

HUMANISM AND THE METAPHYSICS OF HUMAN ESSENCE – ON THE PRODUCTION OF MAN BY LABOUR

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RESUMO: São muitas as definições do humanismo porque muitos são os pressupostos teológicos ou filosóficos em que se apoiam e muitas as posições político-ideológicas que procuram justificar. Louis Althusser sintetizou, meio século atrás, os pressupostos dessas doutrinas: há uma essência universal do homem; tal essência é atributo de indivíduos tomados isoladamente, que são seus sujeitos reais. A essência, que em si é um universal, se reproduz em cada homem; todos os homens seriam, portanto plenos detentores da humanidade, ou ainda, racionais. Assim compreendido, o humanismo, filosoficamente, é um discurso idealista que declara, a partir de uma nebulosa intuição de essência, que o homem ou “as pessoas” é ou são isso ou aquilo. Retoma, mesmo quando inspirado de elevados ideais de emancipação, uma das repostas mais comuns à pergunta pela essência do homem: a animalidade é sua matéria, mas sua forma substancial é a razão. Embora ela valha para todas as doutrinas metafísicas sobre a essência humana, Althusser tinha em vista, ao desenvolver sua crítica, as versões marxistas do humanismo, que se apoiam nas obras de juventude, inspiradas na noção de “essência genérica” (Gattungsweisen) do homem elaborada por

Feuerbach. Daí sua tese de que as descobertas teórico-científicas de Marx configuraram uma “ruptura epistemológica” com as ideias da juventude. Essa tese suscitou e continua suscitando múltiplas refutações: Althusser foi acusado de empirismo, positivismo, epistemologismo etc. As classificações pejorativas importam menos do que a doutrina “ontológica” do trabalho em que elas se baseiam. Tal como interpretado pelos ontólogos, o princípio de que o homem se autoproduziu pelo trabalho encerra-se num círculo vicioso: o trabalho produz o homem porque ele trabalha de um modo humano. A tautologia é ocultada por um postulado metafísico: o trabalho é a exteriorização da essência ativa do “ser humano genérico”. A autoprodução do homem não é, pois compreendida concretamente como resultado de um processo seletivo de hominização, mas como atualização de uma essência meta-histórica, segundo o modelo do par conceitual aristotélico potência/ato (trabalhando, o hominídeo já era homem em potência). A despeito do estágio elementar dos conhecimentos arqueológicos de seu tempo, ao examinar a categoria trabalho em *O Capital*, livro I cap. 5, Marx se referiu às “primeiras formas instintivas, animais, de trabalho”, ilustrando-as com a teia da aranha e a colmeia das abelhas. Assinalou ainda que nelas se delineiam formas embrionárias da técnica, notando porém que “o emprego e a criação dos meios de trabalho, embora se encontrem em germe em algumas espécies animais, caracterizam o processo de trabalho especificamente humano”. Evidentemente, não cabia numa crítica da economia política burguesa proceder ao estudo aprofundado das modalidades pré e extra humanas do trabalho. Mas as concisas considerações que ele consagra ao tema não deixam a menor dúvida: “pressupomos o trabalho numa forma

em que ele pertence exclusivamente ao homem”, isto é, esta forma constitui o ponto de partida do Capital, mas ela é o resultado de um longo processo de hominização e não a expressão meta-histórica de uma essência genérica. À luz dessas considerações, a crítica ontológica da “ruptura epistemológica” recai, em irônica dialética, numa velha e radical ruptura metafísica: entre natureza e cultura, ou em linguagem explicitamente teológica, entre corpo e alma. Pode-se criticar o efeito provocador da expressão anti humanismo teórico. Exatamente porque é muito mais simpático aderir à ontologia trabalhista do ser social do que à crítica dos pressupostos meramente ideológicos e no mais das vezes retóricos do discurso humanista, Althusser teria sido mais bem compreendido se em vez de molestar a sensibilidade cultural dos intelectuais de esquerda, ele tivesse se cingido a criticar a pretensão de dizer o que o homem é, sem passar pela análise das condições concretas da evolução do homo sapiens. Submetido à crítica materialista, o ideal de uma humanidade liberada da opressão, da exploração de classes e da miséria da existência, meta irrenunciável das lutas revolucionárias inspiradas no marxismo vivo, deixa de ser ontologicamente garantida pela “essência genérica do ser social”. Mas abandonar uma garantia quimérica é avançar rumo à verdade efetiva das coisas. A longa história do homo sapiens não é a atualização de uma essência pré-fixada. Ela corre por um rio caudaloso cujo leito não foi traçado de antemão. A lógica objetiva que Marx discerniu na trama densa das relações sociais não obedece a nenhuma teleologia imanente. A instauração de uma forma superior de organização social, na qual os meios de produção de riquezas deverão se tornar patrimônio comum (=comunista) da

humanidade, é o mais elevado programa político de emancipação da humanidade, mas exatamente por ser um programa, depende da virtù e da fortuna dos que se batem para concretizá-lo.

KEYWORDS: Humanismo; Metafísica; Trabalho.

There are many definitions of humanism because there are many theological or philosophical assumptions that support them and many political and ideological positions that they seek to justify. Louis Althusser synthesized, half a century ago, the fundamental assumptions of these doctrines: there is a universal essence of man; this perennial and unhistoric essence belongs to individuals taken separately, who are their actual subjects. Thus understood, the humanism, philosophically, is an idealistic conception declaring, from a nebulous intuition of essence, that man or “people” *is* this or that. Even when inspired by high ideals of emancipation, this idealistic conception takes for granted the question about the essence of man: animality is his matter, but his substantial form is reason.

Although his criticism is valid for all the metaphysical doctrines about the human essence, Althusser had in mind, when developing it, *Marxist* versions of humanism, inspired in Marx’s early writings, when he was still under the strong influence of Feuerbach. Hence his thesis that the theoretical-scientific discoveries of Marx supposes an “epistemological rupture” with the ideas of the youth, particularly with the notion of “generic essence” (*Gattungsweisen*) of man. This thesis has aroused and continues raising multiple refutations: Althusser was accused of empiricism, positivism, epistemologism etc. Pejorative ratings matter less than the “ontological” doctrine of labour in which they are based.

All marxists agree that man is self-produced by labour and consider it the key and the foundation of historical materialism. The problem is that many understand this process as the self-development of a subject that externalizes his essence by labour, conceived as the generic human being’s active essence. Thus interpreted, the Marxist principle that man is self-produced by labour leads to a vicious circle: labour produces man because he labours in a human way. The tautology is concealed by

a metaphysical postulate: the self-production of man is not understood specifically as a result of natural selection (= the *hominization*), but as a meta-historical essence, according to the model of the Aristotelian conceptual pair *potentia/actus* (labouring, the hominid was already man in *potentia*).

The historical-materialist position, such as synthesized by Engels in his remarkable text about book “The role of labour in the transformation of monkey in man”, written in 1876, published “post mortem” in 1896 in *Die Neue Zeit*, and symptomatically forgotten by essentialist tendencies of Marxism, sustain, instead, that *homo sapiens* and their ability to modify the nature by its peculiar form of labour, results from the material process of hominization.

This was also the position of Marx. Despite the elementary stage of archaeological knowledge in his time, when he examines the concept of labour in *The Capital* (book I Chapter 5), he refers to the “first instinctive, animal, forms of labour”, illustrating them with the spider’s web and the bee’s hive. He points out that “the employment and the creation of means of labour, although in germ in some animal species, characterize the process of specifically human labour”. Other species delineate embryonic forms of technique, but it wouldn’t fit in a critique of bourgeois political economy an in-depth study of pre and proto modes of human labour. But the concise considerations that he devotes to the subject do not leave the slightest doubt: “we assume labour in a form that belongs exclusively to man”, i.e. this form constitutes the starting point of the *Capital*, but it is the result of a long process of hominization and not the expression of a meta- historical essence. These considerations suggest that the ontological criticism of the “epistemological break” falls, in ironic dialectic, in an old and radical break: between nature and culture, between body and soul.

We can criticize the provocative effect of the phrase *anti theoretical humanism*. Precisely because the ontology of social

labour is much more sympathetic than the criticism of merely ideological and often rhetorical assumptions of humanist discourse, Althusser would have been better understood if instead of harassing the cultural sensitivity of the intellectuals of the left, he had just criticized the pretension of saying what man is, without undertaking the analysis of the concrete conditions of the evolution of *homo sapiens*. In any case, it's difficult to understand how to be anti-humanist in theory and humanist in practice.

Subjected to materialist critique, the ideal of a humankind freed from oppression, exploitation and misery of existence, irrevocable goal of revolutionary struggles inspired by Marxism, ceases to be ontologically guaranteed by “generic social being’s essence”. But abandoning a guarantee fantastic view of things is to advance towards the effective truth of things. The long history of *homo sapiens* runs by a raging river, whose course was not mapped out beforehand. The objective logic that Marx discerned in the dense social relations plot doesn't obey any immanent teleology. The establishment of a higher form of social organization, in which the means of production of wealth should become common heritage (=Communists) of mankind, is the highest political program of emancipation of humanity, but exactly for being a program, it depends on the *virtù* and fortune of those who are fighting to achieve it.

LOSURDO'S CRITICISM

In a recent study entitled “How is born and how dies the western Marxism”², Domenico Losurdo dedicates a topic to a replica of Althusser's criticism of humanist doctrines. Many have already challenged him by relegating the *universal* ideas to the sphere of pure ideology, dissociating them from theory.

But what he actually criticizes is the dogmatic claim that we can say what the human being is without passing through the analysis of the relations of production which articulate society. As we said previously, although this criticism is valid for all the metaphysical doctrines about man's essence, he had in view, in developing it, the *Marxist* versions of humanism, based in the labours of the Young Marx, inspired by the humanism of Feuerbach. We argued that this doctrine is a metaphysical interpretation of labour, which considers it the exteriorization of the generic essence (Gattungsweisen) of homo faber/sapiens and resolves the historical movement in the idealist dialectic of alienation and its overcommig.

The central focus of the Losurdo's argument is the reaffirmation of Marxist humanism. His criticism of Althusser consists essentially in enumerating examples of positive use in Marx's labours, of the concepts of human, humanism and derivatives. The young Marx saw in the existent society the denial of positive humanism (positiver Humanismus), complete humanism (vollendeter Humanismus), (MEW, Erg. Bd., I 583 and 536), real humanism (realer Humanismus) (MEW, II, 7). His revolutionary program outlined the "categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a being degraded, enslaved, abandoned, despised" (p. 399, MEW, I, 385).³ The humanist vocabulary remains not only in the *Manifest* of the *Communist Party*, "labour of theoretical maturation". We read also in *Capital*, the labour of maturity fully attained, that the greedy profit entails "waste" of human life; that at the beginning of the industrial system, the great abduction of children in the homes of the poor and the orphanages has incorporated a human material completely devoid of desire and that the bourgeois society celebrates the image of itself as "a real Eden of the innate rights of man", when in reality, in its scope, the "human labour",

moreover, “man as such (...) plays a miserable part”. Finally, far from being recognized in his dignity of man, the labourer “leads to market its own skin and doesn’t have another thing to expect but the tannery” (LOSURDO, 2011, p. 399-400).

But what proves these citations of the positive use made by Marx of humanist vocabulary? Just that he has never established an abstract separation between the vocabulary of the theory and the vocabulary of the political struggle. They certainly do not prove that Marx considered the essence of man an universal principle of explanation of human history; on this issue, Losurdo remains silent. For him, what matters is the historical construction of the idea of universal humanity, the old struggle to eliminate the racist, colonialist and class differences among men. And Losurdo’s struggle for the defense and illustration of this historic construction earned him deserved recognition, making him one of the main references of theoretical Marxist anti-imperialism on an international scale.

However, whether we like it or not, moral discourse is immersed in ideology; the moral abstractions are much too vague, when not outright contradictory. It is not needed a huge terminological rigor to realize that common phrases and morally sympathetic phrases, as for example, “torture is inhumane”, omit that, on the contrary, torture is a characteristically human institution. Primates, reptiles, insects etc. do not torture. About the word “human”, you can say the same as Marx said of “population” in the famous *Introduction of 1857*:

“It seems correct to begin by real and by concrete, by the actually real assumption and, thus, in Economy, for example, by population, the foundation and the subject of the whole act of social production (die Grundlage und der Subjekt des ganzen gesellschaftlichen Produktionsakts). A more accurate account, however, shows that this is false.

The population, for example, if I omit the classes that constitute it, is mere abstraction”.

Just replace population by man (or human, humanity etc.) to note that the theoretical problem raised by Althusser is the same: the humanity, if I omit the classes that constitute it, is mere abstraction. He does not criticize the humanist values in general, but the metaphysical postulate of a universal essence of man, which would be an attribute of each individual taken separately.⁴ Thus understood, humanism is an idealistic doctrine that declares, from a vague intuition of essence, that man or “people” *is* or *are* this or that. Resumes, sometimes inspired by high ideals of emancipation, one of the most common answers to the question of men’s essence: animality is its matter, but its substantial form is reason, or, in explicitly theological record, man is body and soul.

From the epistemological break to the materialism of the encounter, the Althusser’s concern in examining critically the simplifications and the metaphysical answers to problems raised by the theory of Marx remained constant. At the very least, he has awakened from the dogmatic sleep the purely ideological marxists, many of them flirting openly with idealism. But his criticism would have been more welcomed and understood if instead of go in against hand of the cultural sensitivity of the left, he had just criticized the assumptions purely ideological and most of the times rhetorical oh humanistic doctrines.

The fundamental link between the processes of the natural history and the social history of *homo sapiens* was expressed in a lapidary phrase of Engels during Marx’s funeral, in honor of the “greatest of thinkers”, who had “ceased to think” three days before, in march 14, 1883: “just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, Marx discovered the law of development of human history”. This analogy

between the respective contributions of the two geniuses of knowledge earned Engels a lasting antipathy from those that consider marxism a metaphysics of human labour.

In this decisive point, Losurdo's theoretical humanism led him to a huge disregard of the theoretical importance of *Capital*, the work to which Marx devoted his greatest intellectual effort:

The continuity in the evolution of Marx is obvious, and what Althusser describes as epistemological rupture is nothing more than the passage to a discourse in which the moral condemnation of anti-humanism of bourgeois society is expressed in a manner more concise and more elliptical (LOSURDO, 2011, p. 401).

Reduce the colossal contribution of Marx to the knowledge of the social evolution of humanity to mere "more concise and more elliptical" way of expressing his ideas is inflict him an unacceptable "capitis deminutio". The unilateral emphasis on moral aspect conflicts with the famous statement of Marx at the end of the Preface to the *Critique of political economy* :

(...) my views — no matter how they may be judged and how little they conform to the interested prejudices of the ruling classes — are the outcome of conscientious research carried on over many years. At the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell, the demand must be made:

"Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto;
Ogni viltà convien che qui sia morta"

WESTERN MARXISM AND ANTI-COLONIALISM

As we recognize the impropriety of the expression *theoretical anti humanism*, we don't refer only to its political effects on the

cultural sensitivity of the left. The most consistent criticism that Losurdo directs to Althusser is that, without assuming firmly and positively the value of the idea of humanity, it would not make sense to speak about dehumanization. When we hear a spokesman of the American oppression machine talk about “human rights”, we reject this gross hypocrisy on behalf of human emancipation, which presupposes the abolition of class exploitation, of force as “ultima ratio” of international relations and full equality of peoples. It’s not because imperialism corrupts and prostitutes the universalist values that we should reject them. But precisely, to unmask the imperialist mystification, it’s not enough to reiterate that Socialists and Marxists defend the real humanism, if only because you don’t have to be a Marxist to denounce the miseries, injustices and atrocities of the world.

It is however in the grounds of historical materialism that we can criticize radically the imposture of bourgeois universalism and show that this alleged bourgeois humanism is based on exploitation of labor, the use of military force and in predatory plundering of natural resources. And it is also on these grounds that we can discern the contradictions that determines the course of world history and the principal enemies of the emancipation of the human species. In July 26, 1920, Lenin contended at the Second Congress of the Comintern that “the characteristic trait of imperialism is that the whole world [...] is divided currently in a large number of oppressed peoples and a little number of oppressors which have colossal wealth and a powerful military force”. Ninety-three years later, this observation remains valid.

Shall we include Althusser in the of western Marxist’s school? Maintaining objectivity in his criticism, Losurdo recognizes that “Althusser follows with deep participation

the struggles undertaken by colonial peoples and looks with sympathy to China, who yearns for the leadership of the anti-imperialist movement; however, from a theoretical point of view, he does not seem able to grasp the full meaning of these struggles”. Why? According to Losurdo it is “a phenomenon of general nature”. “During the years of 1960 and 1970, a massive misunderstanding characterizes the Marxist left in Europe and in the United States: the large demonstrations in favor of Vietnam are interwoven quietly with the tribute to authors that considered definitively overcome the national liberation movements”.

But to illustrate this generalized misconception it is not Althusser but Adorno the one criticized. Losurdo blames the *Negative Dialectic*, of 1966, for having liquidated the Hegelian thesis of the “spirit of the people” (Volkgeist) and denied the essential character of the national dimension and of the national question”, estimating it “reactionary and regressive”, “in relation to the Kantian universal of this period”, and condemning his “nationalism” and “provincialism” in an epoch of global conflicts, when “an organization of the world” becomes possible. Worse still, the Volkgeist would mean the devotion to a “fetish”, a “collective subject” (the nation), within which “the individual subjects disappear without leaving traces”. This position taken by Adorno unlegitimizes *a posteriori* the war waged by *National Liberation Front* in Algeria, a people and a country without doubt more parochial, more backward and less cosmopolitan than France, against whom the Algerian people rose up. In any case, Adorno was placed in the impossibility of understanding the great struggles that were occurring under his eyes, beginning with the one guided by *National Liberation Front* in Vietnam”. (p. 403; italics in original)

BRIEF CONCLUSION

Although he does not discuss in what sense he considers correct or incorrect to say that the humanism assumes a universal essence of man, nor what would be this essence (a categorical imperative, a pure idea of reason, a revolutionary ideal), Losurdo is right in arguing that the recognition of the full equality of men constitutes an irrevocable goal of revolutionary struggles of our time and that therefore, against the false universality of liberal ideology, we must defend unreservedly the cause of humanity. We must also recognize the relevance of his criticism of Western authors, marxists, half-marxists and anti-marxists, about the Nations that have freed themselves from colonial rule. Include in the same condemnation the imperialist States and those originated from national liberation movements implies hiding the historical consequences of colonization and disregarding the persistent contradiction between the oppressed peoples and the peoples oppressors, pointed out by Lenin for almost a century now. In accordance with this rhetorical anti-statism, humanity would continue to be divided between oppressors from the center and the oppressed of the periphery.

NOTAS

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²“Come nacque e come morì il ‘marxismo occidentale’”, pp. 394-417 in Mario Cingoli and Vittorio Morfino, *Aspetti del pensiero di Marx e delle interpretazioni successive*, Milano, Unicopoli, 2011.

³All these references are quoted in Losurdo’s text.

⁴Cf. Louis Althusser, “Marxisme et humanisme” in *Pour Marx*, Paris, Maspero, 1965, p. 234.