

Branislava Petrov

The Immanence and the Transcendence of the Emerging Subject in Marx's Philosophy of History

Bionote: Branislava Petrov is a philosopher and a feminist author based in Novi Sad, Serbia. She presented her work at various conferences all over Europe, some of them being: Workshop "Helene Druskowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche, 2018," organised by Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia; Historical Materialism Conference Athens 2019, Athens, Greece; Feminist Futures Festival 2019, Germany, Essen; Internatiolal Scientific Conference of Medical University of Kharkov, Ukraine, 2019 and 2020., etc. Her work under the title: "Ideology and Social Structures Behind the Problem of Domestic Violence" has been published in 2019 edition of the last mentioned conference. Her work under the title: "The Difference Between Marxist Radical Feminist and Liberal Feminist Approach to the Problem of Transgender Ideology" has been published in 2020 edition of the same. She organizes online reading groups focusing on the works of Second Wave feminism. She is critical of modern day liberal, as well as so called radical feminism. She is currently working on a piece titled "Feminism and Identities," which will be presented at online conference "Women Philosophers in South-Eastern Europe—Past, Present and Future," organized by Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia. She works as a freelance writer and translator. She speaks English and Greek languages.

Philosopher and Feminist Author
 dundicbranka@yahoo.com

Abstract: The Author's aim in this paper is to expose the hidden distortions in Marx's understanding of the subject of history, such that occur under the influence of the patriarchal ideology. In order to do so, the author will first offer, what she believes is the most satisfying explanation of the subject in Marxism, namely, the idea of subject as an emerging immanence. The Author will further claim that Marx's attempt to overcome Hegelian teleological image of the world and to replace its transcendental subject with an immanent one, remains essentially flawed. The cause of

this shortcoming the author will find in the contradiction inherent to Marx's idea of subject. In the conclusion, the author will name feminism as the key theory for overcoming this contradiction.

Keywords: transcendence, immanence, subject of history, teleology, historicity, sex based division of labor, unpaid labor, feminism

The problem of subjectivity in Marx's philosophy remains an open question, even conundrum. One of the possible ways to solve it is to posit the idea of subject as a historical emergence. This idea is seen as a solution to the problem of the Hegelian teleological implications found in Marx's historical materialism, as well as an inevitable transcendence of the subject implied therein. In the logical sense, the teleological image of history implies the existence of three elements: the *goal* of history; the *subject* of history, as that which is moving towards the goal; and the *unity* of the process—history has to be a rational course whose every moment is a substantial part of it. Teleology leaves no room for coincidence. All three elements can be found in Hegel's philosophy of history. We will go through it briefly now.

When Hegel talks about philosophy of history what he has in mind is not simply a science that deals with the principles that govern history. It is not only that history is rationally structured and organized, but it is history itself that is a constitutive part of the mind and of the world. The mind and the world, the subject as well as the object, are historically structured. It is not only that history is governed by certain principles, but history itself is a principle—the world has its own historicity and it is essential to it; with Hegel, history becomes metaphysics. That the world has its own historicity means that everything in it has its truth in its historical development. Idea is developing through history and it is this development that is its truth. Each moment of such development is truth in itself; the final goal of history, however, is the absolute truth—spirit that is not only truth in itself but also for itself, an absolute spirit that knows itself as such. Spirit is like a germ that is striving towards its final form, therefore it has all of its potentials in it at the very outset, and each moment of the development is self-actualization of what is already there. That

is a teleological image of history. Spirit is the subject of such history, its goal being self-actualization through succession of moments that are all subordinated to the goal; history is a process that starts with subject and develops through the logic of subjectivity, all its events and actors being means for spirit to meet its goal. History is governed by the mind, but historicity is the logos of the mind. History is process of the spirit. Spirit is the transcendental subject of the history.

This process, the development of the spirit through the course of history follows a dialectical pattern: through the moments of alienation and its overcoming. These moments are: 1. Primitive harmony 2. Alienation 3. Unity on a higher, concrete level.

According to Hegel, the third moment is achieved in liberal bourgeois society. In other words, the course of history ends in capitalist society, as spirit achieves its goal in it; absolute freedom is established in capitalism.¹

Marx takes over the Hegelian idea of the historicity of the world, but he refuses the teleological implications. But because historicity understood in Hegelian way implies teleology, as we have shown, in order to defend historicity in Marxism we shall revisit the three elements needed in the teleological image of the history—the subject of history, the goal of history and the unity of the process. If we find all three of them in Marx, what we can only hope for then is to find the difference in their very nature.

The first premise of Marx's view of history is not one of the potency of spirit and its development, but rather real individuals, their activities and the material conditions of their existence—those they find as given as well as those they produce themselves.²

Like Hegel, Marx sees the process of history as a dialectical process which develops through stages, and he takes over the three stages of development as well, namely—thesis, antithesis and the unity of the oppositions; first comes primitive unity, then alienation follows

it, and finally, a unity on a higher level occurs, a unity on the level of freedom. For Marx, however, these stages are not stages of the development of spirit, but are stages of the development of *means of production* and accordingly, of modes of production.³ As man does not serve as a means of the development of spirit, but is a producer of his own development—he is his own means and goal. Accordingly, the latest stage of the development of history, the stage of freedom, for Marx, can not be achieved in bourgeois society, which is organised in such a way that the freedom of a few is paid for by the slavery of the majority. Furthermore, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx talks about the whole of human history to date as prehistory; it is prehistory because it is the history of struggle for freedom—class struggle. The real history of humankind will begin once freedom is achieved, and that can only happen in communism. This, however, is where the problem occurs. It is often said that the idea of communism as the ultimate goal of class struggle has a teleological implication. Marx takes over the Hegelian idea of history as logically structured process led by progressive tendencies, but in place of the realization of absolute spirit, posits the establishment of classless society in communism. Can communism be seen as a teleological goal of the historical process? If so, what or who is the subject of such a process?

The British Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley points out:

“Evolution, “development, “progress,” all imply something identical throughout, a subject of the evolution, which is one and the same. If what is there at the beginning is not there at the end, and the same as what was there at the beginning, then evolution is a word with no meaning.

And further, unless what is at the end is different from that which was at the beginning, there is no evolution. That which develops, or evolves itself, both is and is not. It is, or it could not be it which develops, and which at the end has developed. It is not, or else it could not become. It becomes what it is; and, if this is nonsense, then evolu-

¹ Although Hegel does not deny inner problems of capitalist society, he believes in their resolution within the given system, not in revolution.

² Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968). Available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845-gj/%20part_a.htm.

³ Sean Sayers, “Marxism and the Dialectical Method: A Critique of G. A. Cohen,” *Radical Philosophy* 36:1 (1984): <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/marxism-and-the-dialectical-method>

tion is nonsense. Evolution is a contradiction; and, when the contradiction ceases, the evolution ceases.⁴

But:

When Marx speaks of a course of social change, he is not speaking of changes of which anything easily identifiable is the enduring subject [...] There is nothing which retains its identity as it changes in the ways they describe; there is only a course of events. There are men who are born and live and die, and among whom certain modes of action, thought and feeling endure for a time and then give way to others.⁵

The progressive development of the productive forces and of human capabilities, and hence the creation of the human subject, is not a teleological process of development of a single subject, it is not a process governed by an intended goal from the outset. It is not the outcome of the activity of a pre-existing subject, for there is no such subject. It arises as an unforeseen and unintended consequence, through the coming together of numerous separate and independent activities. However, that is not to say that it is a mere outcome of chance, a merely arbitrary, accidental, or contingent result. On the contrary, a regular pattern of development emerges from the myriad social interactions of different agents—households and individuals—each separately and independently pursuing their own ends.⁶

Thus, if social laws grew out of man's material conditions, the idea of absolute spirit as a transcendence that determines them may be redundant. There is no subject of history at the outset, and thus there is no pre-plan either. There are only people scattered around the world, striving to survive in untamed, hostile nature. Serving as the common denominator, nature eventually brought them together; in their efforts to overcome and master nature, they developed relatively similar mechanisms of survival, followed by the development of a compatible conscience and logic that governs it. Still

scattered, they began to develop technology independently, and to grow into more complex social organisations. To become a logically structured process, history required a certain level of complexity. At the point when it was acquired, social laws started to be established, and from that point on we can talk about man as a historical subject. He *emerges* as a subject, as a consequence of his own actions; there is not a "germ" of subjectivity from the outset.

In *The German ideology*, Marx warns that the subject should not be projected back to the beginning and we should not think of it as a moving force of history. Subject, just as the logical structure of historical processes, emerges during the process. They are a consequence of a coincidence, but once established they in turn establish society as a unity organized by logos, such that its simpler elements can no longer be deduced from it. Thus, the historical process implies a *qualitative change*. There is an ultimate dialectical pattern at work here: the world, as it appears to man, is always already mediated by man's work. The world and man do not face each other as an object and a subject, but they exist as a unity, an active process that has this relational structure as its substance.

Could it be said of communism that it represents the goal of history in the teleological sense? Let's see. Although Marx's and Hegel's methods are similar in form, they differ in content. Hegelian spirit is a unity of content and form; this is the sense in which he talks about absolute spirit. So how does historical materialism divide the content from the form? It does so precisely because it is the nature of the subject in it that differs: Marx's subject is not transcendental subject. Marx criticizes Hegel and Hegelians as philosophers whose philosophy serves to keep the status quo. Because they do not see dynamics of the world as produced by its actors, but they understand them as governed by a higher instance, they trap themselves in an abstract formalism that serves to explain the existing world of contradictions,⁷ but not to change it. Their thought, therefore, is not alive thought, such that is in a living dialectical relation with ever reproducing material conditions, itself renewed each time material conditions change, but is a mere construct detached from its

⁴ Sean Sayer, "Marx and teleology," *Science & Society* 83.1. (January 2019): 47-8.

⁵ John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx: Volume Two*, (London: Longman, 1963), 429-30, quoted in Sayers, "Marx and Teleology," 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ We can not go here into the details of the contradictions of capitalism. It shall be enough to emphasize that Marx sees capitalism as inherently built upon contradictions because, on one hand, capital's essential feature is its tendency towards indefinite accumulation, while on the other, the logic of indefinite accumulation is in opposition to the definite nature of its resources – humans and nature. Marx believed those opposite tendencies will result in the self-destruction of capitalism.

material base, lifeless specter drained of the real moving force of history, which is class struggle. With spirit as transcendental subject of history and its moving force, class struggle can only be given secondary importance. For Marx, on the contrary, it is class struggle, as a struggle for freedom, that produces man as a subject of history, this subject being immanent principle of change. This is what was meant by the statement that Hegelian and Marxist methods differ in content. In the need for transcendental principle Marx sees a need for justification of the existing conditions of the world. The world, however, needs to change. But that change shall come free of constructed formalism. It is precisely the disappearance of the need for such formalism that will mark the beginning of the free world.

Hegel talks of the realization of the absolute spirit as “the end of history.” Marx sees the establishment of communism as “the beginning of history.” Hegel’s subject achieves its fulfilment in bourgeois society, a society where the majority are not free. It is possible for Hegel because individual people, as well as their material world, are mere emergent forms of spirit. Marx’s emerging subject, man, achieves its full freedom only in a society where everyone is free. Only such a society will see the liberation of human potential to the extent never seen before. It is not a teleological goal of history, it is its logical consequence.

By positing the subject as immanent, we move the further research from philosophy to history. Task of further understanding of the immanent subject of history requires historical research. Historical research, however, is not without its troubles. One of the main obstacles in it is the fact that it does not give us instructions on how and where to recognize ideological distortions in historical facts. Ideologies are always at work throughout history and a good researcher is aware of it. Ideologies, however, differ among themselves, some of them being so ancient and fundamental that they often go unrecognized. This lack of recognition results in production of entire philosophical systems—systems that aim at universality - ideologically distorted and practically in service of certain groups of people instead of humanity as such. One such fundamental ideology that often goes unrecognized is patriarchy.

Before the subject emerges there is nothing at the outset; history starts with a man searching for ways to satisfy his needs, developing technology and organizing in ever more complex communities. There is no arbitrariness in such organizing, however; people form social units in a way that will provide the most efficient execution of the labor needed. The strict *division of labor* plays a crucial role here. There is a variety of criteria that can play a role in deciding how the labor will be divided; but no criterion seems to be as irremovable as biological predisposition. Occurring in the very first, primitive communities, a sex-based division of labor soon acquired the status of a *given*. Whatever consequences it produced from that point on, it could only be taken as a given as well.

Sex-Based Division of Labor

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes about specifically human values as connected with the idea of *transcendence*: for that reason humanity recognises as values such activities that give life meaning by giving it reasons for existence that exceed its mere confirmation and repetition.⁸ Beauvoir uses Hegel’s dialectics of master and slave to conceptualize the relation between man and woman. According to her, man and woman are posited as master and slave because of the sex based division of labor in primitive tribes. Free from reproductive labor, men engaged in such duties as hunting and war. These are prestigious activities because they consist of risk, which gives value to life because what the life is risked for is larger than the life itself.

“Woman’s biggest damnation is the fact she is excluded from war-paths; man rises above animal not by giving life, but by risking it.”⁹ Reproduction of life remains *immanent*; it is a fact with no meaning. Value is defined on the side of transcendence, with no exception. Humankind recognizes its peculiarity only in such phenomena that presuppose such a project that overcomes mere (nature-like) repetition.¹⁰ For that reason, woman strives towards male-established values as well. Man opens the doors of the future that is the future of humankind, and woman transcends towards it as well.¹¹

⁸ Celia Amorós, *Prilog Kritici Patrijarhalnog Uma*, trans. Ana Markovic (Karpos, 2017), 11.

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 93, quoted in Amorós, *Prilog Kritici Patrijarhalnog Uma*, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ *Idem.*

Here we are met with a contradiction. On the one hand, as a universal subject of history, man is said to be an emerging immanence of the historical process, but on the other hand, to acquire the status of subject he must acquire the status of transcendence. Where does this contradiction come from?

When Marx analyzes the class society and the mechanisms inherent to it, there is one sphere he leaves out, one sphere he does not apply his own method to. It is a sphere where women's unpaid labor takes place—the sphere of the private. Marx takes a surprisingly essentialist approach when talking about production of male work force. According to him, women are too fragile for the rough work in factory, and in *Capital, vol. 1* he openly advocates for women to stay out of factories and remain at home, because the hard work “spoils them morally.” The endless domestic work he describes as “natural function.” And because it is natural, it does not need the Marxist analysis applied to it. What Marx overlooks, however, is that the “natural” (and unpaid) work done by women at home benefits man, but even more, it benefits the capitalist. That means that he overlooks the fact that, while both, woman and man, toil their lives away for the benefit of capitalist, it is only the man who gets paid directly. By staying at home, out of the evil factory, the woman, on the other hand, is in touch with the wage only indirectly, only through the mediation of man. Encouraged by the system not to recognize the work she provides for him (and capital) as valuable, the man starts to see the woman as subordinated to himself. By staying at home woman is doomed to have two masters—the capital and the man. This is the patriarchal ideology at work in Marx's work that distorts the very outcome of his philosophy. Simultaneously, there lies the answer to the question of the subject of history being immanent in Marxism, yet remaining transcendental. It can be so because of the patriarchal distortions in Marxism; it can be so because the subject of the history in Marxism is an abstraction of humankind. It is not a universal human, but male human. Man is the subject of history in Marxism, woman is not.

By doing unpaid, never recognized, never analysed domestic reproductive labor, a woman produces man's material conditions and his possibility to act as the subject of history. But once produced, man does not look back, he leaves the woman in the dust. From then on, his approach to her can be humanitarian—he can offer her help, or

guidance—but never egalitarian. Man detaches himself from the very conditions of his existence so he can serve as a transcendental principle of the historical process. Serving as an agent of patriarchal ideology (and by doing so, serving also as a useful fool for capitalist ideology), man imprisons woman into immanence, stripping her of the possibility to act as the subject of history. But as the value of reproductive labor is woven into his own subjectivity, by denying it, he emerges as a walking contradiction. Marx is turning Hegel's philosophy “upside down” to free his dialectics from the transcendental subject and show how the material processes of the world can be explained without “leaving the earth,” just to kill off what is “earthly” in it (but not before using its producing value)—the female half of humankind—and go back to transcendence.

It is, therefore, the task of feminism to answer to the problem of the subject of history. Feminism must dismantle the idea of the sex based division of labor as given, just as it must recognize and reaffirm value in reproduction. By doing so it shall dismantle patriarchal ideology. Free from its distortions, the historical subject may emerge in its unity.