

THE ONTOLOGY OF PRODUCTION: KARL MARX AND NISHIDA KITARÓ.

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1. Introduction

Our aim is to think about the ontology of production from Marx and Nishida Kitaró's (1870-1945) point of view. Nishida is a Japanese philosopher who wrote several essays on a large number of subjects, considered a very important figure in Japanese philosophy. Indeed, he was the founder of the Kyoto School.

Beyond the Marx's standpoint, our plan is to reflect about the essays compiled under the title *Ontology of Production*, in particular the essay entitled "Human Being" (Kitaró, 2012a). One question to consider is what does a Japanese philosopher think about the concept of production? And what is the ontology of production to Marx? We intend to demonstrate that the dialogue between East and West is essential. "Nishida never lost sight of his central problem, namely, the confrontation of Oriental Buddhist ideas with Western philosophy", says, for example, Matao Noda (1955, 345).

For Nishida there is a fundamental groundlessness of thinking. For him, behind the rational, there is the irrational and this is a fundamental feature of his philosophy. Besides, we must understand what production is and how human beings can make and remake the world. In our reading, there isn't the temptation to see in Nishida's philosophy any fidelity to Marxist orthodoxy. Our endeavour is, precisely, to understand the ontology of production from both thinkers.

¹ Grateful to Paula Couto.

2. Marx

As we know, the notion of production is very large. We could mention the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* (Aristotle), and the notion of production as work. Marx demonstrates that labor is the truest relation between man and nature. Therefore, we must pay attention to the several meanings of production. Aristotle dignifies *poiesis* (the relationship between man and nature) and *praxis* (the relationship between man to man), and in that way he considers manual work as degrading, proper to slaves. We must, then, take this into account if we want to deepen our knowledge about production.

Indeed, production means *poiesis*, *praxis* and *appropriation*. However, there are two kinds of appropriation: The appropriation of nature by the power of production, and the private propriety, which refers to an owner and its property. We must, also, take into account that global economy is driven not only by production but also by the machinations of financial markets. How can we think, now, the concept of production if there is the economy of global capital and another kind of commodities and even other types of production and products?

In the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx calls “Robinsonades” to economists as Adam Smith and David Ricardo who define society as an association of individuals. Overcoming this assumption, Marx defends that society comes up as a result of material production. The human as a political animal needs to be understood as a creator. The social animal means the human being who lives in society. However, we must emphasize what is unknown to the economists, that is, the relationship between historical processes and social productions. Marx adds: “Production in general is an abstraction, but it is a rational abstraction, in so far as it singles out and fixes the common features, thereby saving us repetition”.

In 1851 Marx had announced and postponed the publication of a work entitled *Economics*, as he neglected this intention until 1857. Meanwhile he wrote some important essays. The *Grundrisse* (*Outlines of a critique of Political Economy*, and other works (*Towards a Critique of Political Economy*) are essential to understand the notion of value, production, and many other issues. When Marx wrote the *Grundrisse* he

had thought to divide the *Economics* in six volumes. The *Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, was the first.

In fact, the *Grundrisse* was written by Marx in the years 1857-8 and remained unpublished until 1941. It's in this volume that the ontology of production is well determined. First, when we think about production we refer to *material production*. Marx says: "Individuals producing in society, thus the socially determined production of individuals, naturally constitutes the starting-point" (Marx, 2000, 380). The fiction is the credit conceded to the individual, as if history was made of the agglomeration of individuals. Production shows a different understanding: production is the stuff of history and *shows always individuals socially determined*. The family and the clan illustrate the social union. The civil society, in the eighteenth century, illustrates the same thing.

Production is therefore production of social individuals at a certain stage of social development. There are stages of development that have certain landmarks. Moreover: if the isolated individual gains importance, it is because there is a period historically determined and this idea became prevalent. Thus, that idea is itself a result of history. Therefore, everything we can think about production must take into account the production by social individuals and the corresponding stage of social development. There is no other way. We will see, later on, the standpoint of Michel Henry on this issue.

The reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) is important because it shows how we must conceive reality as a sensuous human activity, practice, not in the form of the object or of contemplation. Feuerbach himself does not conceive human activity as an objective activity. Therefore, his distinction between sensuous activity and thought objects isn't enough. If Feuerbach's anthropology is based on the concept of *Gattungswesen*, which means "generic essence" or "species being", Marx emphasizes the notion of production. In fact, the sphere of Feuerbach's philosophy is consciousness, ideas and representation, "as if we have reinforced the Kantian and Fichtean assertion of the autonomy of consciousness" (Ricoeur, 1986, 31). For Marx the sphere is praxis.

According to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* (1844) the criticism of religion is the "premise of all criticism". Therefore, we must understand religion and its role in the history of

mankind in order to understand our lives. The criticism of religion isn't one type of criticism; it's the main source, the matrix to understand human societies. As we know, Feuerbach's shadow instigated Marx to think as he does in his critique to the philosophy of Hegel. "*Man makes religion, religion does not make man*", wrote Marx (Marx/Engels, 1975, 175). However, Marx recognizes some important achievements of Hegel's philosophy. For example: "The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation: that he thus grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's *own labour*." (Marx/Engels, 1975, 332-333)

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx's first draft of *Economics*, it is important to note that worker's relationship to his product result in alienation. Therefore, we must understand the relationship between alienation and the money system. Then we must recognize the political economy and notions like wage, property, exchange, and so on. Furthermore, the worker becomes himself a commodity, which means that the depreciation of the human world progresses in "proportion to the increase in value of the world of things". For Marx, the worker produces commodities and is himself a commodity.

In fact, the worker produces himself as an alien being. He produces the object, but in so doing, he produces himself into a thing. Marx says that in political economy "this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as a loss of the object or slavery to it, and appropriation as alienation, as externalization".

In his reflection, Marx doesn't differentiate political economy and religion. His purpose is to show human alienation, and so that condition within the political system and within religion. The human becomes strange to himself. Not just poor but unhappy. The worker no longer belongs to himself but to the object.

The *Manuscripts* (1844) shows that the reflection about work, wage, capital and others, depends on a philosophical reflection based on the

ontology of production. In fact, man is the creator, the worker; man transforms and acts in a way that the political economy never fully realizes. The author of the *Manuscripts* insists that “(...) the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes the less belongs to him as his own” (Marx/Engels, 1975, 272).

We must refer to the importance of concepts such as ideology and alienation in the *Manuscripts*. We know, following Paul Ricoeur (1986), that ideology doesn't have a specific treatment in that text. It's only in *German Ideology* that Marx thinks ideology fully. However, in the *Manuscripts*, ideology is referred indirectly and it constitutes the beginning of the German ideology thinking. Paul Ricoeur, in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, says that “alienation of the products of one's labor is the model for Marx's depiction of the concept of alienation as a whole” (Ricoeur, 1986, 41).

Other important remark is the notion of production in the *Manuscripts*. So, Ricoeur says: “Marx usage of the concept of creation is extremely important because it provides a scope to the concept of production that is much broader than mere economics. I sometimes wonder whether orthodox Marxism's dogmatic reduction of everything to production does not proceed from a failure either to know or remember that for the young Marx at least the concept of production is defined by creation and not the contrary” (Ricoeur, 1986, 46).

We must also understand the critique to idealism through the notions of *representation and subjectivity*. Marx condemns them as he condemns Feuerbach's materialism. Practical activity is the only way to overcome the ambiguities of representation and subjectivity (idealism) and a mere and passive materialism. Emphasizing practical activity is the way to show the necessity to organize the world (idealism) and the importance of activity (work, practice, transformation). We agree with Balibar when he says: “What he proposes is quite simply to explode the contradiction, to dissociate representation and subjectivity and allow the category of practical activity to emerge in its own right” (Balibar, 1995, 25). Therefore, we must transfer the category of subjectivity and representation

to practice. Not simply eliminate them, *but transform them into the very idea of subjectivity and show how practice really is.*

What is truly new in Marx's philosophy? Not only the philosophical reflections, but also the economic and social reflections, as the man political action: Marx himself. What is new is the other way of doing philosophy. A new conception of what knowledge and practice is. If we can't separate ontology and production, we can't separate ontology, production and social relations.

We can remind the expression of Balibar in the first page of *The philosophy of Marx* (1995): "*Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before*". This is the second phrase, the first is: "*There is no Marxist philosophy and there never will be*".

This simply means that there isn't a Marxist philosophy notwithstanding the existence of a philosophy in Marx's thought. Balibar defends this (apparent) paradox. But there are other issues: Marx tries to prove an alternative to philosophy: a non-philosophy or even an anti-philosophy.

This "new" philosophy in no way distinguishes the historical from the philosophical or the economic. Marx's reflection assumes that there is no distinction between them. In short, more than a philosophy of action, *what Marx proposes is a new understanding of action itself.* The revolutionary movement needs action. The proletarians must act. Philosophy is nothing if it doesn't account for that necessity.

Thus, the task of philosophy is to serve history, which means that the immediate function of philosophy is to serve history. Why so? If history is the theatre of the "self-estrangement in its unholy forms", philosophy must think why human societies are produced like that. What Marx refers to emphatically is the German social and historical *status quo*. The progress is possible if one class, the proletariat, has the power to transform the present and the possibility to sustain theoretically that revolution. So "the head of this emancipation is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat" (Marx/Engels, 1975, 187).

Finally, there is an important point of view that we must consider if we want to clarify Marx's ontology of production. We refer to Michel Henry, in particularly the essay entitled "Introduction à la pensée de Marx" (Henry, 2008). For our purpose, we don't need to deepen

Henry's philosophy and read, for example, *Marx*, the most important work of the French philosopher on Marx (Henry, 1976). In fact, we just want to refer another standpoint. For Henry we must overcome "Marxism" and understand Marx himself. How? "The rise to the origin of Marxism, such is the introduction to the thought of Marx" (Henry, 2008, 10). Paradoxically, Henry argues that Marx's thinking has nothing to do with materialism, social class or history, for example. But the essential issue for our purpose is the argument that defends that "there is no history, there are only historical individuals". In fact, for Michel Henry more important than class is individual: "Is the determination of individual life that originates social class."² Michel Henry considers that Marx's philosophy is a radical defense of the individual, "de la subjectivité individuelle". And it is this philosophy that produces a new ontology. For us, Marx's philosophy is a new expression of the ontology of production based, precisely, in other notions: on Feuerbach's materialism, with a new impact on history and a new philosophical vision of economy and the fact that history overlaps individuals. However, as we can see, the ontology as production remains an open field.

3. Nishida Kitaró

Agustin Jacinto Zavala, in "Acercamiento a la filosofía de la Historia em Nishida Kitaro", says that Nishida is one of the greatest thinkers of Japan (Zavala, 1981, 130). First, the practice and reflection of Zen was his main interest. Afterwards, it came the problem of ethics, knowledge and history. Our intention is just to mention the perspective of history for Nishida, particularly what he thought about *praxis* and *poiesis*. Nishida wrote in 1940 an *Introduction to a Philosophy of Praxis*. But what is praxis? And poiesis? To Zavala, interpreting Nishida's philosophy, "the philosophies of praxis don't start with subjective and moral consciousness" (Zavala, 1981, 136). We must, indeed, overcome the rational subjectivism.

² The complete quote is: "C'est la détermination de cette vie (la vie individuelle), la détermination des individus, de leur action et de leur pensée qui fait, qui est la détermination de la classe » (Henry, 2008, 14). Later (2008, 27), the author wrote: « Et cette réalité dernière, qui fonde l'économie elle-même et qui la détermine ultimement, c'est la vie subjective individuelle ».

After 1924 there were meetings with Miki Kiyoshi and Kawakami Hajime with the purpose to discuss Marxism and its social impact. Indeed, after 1920 Marxism was very important in Japan. In 1933-1934, with the publishing of *Fundamental Problems in Philosophy*, Nishida thinks reality with the point of view of our self, our active self. The true action must be personal. Nishida finishes the first part of *Fundamental Problems in Philosophy* writing that “philosophy never, until now, has truly thinking from the point of view of the active self. Therefore, we don’t think from the background what is the world of the actual reality where we act” (Kitaró, 2014). So the active self is a social self. Every person is a person with others.

In order to understand ontology of production, we must look carefully into “Human Being”, an essay written in 1938 (Kitaró, 2012). First of all, “the world of historical actuality is the world of production”. Then, we *create* things, *produce* them, and things have a *historical* world. History has in fact a double face: the self is opposed to things and vice-versa. Nevertheless, they utterly oppose and contradict each other; it is inevitably that they affect each other. Nishida has a chief expression to say that: life is always a *moving from the made to the making*. “Creation”, “production” and “history” are interrelated expressions that we must recognize essential to characterize the human being. However, we can’t forget that contradiction “is the fact of human life”. There are contradictions between the self and the thing, self-contradiction and, to summarize, contradiction is the problem of our life and death.

For Nishida our intentional action arises as historical form-making activity. The true objective intentional action that makes things historically is praxis. Nonetheless, there is no intentional action and no praxis that is not productive.

We must remark that for Nishida intuition is always active. “Active intuition is «intuition» insofar it is an immediate apprehension logically prior to any distinction between apprehending subject and apprehending object”. (Kitaró, 2012a, 24). Or, in other terms, “acting-intuition” is Nishida’s term for the dialectical interactivity between human self and world, whereby we see things by working upon them, and as we work upon our environment our self-awareness is in turn shaped. Thus, in shaping the world, we in turn are shaped by it in the world’s

self-formation. The world is the place (*basho*) that forms itself, and we are involved in that formation of the world" (Kitaro/Krummel, 2012, 6). The human existence is "self-contradictory because it is simultaneously autonomous and a part of the world. Like Krummel says (Kitaró, 2012 b, 31): "As *homo faber* we reshape the world with tools and technology to assert our independence from it and yet simultaneously this is the world's own self-creativity working through ourselves. The dialectic is such that human beings in their autonomous creativity are actively taking part in the world's own self-creation."

The notion of *basho* is central to understand Nishida's philosophy. The translators render the Japanese word by place or *topos* or even "lieu" (some French translators) (Heleno, 2014). Although this *basho* is *nothingness*, we must pay attention to the relationship between *nothing as a place*, and not, like de Eastern ontology, as being. So, one thing that differentiates East and West is, respectively, the notion of being/not being (the issue of ontology) and the real importance of nothingness. Naturally, this makes the difference between what we understand about ontology and production. *Basho* precedes any intellectual dichotomization between experience and reality. Truly, "it refers to the most *concrete* situatedness at the base of our being, entailing a non distinction between experience and reality, hence a priority to the subject-object dichotomy or the distinction between ideal and real. It would be the «place» enveloping and encompassing all mental acts and their objects, all perspectival horizons of intentionality that constitute the world of objects" (Kitaró, 2012 b, 9).

Surely, there is a concern with the meaning of consciousness and also the object. The ontology of consciousness means that we must take into account the reflexivity of self-awareness. But what Nishida means is another kind of ontology and furthermore another perspective of consciousness. For him, the consciousness is a field that cannot be grasped as an individual substance but rather as a field that is the opening of world and self. That field overcome the idea of self-awareness, because the knowledge must be understand as a "locus of non-differentiation behind the distinction between such awareness and things seen from its vantage point", like John Maraldo writes (Maraldo, 2015). And he continues "as non-differentiated and inclusive, that locus is

field-like, a metaphor that Nishida at first replaced with the notion of topos or “place” (*basho*)”.

Thus, there isn’t something like a passive intuition. Self, furthermore, is active, and this is why it was historical. Men are beings who make history, and there is no other possibility. “Dialectically, to see is to act, and to act is to see” (Kitaró, 2012a, 148). However, if we must act, we must destroy. That means that absolute negation becomes mediation and the “thing is mediated by life and death”. Production is, therefore, the mediation between absolute negation and absolute construction.

The influence of German idealism in Nishida’s philosophy is notorious, it is the best way to be aware of the dialectic between the self and the world. If not so, neither the notion of production nor of history have meaning. For Nishida there is an expressive activity, that is, “when we say we make things, it is always with respect to what is objectively expressive. What is in this sense objectively expressive is reason. The *logos* is characteristic of poesis.” (Kitaró, 2012a, 149). Production is thus an expansion of the self. And then “our life exists in making things; what is called productive life must be grasped from expressive activity” (Kitaró, 2012a, 149). Important is to say that, heretofore, expressive activity is the expression of conscience self. However, conscience must be seen from the point of view of historical production. In the end of “Human Being” Nishida says: “Our knowledge arises from the fact that we, as singularities in the historical world, see the thing in expressive activity. It is from there that we are continually seeing the thing self-contradictorily” (Kitaró, 2012a, 185).

We must, then, interpret production at least in three ways: a) The radical historicity of human being; b) the making of things; c) the appropriation of nature, this means, the essential relation between man and nature. Production is not a power of man through or over nature.

If this is true, we must reinterpret the history of philosophy. In many philosophers there isn’t any care about the radical historicity of man, social relations and so forth. Man, says Nishida, is the apex between the made and me the making. We must reiterate that production is necessarily ontologically constitutive for man. Like William Haver wrote in his introduction to *Ontology of Production*, “if production is

necessarily ontologically constitutive for man, if in fact we exist not merely *because* we make things but only *in* the making of things (poiesis), then what Marx called a « mode of production » is a materialistic nickname for ontology". (2012a, 10). And a little after: "For Nishida consciousness itself is not a subjective phenomenon; subjectivity happens but only as an effect, never as cause."

Appropriation is another concept that engages Marx and Nishida alike. There is no production without appropriation. This means: the identity between production and ontology is an appropriation of the world by man. In an explicit reference to historical materialism (2012, 164), Nishida wrote that "the world of matter is a world that neither moves mechanically nor develops biologically. It is necessarily a world that is continually forming itself in expressive activity, which is to say, in production". And later he also wrote: "our life arises from seeing the thing dialectically".

Finally, each society, for Nishida, is a kind of poiesis. Zavala (1994) quotes the last works of Nishida saying that the world must be thought as a dialectical world. There is a historical present, and in it opposes dialectically the past and the future. So, we can say that the infinite past is the thesis; the future is the infinite possibilities (antithesis) and the present is the synthesis. The more they oppose, the greater is poiesis in the present.

4. Concluding remarks

Nishida's language is strongly Hegelian. In "Human Being" there is no reference to concepts like ideology, alienation, concepts that deepens the relationship between man and the world. In fact, it is impossible for us to reflect about the ontology of production without such concepts. History, praxis, poiesis, are concepts that mean something to us only if we go further in our reflection, that is, if we notice their achievements and failures.

Marx's aim is to understand and suppress alienation and ideology. However, we should suspect that it's not only capitalism that produces them. As we have seen, particularly in Nishida's essay "Human Being"

- but in others too -, when he reflects about the “ontology of production” there aren’t any concerns about such problems. If the text of Nishida is excessively “pure”, Marx’s philosophy defends another kind of optimism. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that Nishida doesn’t need to be a “Marxist”, this is, his propose is not to depict Marx’s philosophy but rather to reflect about such issues. What is common to both thinkers is the German idealism, despite the criticism they make.

It’s time to make the concluding remarks about our purpose. In fact, “ontology of production” means also “ontology as production”. Indeed, it would have been possible to start our reflection with Michel Henry’s essay entitled “Le Concept de L’être comme production” (Henry, 2004). Therein, the sequence of the author’s thinking is: to know what is the meaning of Aristotle’s causes, the Heideggerian’s standpoint, Hegel’s notion of work and, most importantly, the “new” meaning of ontology defended by Marx. Indeed, Marx’s overcoming of the notion of representation proposes a new vision of action (praxis) which shows a new philosophy.

However, if our purpose is to illustrate the notion of ontology and production, we try to emphasize what the young author’s of the *Manuscripts* thinks about that. As we have seen, the notions of work, wage, and others introduce a new kind of bondage between man and the world. Indeed, Marx makes a new philosophy because he refreshes the bond between ontology and production.

Nishida Kitaró shows another point of view. Undeniably, ontology is reconsidered if we underscore the notions of history, active intuition and “*basho*”. In fact, we don’t expand this last notion of Kitaró’s philosophy. However, we must remark that with Nishida the question of ontology is really the relation between notions as place and nothingness. “*Basho* in its deepest sense is understood as the concrete situation, i.e., the “placedness” or “implacement” of our lived experience vis-a-vis reality, in the whole of its dynamic structure, that grounds cognition and whence the bifurcation into subject-object derives” (Kitaró, 2012 b, 6).

What is, then, the future of the notion of production? Emphasize, for example, Marx’s concepts or take notice of Nishida’s *basho*? Like Krummel wrote (Kitaro/Krummel, 2012, 4): “Nishida stood in relation

to Kantian epistemology and Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness as he was developing his theory of place in the attempt to avoid the pitfalls of dualism, hylomorphism, and substantialism". As we tried to demonstrate, what binds both thinkers is the importance of social history, the overcoming of dualisms and a new perspective of action and creativity.

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