right that assisted Chinese, Indians, etc., to resist against the aggressors or foreign occupiers" (Scaron, 1980, p. 7).

⁴ As an example, according to Marx and Engels (1976, p. 488): "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country". Or: "The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image" (Marx & Engels, 1976, p. 488).

⁵ In the articles on British domination in India, writing for *The New York Daily Tribune*, Marx argued that British, by an 'unconscious thrust of history', would revolutionize the Indian economy. England would have a double mission. One destructive, another regenerative: to destroy the old Asian society and to give the material bases of the western society in Asia. The articles on India are recurrently used for the defense of a 'unilinear' view of history (Anderson, 2010). But as Mohri (1979, p. 41, author's emphasis) states, instead of a double historical mission of English domination, to destroy the old archaic society, and to lay the foundations for civilizational progress, Marx understood a twofold destructive mission of colonialism: "[...] 'the destruction of the old society' and the destruction of some of the essential conditions for 'regeneration of a new society'". This synthesis appears in the letter of 1881 to the Russian economist Nikolai Danielson, where Marx (1968, p. 1) exposed the real results of English domination in India, stating the tragedy for the Indian people: "In India serious complications, if not a general outbreak, is in store for the British government. What the English take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless to the Hindus; pensions for military and civil service men, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc., etc. – what they take from them without any equivalent and quite apart from what they appropriate to themselves annually within India, speaking only of the value of the commodities the Indians have gratuitously and annually to send over to England – it amounts to more than the total sum of income of the sixty millions of agricultural and industrial labourers of India! This is a bleeding process, with a vengeance!".

The third and final stage concerns the period from 1864 to 1883 (Marx's death). Scaron (1980) argues that this period marks Marx's internationalist positions. Changes in positions on the Irish and Indian issues are also important.

On Ireland, Marx would change his position of free trade in 1848 to be "[...] in 1867 [...] a lucid speaker of the need for countries like Ireland to defend British competition, erecting protective barriers, their incipient industries". On India, "[a]lthough he does not generalize his empirical findings in this field, the author of *Capital* approaches the notion of underdevelopment" (Scaron, 1980, p. 8).

Scaron (1980) affirms that Marx, in that period, understood the inability to fulfill the second phase of the 'double mission' in India by England. "We are far from the thesis according to which English capitalism, Mephistopheleically condemned to do well despite its malign nature, would engender modern industry in its immense Asian colony" (Scaron, 1980, p. 8). Scaron (1980) still lists a fourth stage: from the death of Marx (1883) to that of Engels (1895). However, it is not our object of investigation.

For Bianchi (2010), the starting point of the rupture would be the contact with the Irish case. Marx had argued that the proletarian revolution in the English industrial power would have as its necessary condition the emancipation of Ireland as a nation, even if this social revolution took on a different form from the more advanced countries. This new view would be the breaking point, "which was clearly distanced from a philosophy of history" (Bianchi, 2010, p. 182). According to the author, this distancing "[...] was expressed even more clearly [...]" in connection with the polemics of the development of capitalism in Russia (Bianchi, 2010, p. 182).

Finally, Shanin (1983), Dussel (1990), Anderson (2010) and Lowy (2013) argue that Marx's final rupture with a teleological historical position would be in the 1870's. Marx would decisively change such a position through the contact with studies of the Russian intellectuals and revolutionaries. A multilinear conception of history would be constructed, as a result of the possibility of a non-capitalist 'russian road' to socialism⁶.

Dussel (1990) proposes that the change in Marx's conception, the great 'turning', is due to the encounter with the Russian reality. The beginning of the break with the teleological vision of history is found in Marx's analysis of Poland, but "[...] this got even clearer with Ireland" (Dussel, 1990, p. 244-245).

However, according to Dussel (1990, p. 245-246, author's emphasis):

[...] we think that the origin of the fundamental 'turn' in Marx's vision of universal history was due to a very simple fact. When his work *Capital* was published in 1867, it produced reactions that reached the ears of Marx. Perhaps the most enthusiastic of all was that of some young revolutionary Russians; among them, certainly, Nikolai F. Danielson (who was born in 1844 and died on July 3, 1918). Now Marx could engage in a direct and fruitful dialogue with thinkers and militants from other horizons. *Capital* had become a problematizing transmission belt. The Russian reality, which was not new to Marx, who nevertheless despised it frequently, will gradually become an almost obsessive object of study [...].

Shanin (1983), more broadly, argues that several factors influenced Marx to abandon the fixed historical view. Marx would come to understand the complexity, dynamicity, and interdependence of societal forms in the more mature period of his works, beginning in the 1870's.

Four fundamental events would change Marx's political and intellectual vision. First, in 1871, the experience of the Paris Commune offered lessons on revolutionary action in a way never seen before. The emergence of a great social revolution that would allow the destruction of class society significantly altered the vision of the time. It is also the period with which Marx begins to move away from the political activities of the first International - ended in 1872 (Shanin, 1983).

The second event is the radical revolution in social sciences as a result of the prehistoric discoveries that occurred during the 1860's and 1870's. This factor expanded the comprehension of history in thousands of years, allowing a more accurate view of primitive societies. In turn, the impact of the development of civilizations on the understanding of humankind was considerable, "[...] by combining the study of material remains with [...] ethnography" (Shanin, 1983, p. 6).

⁶ Between the late 1870's and the early 1880's, Marx began to study what was happening in Russia. In Russia of that time, one form of common rural property was exalted, known as 'obshchina'. The Russian populists called 'narodniks' argued that from this form of property a socialist transition would be possible. On the other hand, a wing of the revolutionary movement, so-called 'marxists' argued that it would only be possible after an intense capitalist development. That is, they understood that Marx's theory encompassed a 'unilinearity' in history. This period also marks the contact of Marx with the leader Vera Zasulich who will contact the German communist to know if his theory predicted the destruction of the rural commune by 'history'. The letter sent to Zasulich and the sketches that Marx left are emphatic in asserting opposition to any historical determinism. Just for example, in the letter officially sent, Marx clearly states: "The analysis in *Capital* therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune" (Marx, 1983a, p. 124). In the second draft of the letter, Marx (1983b, p. 105) attests that "[w]hat threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither a historical inevitability nor a theory; it is state oppression and exploitation by capitalist intruders". For further study, see Shanin (1983), Dussel (1990) e Anderson (2010).

The third event, according to Shanin (1983, p. 6), together with the studies of prehistory, was the considerable extension of the knowledge of non-capitalist rural societies existing together with the capitalist mode of production, “[...] especially the Works of Maine, Firs, and others on India”.

Finally, Marx’s contact with Russia and the revolutionaries, in which they would offer the German author the greatest combination of all events above. The evidence found about Russian rural communes and their revolutionary experience would be Marx’s definitive turn for a multilinear view of history.

Anderson (2010) in his book *Marx at the margins* seems to establish that the rupture of a philosophy of history starts in the *Grundrisse* and the evolution continues in the writings of non-Western societies and has its maturity of formulation and complexity of a multilinear conception of history with the contact with the Russian reality at the end of 1870’s and beginning of 1880’s.

To finish, in his introduction to the Brazilian volume of Marx and Engels’ writings on the class struggle in Russia, Lowy (2013) argues that the rupture in Marx’s thought for a non-linear view of history stems from his contact with the Russian case. As for Dussel (1990) and Shanin (1983), Lowy (2013) indicates that before 1877, Marx would still have traces of an evolutionist, Eurocentric, and ‘etapist’ view of historical development. In the writings on Russia and the possibility of social revolution with socialist character in the periphery of the capitalist system Marx would have broken with this vision. For the author, this is an important political and methodological turn to understand history.

Thus, for these authors, from the 1870’s, Marx would have made a definitive break with a teleological conception of history. On the other hand, it would have also perceived the possibility, through the ‘russian road’, of non-capitalist development with the rural commune in the tsarist country.

It is evident that these interpretations try to find support in Marx’s trajectory. However, the analysis of writings before the *Manifesto* as *The German ideology* and *Poverty of philosophy* - between 1845 and 1847 - provide evidence that in this period both Marx and Engels had established their materialist conception of history, fighting against any ‘philosophy of history’ and arguing that history itself is an open road and humans can change its course.

On Marx’s theory of history

In the present section, it is argued that in the writings of the second half of the 1840’s Marx criticize the supra-historical and teleological conception of history, establishing limitations to the ‘radical change’ thesis.

As Augusto and Carcanholo (2014) pointed out, in a quick examination of Marx’s texts in the second half of the 1840’s it is possible to identify the opposition to any deterministic and fatalistic notion of human history. More specifically, in *The German ideology* Marx was already in charge of accurately criticizing the Hegelian philosophy of history. And as Miranda (2018) states, the critique of the philosophy of history has continued in *Poverty of philosophy*. In these texts Marx polemizes with the young Hegelians and Proudhon. Therefore, we are going to follow the steps of these authors to demystify the thesis.

Through Hegel’s dialectics, movement is captured in purely logical terms. The analysis of reality is reduced to an ideal system. That is, in the Hegelian method movement is purely caused by concepts. The present is nothing more than a dialectical process that runs from the inorganic nature towards a culminating point of civilization whose methodological basis is founded in logic (Miranda, 2018).

In Hegelian conception of history motion is captured in purely logical terms. History is reduced to an ideal system, whose categories are engendered in a fatalistic succession. That is, in the Hegelian philosophy of history its movement is purely brought about by the dialectic of concepts (Miranda, 2018). Therefore, it is interesting to note that history in its genesis already has in germ a certain climax.

For Hegel, in the dialectical apprehension of reality, it is necessary to construct a conceptual system that, from an idea/reason, would manifest the concrete through an abstract conceptual system. On the other hand, Marx’s materialist view proposes that abstractions of thought should not have a purely ideal character. On the contrary, they must have as presupposition the material reality (Augusto & Carcanholo, 2014).

More than that, the starting point for the essential difference between Marx and philosophical speculation, that is, an idealistic philosophy, “[...] is that the abstractions of the concrete determinants of phenomena are only possible in the plane of ideas because they are products of social reality itself” (Augusto & Carcanholo, 2014, p. 14).

According to Marx in *Poverty of philosophy* (Marx, 1976, p. 165, author’s emphasis):

Thus, for Hegel, all that has happened and is still happening is only just what is happening in his own mind. Thus, the philosophy of history is nothing but the history of philosophy, of his own philosophy. There is no longer a 'history according to the order in time', there is only 'the sequence of ideas in the understanding'. He thinks he is constructing the world by the movement of thought, whereas he is merely reconstructing systematically and classifying by the absolute method the thoughts which are in the minds of all.

As Miranda (2018) argues, Marx deal with these theoretical conceptions. After a first contact with political economy categories and its ontological expression found in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts* of 1844, it is above all in *The german ideology*, written with Engels, that the theoretical-methodological formulations gain greater precision. Marx and Engels argue that the basis of their formulations is the analysis of material reality. The authors delineate a conception of analysis of the real material conditions of human life, starting not from men abstracted from the material world, but from actual real men and their actual social relations.

In *The german ideology*, Marx criticizes the young Hegelians and their pretension to transpose the existence as product of the conscience:

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declare them the true bonds of human society), it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognize it by means of a different interpretation. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly 'worldshattering' phrases, are the staunchest conservatives (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 30, author's emphasis).

Against that, in *The german ideology*, Marx and Engels (1976a, p. 36) analyze historical reality through an expressive materialist conception of the world, such that "[m]en are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men [...]", transformers of their environment, "[...] as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these".

Radically contrary to speculative philosophy, "[...] which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 36). What is meant by this is that Marx and Engels presuppose not the imaginative abstractions of men to conceive the 'men in the flesh'. On the contrary, "[...] but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 36).

For Marx and Engels, all the immaterial phenomena are product of material reality. Ideas, conceptions and thoughts are a late development of matter. They are "[...] directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 36). It's interesting because for Marx the body-mind duality seems not exist. Also, the development of human being is directly linked to material conditions: "Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 36).

More than that, they conceive, as a result, that "Consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*], and the being of men is their actual life-process" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 36). That is, "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 37).

But as they state, this conception is not devoid of premises. It starts out from real social relations of humans. "Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and fixity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions". The result is that "[a]s soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts, as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 37).

Thus, the starting point to analyze the historical process "[...] is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 31).

According Marx e Engels (1976a, p. 31-32, author's emphasis):

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence 'of' the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite 'mode of life' on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with 'what' they produce and with 'how' they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production.

Thus, as Marx and Engels (1976a, p. 50, author's emphasis) affirm:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which uses the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history, e.g., the goal ascribed to the discovery of America is to further the eruption of the French Revolution. Thereby history receives its own special goals and becomes 'a person ranking with other persons' (to wit: 'self-consciousness, criticism, the unique', etc.), while what is designated with the words 'destiny', 'goal', 'germ', or 'idea' of earlier history is nothing more than an abstraction from later history, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history.

In these propositions appears a materialist conception of history, clearly in opposition to a supra-historical and teleological formulation. Also indicated the historical limitations of human activities as a result of the development of the productive forces and the relations of production of a certain historical period (Miranda, 2018).

In a letter to Pavel V. Annenkov, commenting Proudhon's *Philosophy of poverty*, Marx demonstrates his critical opposition to Proudhon's work which purports to expose "[...] a dialectical fantasmagoria". Marx's critique refers to the fact that the author conceives history in a "[...] nebulous realm of the imagination [...]" by not analyzing history as it was and presents itself. That is, "[...] it is Hegelian trash, it is not history, it is not profane history - history of mankind, but sacred history - history of ideas". For Marx, the conception of man in Proudhon's perspective "[...] is but the instrument used by the idea or eternal reason in order to unfold itself". This development of man occurs in an interpretation "[...] in the mystical bosom of the absolute idea" (Marx, 1982, p. 97).

In opposition, Marx questions why the French author resort to a superficial Hegelianism. In response, Marx asks:

What is society, irrespective of its form? The product of man's interaction upon man. Is man free to choose this or that form of society? By no means. If you assume a given state of development of man's productive faculties, you will have a corresponding form of commerce and consumption. If you assume given stages of development in production, commerce or consumption, you will have a corresponding form of social constitution, a corresponding organization, whether of the family, of the estates or of the classes - in a word, a corresponding civil society (Marx, 1982, p. 96).

Given Proudhon's limitations, Marx still comments that the social being has the capacity to change reality, but the limitation lies in the fact that it is inserted in a historical context impossible to be 'chosen'. That is to say, the human being has the capacity to change the course history, but the present in which it is inserted results in the accumulation of the actions of predecessor generations, therefore, they limit their activity. In Marx's words:

Needless to say, man is not free to choose 'his productive forces'—upon which his whole history is based—for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of previous activity. Thus, the productive forces are the result of man's practical energy, but that energy is in turn circumscribed by the conditions in which man is placed by the productive forces already acquired, by the form of society which exists before him, which he does not create, which is the product of the preceding generation (Marx, 1982, p. 96, author's emphasis).

It's very interesting that this conception appears in later writings and continue to evolve. This synthesis is present in Marx's famous phrase in *The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please", because the circumstances are totally transmitted and unmanageable by individuals. "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx, 1979, p. 103).

The fact that present generations find themselves faced with productive forces that have been acquired by a set of generations in different historical periods, providing the forms for 'new productions', creates a

human history, “[...] which is all the more a history of mankind as man’s productive forces, and hence his social relations, have expanded” (Marx, 1982, p. 96). Moreover, assuming that the human being produces his means of life, the material relations are the basis of any human activity. That is, “[h]is material relations form the basis of all his relations. These material relations are but the necessary forms in which his material and individual activity is realized” (Marx, 1982, p. 96).

Thus, the materialism conceived by Marx in the 1840’s eliminates the possibility of a supra-historical conception of history. In *The german ideology*, the critique of the ‘philosophy of history’ was already present, so that:

When the reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy [*die selbständige Philosophie*] loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of men. These abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 37).

What is meant by that is there is no intentionality in history itself, it is an open road. Although human beings have the capacity to act teleologically, the complexity of the conflicts of the totality of human wills, insert in a very particular condition of life, produces infinite possibility in historical process.

Although Marx and Engels denied intentionality in history already in the 1840’s, we can see this view along all their lives. In his letter to Joseph Bloch, Engels (1972) summarizes the absence of teleology in history as a result of the complexity of the conflicts of interests in the construction of human history: “[H]istory is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life”. For him, “[...] there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant - the historical event”. As “[...] each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed” (Engels, 1972, p. 295).

The historical development of humanity can never be represented as a supra-historical scheme. As pointed out by Lukács (2007, p. 226), Marx’s social theory eliminates already in the 1840’s, “[...] at the level of historical evolution, every teleological element”. With regard to the analytic principle, for Marx, “[...] the starting point is given neither by the atom (as in the old materialists) nor by the abstract being (as in Hegel) [...]”, but by what actually exists. “Every existing must always be objective, that is, it must always be part [...] of a concrete complex” (Lukács, 2007, p. 226).

The materialistic conception of history above indicates that human beings are always capable to transform their social reality in the construction of human history. However, they do not hang in the air, they live in an objective material circumstance (De Paula, 2015). Marx always recognize the human capacity to chance the course of history already in the 1840’s, putting limits to the ‘radical change’ thesis.

Conclusion

It was pointed out that different authors understand that Marx in his youth had a historical-philosophical and ‘unilinear’ conception of history and at some point, in his intellectual trajectory he would have broken with such a view, manifesting a ‘multilinear’ position of development. The authors of this interpretation claim that Marx’s contact at different moments with non-European historical situations between 1850 and 1880 would provide the basis for a “radical change” in his theoretical conception of history.

As indicated, the theory of history in contrast to a ‘philosophy of history’ was already sketched in Marx’s writings of the second half of the 1840’s, more precisely in *The german ideology* and *Poverty of philosophy*. In these texts, the opposition to any attempt at a deterministic conception of history is already manifested. In polemic with the young Hegelians and Proudhon, Marx expresses his materialistic vision for the analysis of reality, the rejection of supra-historical presuppositions, and the human capacity to alter the course of history even if limited to the material conditions of the present.

From the writings of the second half of the 1840’s, therefore, it is possible to identify that Marx reject the historical view the proponents of ‘radical change’ thesis attributed to him. A multilinear view of history, proposed by the interpreters as counterpoint, also seems to lack verification. If in *The german ideology* and *Poverty of philosophy* Marx and Engels state that history cannot be understand with ‘schemes’, therefore is

open, it is self-evident that human activity can change the course of it. Of course, the contact with the evolution of knowledge about non-Western civilizations was crucial to Marx understand history in its greatest complexity, but this corroborated with his materialist theory of history formulated in the second half of the 1840's and not provided a rupture with it. As the aim was to point to the limits of the thesis in general, in future research the particular questions can be demystified in more detail.

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