Marx on Proudhon: The Critique of Dialectical Logic and the Political Determination of Science as Practical Criticism

Introduction

As much as his critique of the Young Hegelians, the central aim of Marx's critique of Proudhon was eminently political. In actual fact, one could say that the latter was even 'more' political than the former. This is not just because of the nature of the critique, but also because of its historic-political significance. While, in the last instance, the critique of the 'True Socialism' of the Young Hegelians remained within the boundaries of a discussion among a small circle of radical 'intellectuals', the critique of Proudhon involved a political intervention right at the heart of the dominant ideological form of the continental workers' movement as a whole. As Shortall notes, Proudhonian socialist ideas had a strong grip among the artisans and craftworkers who composed the great bulk of the working class at that time in continental Europe.¹ On the other hand, by that time Marx and Engels had already made their first contacts with the existing forms of socialist activism and politics in London and Paris, and were attempting to get involved in the organisational aspects of the immediate political action of the working class of their time.² Hence the political urgency of Marx's text.

However, from the perspective of Marx's scientific development, the significance of that polemic against Proudhon went beyond his immediate political concerns. As we shall see, three main interrelated questions emerge from Marx's critical engagement with Proudhon's works. First, Marx made explicit that the materialist inversion of the Hegelian dialectic entailed more than the overcoming of its speculative nature, through its application to the 'material questions' of political economy. This approach can only lead to the conversion of the dialectic into another form of logic and, therefore, remains within the uncritical alienated realm of representational thought. Thus we encounter again the crucial methodological significance of Marx's text. Secondly, in The

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² Ibid.
Poverty of Philosophy, Marx attempted for the first time positively to unfold the reproduction in thought of the real movement of capitalist economic forms. Albeit in a rudimentary form, this represents Marx’s first attempt at a dialectical critique of political economy. In turn, the latter is revealed as the necessary scientific form of the proletarian consciousness that gives course to the practical critique of capital. Thirdly, as a necessary corollary of this, science ceases to be an abstractly contemplative enterprise. Marx’s critique of political economy is not meant to provide another economic theory of bourgeois society, albeit from the perspective of the working class. From that very moment, Marx’s scientific endeavour constituted an attempt at the positive investigation of the social determinations – and hence necessity – of the different forms of the political action of the workers aiming at the radical transformation of the capitalist mode of production. In brief, we shall see that interest in the question of the ‘scientifically correct method’ turns out to be not abstractly epistemological, but directly political in nature. Let us now turn to the discussion of each of these aspects of Marx’s polemic against Proudhon.

The Dialectical Method as Logic in Proudhon

The first two sections of Marx’s The Poverty of Philosophy comprise a reconstruction of Proudhon’s arguments about the basic economic categories such as use value, exchange value and money. The gist of Marx’s critique comes down to the following two aspects. In the first place, he demonstrates a lack of originality in Proudhon’s ideas. In order to counter the latter’s self-proclaimed originality, Marx resorts to some quotes from the classical political economists, particularly Ricardo, and demonstrates that the assertion that economists failed to deal properly with the ‘opposition’ between use value and exchange value is plainly false. In all this there is nothing particularly original in Marx’s development itself and, fundamentally, he bases his economic analysis on the theories of the Ricardian school.

In the second place, Marx criticises Proudhon’s absurdities about the opposition between an allegedly ethically ideal determination of value in labour time and its empirical determination through the contending wills of buyer and seller, which would lead to the deviation from the former due to the social power of direct exchangeability monopolised by money. According to Proudhon, it is not the exchange of commodities as such which lies at the basis of the capitalist exploitation of labour, but only its distorted concrete form of operation leading to unequal exchange. Therefore, Marx points out, Proudhon’s deficient critical engagement with political economy actually justifies his