

## Economic Theory and Philosophical Anthropology: Marx, Gramsci, Sraffa and the Study of Human Nature

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### Abstract

In the present paper, we ask whether in the “new” Classical political economy as reposed by Sraffa the concept of *homo oeconomicus* is really replaced by a different, satisfying theory of human behaviour and social change. In order to discuss this issue, we believe that Sraffa's note "Metafisica" (Sraffa D3.12.4) may be of particular interest. Here Sraffa maintains that many commentators may consider that the important part of his work is the analytical one, without being able to grasp the importance of the historical contextualization. In the present work, we propose to show a possible pathway to integrate the analytical part of Sraffa's work with the historical analysis based on the materialist philosophical anthropology proposed by Marx. First of all, we will discuss the following possible joint vision: on one side, Garegnani's theory of the relation between economic variables according to different levels of abstraction, whether they are into the “core” of necessary quantitative relations, or out of it. On the other side, the analysis proposed by Andrea Ginzburg, who classified Sraffa's thought as a “non [immediately] causal theory”. Then we put forward some hints of a theory of history neither deterministic nor mechanistic, where the relation between “structure” and “superstructure” is far from being static or direct. In order to do so, we will refer to both the “young” and the “late” Marx, interpreted through Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

**Keywords:** Gramsci, Individualism, Marxian anthropology, Sraffa, Surplus Approach.

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## I. Introduction.

In *Production of commodities by means of commodities* (since now *PMCM*) (Sraffa 1960) the path and goal undertaken by Sraffa was not just to construct a price theory as such, but to provide a modern reappraisal to the “submerged and forgotten” Classical theory of value and distribution. In the present paper, we ask whether in the “new” Classical political economy the concept of *homo oeconomicus* is really replaced by a different, satisfying theory of human behaviour and social change<sup>2</sup>. To discuss this issue, the point of departure can be the following Sraffa’s note, in which he states:

Economics is only social - no Crusoe. Individual conditions (hypothetical) in the first place do not exist as such (individual always influenced by education, habits, imitation, social standards and conventions, etc.): in the second if they existed, could not be simply summed up - they should be combined in a much more complex way. Proceeding from individual to social is legitimate if it is a way of proceeding from simple to complex as we shall do; not if intends to proceed from cause to effect, as often is done (Sraffa D1.16).

Here Sraffa gives useful hints to answer the question raised. Firstly, he underlines that economic life is a social phenomenon, depending on historical conditions; so, the analysis must start from the notion of socially determined individuals, rather than the abstract idea of “subject” (i.e. Robinson Crusoe). Indeed, we will discuss how the former can be depicted through a materialistic anthropology, along the lines of Marx and Gramsci, and be, at the same time, the adequate premise for a renewed economic theory, in which social relations take shape within the production process and in such a way that the analyses so structured are able to highlight the role of social interrelations and historical forces in determining the evolution of economy.

Regarding the second part of Sraffa’s quote, the explanation of “proceeding from the simple to the complex” appears an implicit reference to Marx’s method of determined abstractions, and the procedure from cause to effect addresses the topic of the proper meaning of causality in economic theory. These statements are key points to interpret in a specific way his equations along anti-deterministic lines in order to single out the implications of Marx and Gramsci’s materialistic philosophy as mentioned before.

The article is structured as follows: paragraph 2 deals with the interpretation of Sraffian equations to try to establish their compatibility with a materialistic philosophical theory of human behaviour and social change; in paragraph 3 we discuss Marxian and Gramscian anthropology, focusing on some possible limitations to its validity. Finally, we draw some conclusions to set in one framework Sraffian theory and Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, in order to expound the idea of an "individualism" historically founded.

## **II. Interpreting Sraffa's equations and the restatement of Marx.**

The economic magnitudes of the theories that assume that exchange, not production, is the central moment of the economic process are resolved through the interplay of the forces of demand and supply. The interplay, in general, leads to an equilibrium; although its existence, unicity and stability are ensured only under very restrictive hypotheses. The general conceptual framework so founded is entirely subsumed within the analytical schema of price determination, pretending to formulate a *neutral corpus*, where it vanishes the connection between economic theory and political aspects of society. In so doing, the economic forces determining the economic magnitudes pretends to be reduced to the domain of individual choices, resting on the maximizing behaviour<sup>3</sup> and the principle of substitution between goods and productive factors<sup>4</sup> (Bharadwaj 2017 [1989]; p.225). Thus, the theoretical (and practical) horizon has been filled by the theory of methodological individualism (Gioia 2019; p. 4).

Classical approach to value and distribution is rather centred on relations between aggregates, apparently ignoring the importance of individual choices. The Classical equilibrium describes the compatibility among all productive processes; technological condition of production, quantities of commodities and distribution of income between entrepreneurs and workers are given and, on this basis, prices are reckoned (Sraffa 1960). Then, the causal relation going from production to exchange is clear<sup>5</sup>. Since not all the variables are subsumed under the domain of price determination, the theoretical foundation of Classical political economy is worked out in a system of economic interdependencies altogether different from that envisaged in the supply-and-demand based theories<sup>6</sup>. This, we will show, can lead to a flexible methodology, thanks to which we can integrate a strong

analytical structure with a historical dimension, to understand the system of hierarchical interactions of social agents occurring in our societies<sup>7</sup>.

Since the availability of the documents in the Sraffa Archive in the Wren Library at Trinity College, the literature offers contrasting arguments about the evolution of Sraffa's thought, especially regarding the legacy of his cultural project<sup>8</sup>. According to Garegnani's reading (2005), Sraffa re-discovered Classical economics starting from his critique of the Marshallian idea of "real cost", which he replaced with the Quesnay's proposal of "physical real cost"<sup>9</sup>. Two consequences follow: firstly, Sraffa's critique of the marginalist (or of "marginism", adopting his language) use of subjective elements in the theory of demand and supply<sup>10</sup>; secondly, the implications of his adoption of an "objectivist" point of view.

The meaning of "objectivism" is far from being unique in Sraffa's thought, but has changed over time (Kurz and Salvadori 2005; Kurz 2012). However, in order to build a theory of human agency and interaction, we have to reject the reading of Sraffa's objectivist position such as to configure a positivist materialistic philosophy dominated by scientism, given his interest in the methodology adopted for the study of natural sciences; moreover, we must propose a different meaning<sup>11</sup>. Were economics studied in line with physics, which ultimately aims at explaining the entire structure of the world in terms of numerical quantities and mathematical relations, no possibility of further investigation of Sraffa's materialism would be conceivable. As a result, it would be valid the position previously mentioned by Hodgson, as well as the one put forward by Pasinetti (Pasinetti 2012; p. 1312): Sraffa would not rely on any institutional set-up, nor would have any idea of economic agent. Similarly, Scazzieri (2012) argued that no reference to the role of institutions can be deduced from *PCMC*, being only a work of "pure" economic theory.

What is Sraffa's idea of evolution and change?

Apparently, Sraffa would focus on static equilibrium, but, just in his vision of evolution and change, important aspects emerge, which cast light on his epistemology.

Trabucchi and Rosselli (2019) have shown how Sraffa's critique of "marginism" is far from being the outcome of an epistemological pre-conception but is grounded in his views on the appropriate method to deal with actual economic phenomena. For instance, the question what could be the value of a commodity at different times, example of a so-called "process of change", has an answer which is not susceptible of a general treatment since the price of a commodity in the period under scrutiny is also the results of specific historical and social

conditions and, so, subject to a variety of outcomes. This cannot be duly appreciated if adopting a demand-and-supply apparatus, because there is «nothing less than a declaration of faith in universal determinism, for nothing else can support the belief in the actual existence of a *prescribed path*, which must inevitably be followed» (Sraffa D<sub>3</sub>/12/46; *emphasis added*). Had Sraffa approved a “vulgar” materialist philosophy, there would be no point to discuss the determinism intrinsic to the demand-and-supply apparatus; moreover, the rejection of any form of determinism is a fundamental premise in order to conceive an open theory of human agency and interaction.

As suggested by Ginzburg (2019; p. 108), within the Classical scheme in an open system the conditions of formation of the surplus are also traced to historical and social reasons and are not *a priori* determinable through deductive procedures. As he observed in previous papers (Ginzburg 2013; 2015; 2016), the core argument to support this point of view lies in the concept of causality, explained along anti-mechanistic and anti-deterministic lines.

The theory in *PCMC* has been synthetically labelled as “descriptive analysis”<sup>12</sup>; however, in *PCMC*’s analysis the notion of causality does exist. The knowledge of the philosophical writings of Hertz (Sraffa D<sub>1</sub>/9) supported Sraffa’s criticism of the simplified, often anthropomorphic and ethnocentric, concept of causality widespread at his time, which had a strong inclination towards anachronism and was implicitly teleological. In addition, the study, presumably started in 1927, of the works of A.S. Eddington helped Sraffa to trespass the simplified concept of causality, according to which the same effect may not spring from two alternative causes and *vice versa*<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed, the reflection of Sraffa on causality is the solid ground for his criticism of the principle of sufficient reason – that is, every cause is necessarily followed by an effect and every effect is necessarily associated with a cause – such that, in a well-known note (Sraffa D.3.12.7), we read:

When we have defined our “economic field”, there are still outside causes which operate in it, and its effects go beyond the boundary. This must happen in any concrete case... The surplus may be the effect of the outside causes; and the effects of the distribution of the surplus may lie outside.

Here Sraffa notes that, once defined the economic field, and after studying the necessary relations within it, it is necessary recognize how further external causes operate in it. Then, the «closed system is in communication with the world» and becomes an open one.

We read this point together with the passage where Garegnani notes that the relations between the variables in Classical theories should be studied on different levels of abstraction, depending on whether they are in the “core” of necessary quantitative relations, or outside it (Garegnani 1987). The relations in the “core” are the “economic field” in the passage quoted above, where technology, quantities and one distributive variable are known, and prices and the other distributive variable are to be determined. They are susceptible of a rigorous, abstract and general treatment, whose result holds in a specific situation of the production process. Outside the core, all relations are more complex and must be examined following separate logical stages. Now we can study the role of institutions, social conventions, political choices and so on; the relations that we establish are specific, and less general than those we observe in the “core”.

This integration between the analytical method and the historical dimension proceeds along two lines that, ultimately, determines a restatement of Marx<sup>14</sup> along anti-deterministic lines. The theory now appears articulated in two stages: first, Sraffa’s system of equations, which deals with the relations in the core, can fully replace relative price determination according to the labour theory of value<sup>15</sup>. Secondly, Marx’s method of “determined abstractions”, which employs abstract categories not deriving from general hypotheses, but rather from the observation of reality. Hence, the scientific theory is set up on the basis of this kind of generalisation<sup>16</sup>. The use of determinate abstractions makes it possible the reconstruction of the concrete reality as a synthesis of many particular determinants, organically combined, proceeding from the simple to the complex, and without disregarding the influence of the historical and social circumstances in relation to which they actually manifest; deductive and inductive element are not clearly separable<sup>17</sup>.

This led to the foundation of a materialistic philosophy in which «individuals producing in a society - hence the *socially determined production by individuals is of course the point of departure*» (Marx and Engels CW 28, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 Introduction*; p. 17, emphasis added).

### **III. No necessity in history: Marx’s and Gramsci’s anthropology.**

Sraffa in his note D1.7 cites the German economist Robert Liefmann and his statement related to the need of giving in economics a specific sense to human action; to this purpose,

it is valuable attributing to it a basic and unitary principle and creating the theory deductively<sup>18</sup>. For instance, in the utilitarian approach every action is no more an end in itself, but rather a mean to reach the final end: utility. But, Sraffa continues, this answer is not satisfying. In the note D1.20, indeed, he reports Sidgwick's statement that «the importance for seeking the best definitions [is] far greater than the importance of finding it». Then, starting from a basic and unitary principle, it is not possible to find any definition of "human nature", so, Sraffa concludes, we must start again from the beginning and let some doubts raise.

Similarly, Gramsci, looking for a solution to the question "what human nature is", affirms:

The problem of what man is, then, is always the so-called problem of "human nature," or of so-called man in general; in other words, it is the attempt to create a science of man (a philosophy) that *has for its starting point a "unitary" concept, an abstraction capable of containing everything "human"*. But is the "human" – as a concept and as a unitary fact – a starting point or a point of arrival? (Gramsci 2007; p. 186; emphasis added).

In fact, according to Gramsci, the best definition of human nature is the ensemble of social relations, which includes the idea of becoming, since there is no "human" in general but a lot of "humans" in particular that become and manifest themselves through history<sup>19</sup>. The ideas of "becoming" and "history" allows us to avoid the deterministic influences dominant at the time; this is the reason why Gramsci adopted the expression "philosophy of praxis" instead of "historical materialism". As is known, in Italian the term "filosofia della prassi" ("philosophy of praxis") was coined by Antonio Labriola to design an autonomous and independent philosophy capable to highlight the influence of social actions made by social groups<sup>20</sup>. Before proceeding with this topic, however, we must come back to Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels, in order to put "the man with his feet on the ground", outlined a concept of plastic human nature, in which individuals are influenced by economic, social and cultural circumstances. But, at the same time, men are self-poietic, since, on its turn, the social and cultural context is continuously built and re-built by their capability to foster processes of transformation and change. Indeed, Marx and Engels give relevance to the will of the individual who establishes relations with other men, so that, all together, they modify the nature thanks to their work<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, the will and the interlaced interests cannot be considered just as the consequence of individual choices *in vacuo*; they are the consequence of historical, economic, social and political events and forces, which shape the individual

action and are shaped by it. To summarize, for Marx and Engels the economic agent is a concrete man/woman, seized in his/her process of empirically ascertainable human development, under specific historical conditions. In 1857-58, Marx writes:

Society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another. As if someone were to say: for society, slaves and citizens do not exist: both are men. They are both men if we consider them outside society. To be a slave and to be a citizen are social determinations, relations between human beings A and B. (Marx and Engels CW 28, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft) [Grundrisse]*; p. 195)

However, we must mention a couple of critical points of this anthropology, to take into account when applying it to the study of social phenomena. Firstly, the dichotomous relationship between structure and superstructure. Engels writes in the letter to Bloch dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1890:

According to the materialist view of history, the determining factor in history is, *in the final analysis*, the production and reproduction of actual life. More than that was never maintained either by Marx or myself. [...] The economic situation is the basis, but the various factors of the superstructure [...] also have a bearing on the course of the historical struggles of which, in many cases, they largely determine the form (Marx and Engels CW 49; p. 34-35).

This statement seems quite one-sided: in fact, the study of a specific society is not so easy as a «simple equation of the first degree»<sup>22</sup> and cannot be deduced only according to its economic organization<sup>23</sup>. The same idea is shared by Marx, as showed by Gramsci<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, he cites Marx's historical works, such as the *18th Brumaire*, the writings on the *Eastern Question*, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, *The Civil War in France*, to establish on firm ground a balanced interpretation of the dialectic between structure and superstructure.

The second critical point is the idea of progress. With respect to it, Marx and Engels seem to hold different opinions. Engels shares Hegel's position that temporality constitutes a fundamental dimension for discovering truth, since Truth, as a subject, emerges, is constructed and revealed in the course of time. Then, truth is a temporal, historical reality. Starting from this idea, Engels seeks a logic that should govern the historical evolution, that is the “dialectic logic”, as noted in Ege (2012). The aim of this process is the emancipation of



the individual, thanks to the victory over the logic governing the capitalist mode of production.

In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of classical German philosophy* (Marx and Engels CW 26; pp. 353-399), Engels writes that both individuals and social groups are endowed with conscience, act with rational intentionality and also with passion, and always work towards defined goals. Then, he argues that these actions, although important for historical inquiry, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by general laws constant over time, since history always proceeds from a lower to a higher stage of development: «the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history lead to a state of affairs quite similar to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature» (Marx and Engels CW 26; p. 387). Seeking a logic capable of understanding the hidden laws of history, Engels starts from the significance of the actions of individuals and social groups, but the assimilation of history into the realm of unconscious nature leads to the underestimation of human action, almost to the point of its irrelevance. Therefore, Engels's materialistic philosophy becomes deterministic, and the relation between structure and superstructure turns out to be dichotomous, with the former that, ultimately, determines the social movement in history. If, in the quoted letter to Bloch, economy had to be, in the final analysis, one of the determining factors of history, now it turns out to be the only one. Engels's analysis seems to have the same results of the philosophies that share the belief in the self-regulating economic machine; thus, once the inner general laws of motion of economy are discovered, the future evolution of society becomes predictable<sup>25</sup>.

On the other hand, Marx, while believing in the evolutionary progress of history, does not theorize any teleological vision of it, but rather refers to the competing and conflicting specific material interests and political action of social subjects. However, this well-known passage might appear somewhat ambiguous:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx and Engels CW 29, *Preface to a contribution to the critique of political economy*; p. 263)

This quote is often read attributing to the expression “social existence” (in the text) the meaning of “productive forces”; if we interpret Marx's position as meaning that the progress of productive forces makes subjects increasingly self-aware, then he would have a linear view of the progress of society, ultimately dictated by technical and productive amelioration<sup>26</sup>. However, such an interpretation would be reductive. In fact, Marx makes clear in several passages that individual consciousness is not only susceptible to being determined, but becomes itself determinative<sup>27</sup>: it is, as mentioned above, a complex dialectical relationship, which the reading of Gramsci helps us to focus on.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci often recollects this quotation, just to avoid any deterministic interpretation<sup>28</sup>. With the same purpose, he cites Marx's *Thesis of Feuerbach* and *Poverty of philosophy*. With reference to the former, Gramsci develops the notion of "subject," defined as the set of social relations as seen above; furthermore, the second thesis emphasizes the active role of social agents and forms one of the foundations of his “philosophy of praxis”<sup>29</sup>. *Poverty of Philosophy*, on the other hand, is important because there Marx criticizes Proudhon's belief that in civilization everything has existed and acted from eternity. Thus, human reason would not create Truth: it should only unveil it, since history proceeds according to the sequence of ideas (Marx and Engels CW 6; p. 171). This operation is carried out by Proudhon by assuming that each period is characterized by a negative and a positive side; thanks to the dialectical movement, the negative side is eliminated, while the good side is preserved. This process continues gradually until the negative side is eliminated for good, so as to achieve the perfect state of the world and establish equality, which is, according to Proudhon, the first principle or *social genius*. Had Proudhon recognized that men are "actors and authors of their own history" (p. 170), he would understand that history proceeds according to the conflicting interactions of social groups (p. 211). Because of this view, a stadial theory of history is missing in *Poverty of Philosophy*, just as Proudhon does not realize that, between past, present and future, there is no unique linear direction, but rather discontinuities and contradictions, albeit within a framework of overall progress in the long run.

If we leave the "young Marx" to confront texts of the "mature Marx", which Gramsci could not know, we observe that this position was also adopted by Marx during the entire course of his life<sup>30</sup>.

We refer, first, to the *Ethnological Notebooks* (Marx 1974 [1880-1882]) and, in particular, to L.H. Morgan's notes on "Ancient Society", where an outline of human progress is sketched, examining the temporal evolution of different cultures. Marx looked upon Morgan's work quite favourably but did not share Engels' extremely positive opinion.

According to Morgan, the process of transition from one period to the next is impersonal, just as all different cultures were totally objective in their processes and constitution. Consequently, Morgan shares the belief in the laws of history: society always advances from a lower stage of development to a higher one<sup>31</sup>. It is worth noticing that Marx has ignored Chapter 3, Part 1, entitled "Ratio of human progress", where Morgan proposes a timescale of human development, according to the lines just discussed. On the contrary, Marx maintains that social formations build the framework into which societies develop their concrete articulation. In history, no necessity does exist<sup>32</sup>.

We can find further examples in Marx's reflections on the beginning of the revolutionary movement in Russia. In his letter to the editor of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in 1877 (Marx and Engels CW 24; pp. 196-201), he states that his historical works, mainly related to the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe, must not be absolutely interpreted as a philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples. Indeed, in the letter, even when he writes about the capitalist mode of production, Marx speaks of tendencies, never of absolute necessities.

Similarly, in his letters to Vera Zasulič<sup>33</sup>, Marx maintains that the results exposed in *Capital* do not allow him to adduce reasons either for or against the destiny of the social revolution occurring in Russia.

In the light of this anti-deterministic interpretation, Gramsci, in his note *Progress and becoming* (in Italian "*Progresso e divenire*") (Gramsci 1992; p. 357-360), says that progress can be correctly defined as an "ideology" (*ideologia*). Ideology, in Gramsci's language, does not refer to Marxian definition of "false consciousness", but means a specific conception of the world, that is the representation of reality provided by individuals and groups and, as a consequence, a specific collective and individual will<sup>34</sup>. Each "Truth" thus elaborated is not eternal and absolute, but has practical origins and represents a provisional value; in fact, within the "philosophy of praxis", Gramsci claims the historicity of every conception of world and life (Gramsci 1992; p. 406). The interaction between the different wills takes place in the

social space, where they fight for the hegemony. Here, the role of intellectuals and political bodies is relevant.

The category of "ideology" highlights the role of real human beings acting in history. Because of the lack of any predetermined end, the conflicting interaction of social groups, the outcome of which is unpredictable from time to time, is what makes history. In fact, in Gramsci's words, the historical value of a philosophy «can be "calculated" from the "practical" (in the broadest sense of the word) efficacy it has acquired. [...] The extent to which it reacts back is precisely the measure of its historical importance» (Gramsci 2007; p. 194). If philosophy has no practical relevance, it is just an empty elucubration. In the "historical bloc" struggling to establish hegemony:

the material forces are the content and ideologies are the form. This distinction between form and content is just heuristic because material forces would be historically inconceivable without form and ideologies would be individual fantasies without material forces (Gramsci 2007; p. 172).

#### **IV. Conclusions.**

In this paper we have tried to sketch some possible lines along which a theory of individual agency and interaction could be conceived in accordance with the Sraffian reappraisal of Classical political economy, and in a utterly different way from that envisaged within the methodological individualistic theories. The common traits that characterize methodological individualism offers a view of contemporary economic analysis as being purely instrumental, concerned with techniques capable of application to a wide variety of purposes and situations, and able to suppress ideology while acquiring scientific dignity. But the price to pay for this is high, since the apparent neutrality has very little heuristic power about the various economic conditions and their historical evolution, to the point that doubts arise as to whether one could rank economic analysis as a theory able to explain social action.

In order to give a consistent explanation for the ability of individuals and groups to foster process of transformation and change, we have discussed a possible interpretation of the thought of Sraffa. Focusing on the concept of causality, the equations of *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* can be interpreted as the "core" of an open system that takes as given historical, social and legal conditions (in this case, the relations outside the

core). Therefore, his materialist approach can be a matter of further investigation in the wake of Marx and Engels.

Materialist philosophy is based on the assumption of individuals who produce in society and establish specific social relationships among themselves at a given time in history. Thus, there is no human being “in general”, but rather there are people embedded in a specific historical reality, which is, however, determined by their actions and conflicts. This idea is often juxtaposed with the belief in the development of societies according to a linear progress, where the “structure” determines the “superstructure”, and which proceeds from a lower to a higher stage. Were Marxian anthropology read in such a way (incorrect, in our opinion), then it would be deterministic and irrelevant for the study of social phenomena and social change; for this reason, Gramsci’s lens to interpret the thought of Marx offer us valuable help.

In the note *Regularity and Necessity*, Gramsci explains that in history some forces, which tend to be persistent, operate with a certain degree of regularity and automatism; political economy must understand these forces and Ricardo, Gramsci adds, plays an important role in this<sup>35</sup>, as well as, we can say now, Sraffa and the modern reappraisal of Classical political economy. However, the proposed economic laws must never be interpreted as “historical necessities”; they represent the material conditions around which a social group will be formed to attain its goals. Among these material conditions one cannot separate the action of culture (in broadest sense); indeed, a complex set of intellectual choices, feelings and passions «lead men to action 'at any cost'» (Gramsci 1992; p. 413). We can compare here Gramsci’s reflection with Marx’s idea of the solidity of popular beliefs: a popular conviction often has as much energy as an actual material strength<sup>36</sup>.

This anti-deterministic interpretation of the role of the economic science gives relevance to the Gramscian notion of “catharsis”, indicating the shift from the purely economic to the ethical-political moment: man, in fact, is essentially “political man”, acting in society. In this way, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis explains social phenomena and social changes as historical facts, as the results of the historical subjectivity of groups acting in society and struggling for hegemony (Gramsci 1992; pp. 440-448 and, also, Frosini 2009). Any abstract and speculative research that leads to a teleological view of history is therefore an error. Far from being the rejection of the rational investigation of historical processes, this is the statement that the direction of their development depends on conflicting phenomena and is

also influenced by irrational elements. History, therefore, shapes individuals, but it is in the meantime the result of the variously organized action of individuals themselves.

In Sraffa's analysis, this is represented by the separation between the system of equations, which describes the quantitative relationships necessary for the viability of the system, and the conditions that determine the quantities produced and the distribution of income, which must be analyzed separately and cannot be described only with mathematical language. These conditions are an essential part of the analysis and, we can conclude now, the philosophy of praxis represents a valuable instrument to carry it out. The openness towards the indispensable study of the historical and social context constitutes perhaps the most relevant part of Sraffa's thought, even if it has not always been given due importance, as Sraffa himself seems to foresee in the note D<sub>3.12.4</sub>:

In this theory it will be thought that the important part is the analytical and constructive. The significance of the historical side will be missed. And yet, this is the truly important, that which gives us a real insight into the mystery of human mind and understanding, into the deep unknown relations of individuals between themselves and between the individual and society (the social, or rather the class mind).

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<sup>1</sup> 3rd year PhD student.

<sup>2</sup> Not all the scholars agree on this possibility. For example, Hodgson states that: [...] The Sraffian approach does not offer a theory of human agency and interaction. It simply suggests that the long-period positions will somehow reflect and affect the expectations and actions of agents. [...] [T]his lack is a serious weakness. In consequence it cannot be claimed that Sraffian analysis provides a completely adequate or entirely appropriate foundation for post-Keynesian theory (Hodgson 1991; p. 174).

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this approach is not able to give up the idea that market pre-exists to institutions and is independent of any institutional framework.

<sup>4</sup> As is known, the phenomena of reswitching and reverse capital deepening show that, in general, we cannot safely assume well behaved schedules on the market of goods and productive factors (Sraffa 1960; cap. VI; Garegnani 1979; pp. 45 ss.; Garegnani 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Sraffa D3/12/7: «In short the equations show that the conditions of exchange are entirely determined by the conditions of production».

<sup>6</sup> On this point see Dobb (1973) and again Bharadwaj (2017 [1989]).

<sup>7</sup> On this point see Gilibert (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Roncaglia (2009).

<sup>9</sup> See, also, Naldi (2020).

<sup>10</sup> See Marcuzzo and Rosselli (2011); Fratini (2018); Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico (2021).

<sup>11</sup> On this point see Arena (2013; 2015) and Davis (2017).

<sup>12</sup> See Sen (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Just to mention few more, Sraffa also studied Jules Henri Poincaré and L. L. Whyte, see, again, Kurz and Salvadori (2005).

<sup>14</sup> Sraffa (D3/12/4) writes that the ultimate result of his work would be «a restatement of Marx, by substituting to his Hegelian metaphysics and terminology our own modern metaphysics and terminology».

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Petri (2015) and Garegnani (2018).

<sup>16</sup> This is the well-known original definition of the method: «If one were to start with population, it would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from the imagined concrete, one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one arrived at the simplest determinations. From there it would be necessary to make a return journey until one finally arrived once more at population, which this time would be not a chaotic conception of a whole, but a rich totality of many determinations and relations» (Marx and Engels CW 28 *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 Introduction*; pp. 37-45). See also, *ex multis*: Lange (1970; p. 85) and Garegnani (1984; p. 321).

<sup>17</sup> Gramsci observes: «Critical economics has sought a fair balance between the deductive and inductive methods, i.e. to construct abstract hypotheses [...] on the effectual reality, "historical description", which gives the real premise to construct scientific hypotheses, i.e. to abstract the economic element or those aspects of the economic element to exercise the scientific examination» (Gramsci 1975 [1929-1935]; p. 335, our translation). «L'economia critica ha cercato un giusto temperamento tra il metodo deduttivo e il metodo induttivo, cioè di costruire ipotesi astratte [...] sulla realtà effettuale, "descrizione storica", che dà la premessa reale per costruire ipotesi scientifiche, cioè per astrarre l'elemento economico o quelli tra gli aspetti dell'elemento economico su cui si vuole attrarre l'attenzione ed esercitare l'esame scientifico». See, also, Maffeo (2000).

<sup>18</sup> In the specific case of Robert Liefmann, the principle is hedonism; he thought that the profit motive is the essential and unique element for the economic organization in the society.

<sup>19</sup> Gramsci (2007; p. 186): «[...] "human nature" is the "ensemble of social relations"; this is the most satisfying answer, because it includes the idea of "becoming" – man becomes, he changes continuously with the changing of social relations – and because it negates "man in general"».

<sup>20</sup> On this point, Antonio Labriola writes: «[...] The whole course of human events is a sum, a succession of series of conditions that men have made and laid down for themselves through the experience accumulated in their changing social life; but it represents neither the tendency to realize a predetermined end, nor the deviation of first principles from perfection and fecundity» (Labriola 1966; p. 123).

<sup>21</sup> Our interpretation of Marxian anthropology is compatible with the idea of *institutional individualism* proposed by Screpanti (2007; p. 83). We do not go in depth on this point now.

<sup>22</sup> Engels uses this very expression in the letter.

<sup>23</sup> This letter is often quoted by Gramsci. In addition, see also Engels' letter to Schmidt dated 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1890 and Engels' letter to Borgius dated 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1894 (Marx and Engels CW 49; pp. 6-9; Marx and Engels CW 50; pp. 264-268).

<sup>24</sup> Gramsci writes: ««the assumption (*as an essential postulate of historical materialism*) that one can present and explain every political and ideological fluctuation as a direct expression of the structure must be combated [...]

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with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works» (Gramsci 2007: p. 173). See also Forbes (1990; p. 30).

<sup>25</sup> See Meek (1977) and Kurz (2013).

<sup>26</sup> For a thorough discussion about this topic, see Ege (2018).

<sup>27</sup> We can read in the third *Thesis on Feuerbach*: «the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated» (Marx and Engels CW 5; p. 3).

<sup>28</sup> See Gramsci (1992; pp. 458-461). See also Cospito (2004; p. 231).

<sup>29</sup> «The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question» (Marx and Engels CW 5; p. 3).

<sup>30</sup> For a different interpretation see, for example, Gouldner (1980). Of course, since Marx was not only an economist but also a man engaged with politics there are several conflictual elements in his works. See for example his article about the British colonial occupation of India, written in 1853 (Marx and Engels CW 12; pp. 217-222).

<sup>31</sup> See the Introduction by Krader to Marx (1974 [1880-82]), pp. 3-85.

<sup>32</sup> See Lindner (ed.) 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Vera Zasulič was a Russian revolutionary. In 1881, she wrote a letter to Marx asking him «a life or death question» about the possibility for the Russian commune to undertake the «the road to socialism». Marx's reply is composed of three drafts and the final letter, written, also, in 1881. See Marx and Engels CW 24 (pp. 346-371). Curiously, Vera Zasulič forgot and ignored Marx's reply and adopted a deterministic philosophy. For an in-depth description of this case, see Rubel (1947).

<sup>34</sup> See Liguori (2004; pp. 131-150).

<sup>35</sup> (*Regolarità e necessità*, in Gramsci 1992; pp. 410-414). See, about the role played by Ricardo, the letters to Sraffa in Gramsci and Schucht (1997).

<sup>36</sup> See Gramsci (2007; p. 172). Gramsci's analysis of the strength of popular beliefs is in the same note where he defines the idea of "historical bloc". The young Marx writes in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: «Material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself» (Marx and Engels CW 3; p. 182).