CHAPTER 1

The Dialectic of Alienated Labour and the Determinations of Revolutionary Subjectivity in the Paris Manuscripts

Introduction

There was a debate among scholars in the 1960s and 1970s over the way in which Marx came to embrace the idea – explicitly appearing for the first time in the Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right – of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject of the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. Was it through 'empirical' contact with real proletarians? Tucker states it was not, and claims that it was through the reading of socialist and communist literature of the time.¹ Avineri, for his part, argues that it was through the critique of Hegel and his notion of a universal class.² Finally, McLellan thinks that it was through his immersion in a radical-socialist political and intellectual environment as he moved from Germany to Paris.³

Now, as Perkins rightly notes, what matters is not the biographical question of how Marx came to discover the proletariat, but the meaning of that discovery.⁴ In this sense, regardless of the precise form in which Marx came to discover the proletariat as a revolutionary force, the crucial point to highlight is that, until 1844, the proletariat was for Marx a philosophical category. More concretely, it was the mediating category through which he tried to make philosophy descend from the heavenly realm of abstract thought to the real social life of concrete human beings.⁵

¹ Tucker 1961.
² Avineri 1993, pp. 52–64.
⁴ Perkins 1993, p. 33. Apart from the works by Tucker, Avineri and McLellan cited above, classic but still good sources on the details of Marx’s intellectual evolution and biography can be found in Rubel 1975 and 1980 and Oakely 1983, and 1984–5. Musto 2010a provides a more recent examination of Marx’s intellectual biography up to the Grundrisse, incorporating the latest advances of philological research based on the MEGA project. For a commentary on the later, see Musto 2010b.
⁵ Perkins 1993.
Thus, even if he were attempting to transcend what he saw as the abstract character of idealist philosophy as present in both Hegel and the Young Hegelians, I think that Marx’s intellectual development before the *Paris Manuscrits* was carried out within the boundaries of philosophical discourse. In particular, he was attempting to solve the whole theory-practice problematic as it appeared when seen through philosophical lenses. And this meant that, thus conceived, his endeavour was doomed to failure from the very outset. As I shall argue in the following chapter, in the *Paris Manuscrits* Marx would come to discover that it is in the very essence of philosophy (however ‘materialist’ or ‘dialectical’ in form) to remain trapped within abstract thought and, therefore, to be indifferent to the real movement of human practice. Within the limits of philosophical thought, no real mediation is possible between theory and practice, only the appearance of it. Or, seen from another angle, within philosophy the relation between theory and practice cannot but become inverted. Instead of seeing revolutionary science (‘theory’) as the necessary concrete form through which the transformative action of the proletariat (‘practice’) is consciously organised, the latter appears as the necessary form through which the universal claims of philosophy are realised. Revolution thus becomes a logical necessity of philosophy and consists in making the world become ‘philosophical’.

The perspective of the *Paris Manuscrits* is very different. In this text Marx’s starting point is no longer the universal claims of philosophy. As he states when opposing political economy’s recourse to a mythical primitive society of simple commodity producers: ‘we shall start out from a present-day economic fact’. Marx attempted to analyse this concrete economic form in its historical specificity and existing reality and, from this point of departure, he then both made sense of previous history and discovered the hidden transitions to the supersession of modern capitalist society. Hence, communism ceased to be a philosophical ideal in any meaningful sense of the word, notwithstanding the mediations with the real introduced, and became ‘a real phase, necessary for the next period of historical development, in the emancipation and recovery of mankind’. As Marx put it in an oft-quoted passage from *The German Ideology*:

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the

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7 Marx 1992b, p. 323.
8 Marx 1992b, p. 358.