

The Essential Is Culture, Economics Is Mediated

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To this purpose, the cult of production, economic efficiency and material power are described as factors that have helped the full imposition of a sordid materialism, of consumerism and have propelled the social and environmental deterioration suffered by today's society. We reflect on the original and dialectically contradictory work of Karl Marx, José Martí and Enrique Dussel, among others, while arguing in favor of the creative and socio-cultural essence of the human being, and of its complete subjectivity, to which we assign a primary role. The authors describe the conceptions and practices that make the market economy into an end by itself as "economystique", showing they lose their way because they do not understand that both production and all scientific, technical and social activities must be conceived and carried out as means for human improvement.

Keywords: cultural creation, subjectivity, economystique, technocracy

THE ECONOMY IS MEDIATED

Think is serving.

those who produce are human beings, society, living labor. When the economy takes over, as it happens in capitalism,

Create is to fight; to create is to win.

José Martí

In times of economic-social crisis, the technocratic sector tries to impose categorically the (non-Marxist) dogma that economic-material production is primordial in order to solve all socio-cultural problems. The main argument used by the administrative power is very similar to that of the private winemaker: "today I do not lend, tomorrow I will". The technocrats are in charge of propagating the fable: "today the main thing is to solve the material problems and, when they are solved, there will be time to think". This is something like how today it is not convenient to reflect, because this would be a hindrance, a detour, a waste of energies at a time when "everything" must be devoted to productive-material-improving action. Of course, they try to make us forget that all the crises that have occurred throughout human history

could only be foreseen, analyzed and overcome by thinking (imagination, invention, creativity, hope, literature...) in its broadest sense: scientific, academic, artistic and popular.

The technocracy, the great economic and political administrators who understood badly or very little the dialectical substance of Marxism, separate the dialectical substance of Marxism, separate body and soul, subject and soul, object and subject, and try to break the complex and basic social and human unity. In order to focus the reflection on the basis of the living thought of Karl Marx, it is very interesting to start from his following statement: “so that the essential difference is not the essential difference to be forgotten by attending only to the unity, which is already evident from the fact that the subject, mankind, and the objective, nature, are the same.” (quoted by Dussel, 1991). From this, it is easy to realize that production is not the whole, but part of society; so is the economy. Both production and economy are founded, that is, they are because there is a society that allows them to exist, and not, naively, the other way around. There is production, and there is economy for society.

It is a nonsense to present the economy as a within which the commodity is fetishized and instead of meeting real human needs, it goes on to satisfy capital’s insatiable craving for profit and artificial needs fed by it, then living labor, the worker and, in the long run, human society and planetary nature end up severely damaged.

The pragmatic capitalists, great religious believers in the formal, are more materialistic than the naive materialists that the whole Stalinist pseudo-theory of knowledge, bent on demonstrating that nature is prior to consciousness, banned. The cosmological and naïve materialism, proclaimed under Stalin, not only remains alive in some insular heads, but what is much worse, it is still intact in some manuals that continue to be oriented by some professors of Marxism-Leninism. Let us clarify, in passing, that the gnoseological Leninism of “Philosophical Notebooks” and “Materialism and Empiriocriticism”, is substantial and dialectical, and has very little to do with the mush prepared by Stalinist academics, without this meaning that in these texts of Lenin are contained all the keys for the overcoming of positivism and the economistic simplification of Karl Marx’s thought.

What is forgotten is that Marx sought the economic essence of capitalism, to unravel the reason for its emergence and development and how to overcome it. In these inquiries he did not go down the high-sounding gnoseological paths, but went straight to production and here he saw what really interests: worked nature. Worked by whom? Well, worked by living labor, by the “subject that works”. Then, to be Marxist in this, we must recognize the primacy of the subject as subjectivity that transforms nature. Enrique Dussel (1991) summarizes it as follows: “For Marx the first thing, in terms of the constitution of value but equally in the “association of free men of communal production is the subject that works: the producing subjectivity.” The position contrary to Marx is naive and cosmological materialism, which can reach very high chimerical flights (i.e., increasingly separated from the productive, poetic, creative practice) to justify and impose its dogma.¹ The naïve, cosmological and dogmatic materialism of the manuals could not, cannot and will never be able to understand José Martí or the army of willing epigones of reasoned utopia.

FIGURE 1
DANCE EXHIBITION, IV YEAR (2012). DANCE ART, ASAB. EMPHASIS INTERPRETATION



Photograph: Carlos Mario Lema.

Enrique Dussel, makes an overwhelming criticism of the manual “Fundamentals of Marxist Philosophy”, first part, entitled “Dialectical Materialism”, by F. V. Kontantinov, and qualifies it as ontological, cosmological, intuitive and naive materialism. V. Kontantinov, and qualifies it as ontological, cosmological, intuitive and naive materialism (this is the manual that was abundantly used in Cuba until almost the year 2000, despite the fact that it was written since 1951, in the midst of Stalinist paralysis). The question Marx would ask himself is: “What comes first? the subject of labor, the worker, the producer, or the matter of labor, or nature as labored earth?” To this question Marx would answer, according to Dussel, thus, “The first is the subject that works. And this would be historical materialism” (p. 36). The nature that interests Marx, José Martí and the hopeful of the world, the one that interests those who think, feel and create with a cultural conception, is not the nature previous to human beings, but the worked one, the one that is the object of the creative-productive activity. It is from this conception that the human-social being is the primordial thing and everything else: worked nature, economy, and the economy of the production... is secondary: What has to exist before, what has to be constituted as subjectivity so that there can be “worked nature”, “economy” and “material production”? It is not that the economy does not interest us. Yes, we are very interested in it, but in the sense of making it an economy for human betterment. It is not that nature does not interest us; it does interest us, in the sense of protecting it, improving it and improving ourselves with it. As Dussel summarizes, “in Marx matter is what is constituted a posteriori by human subjectivity (physical and spiritual), as work, production” (p. 36). As a field of realization of poiesis

Poiesis comes from the Greek, where it meant or means: work, manufacture, production, operation. From there, the concept is used in a much more cultural and broader sense as creation. This creation emanates from work, from fabrication, but not only in the material sense, of making or producing objects, but in the historical sense, that human beings are creating themselves in society and culture in a material and, at the same time, spiritual way. That is to say, poiesis is also the fabrication of ideas, of feelings, of ethical and aesthetic values, related to a coherent and riskily just practice. Used as a generic term, it is both fruit and seed, consequence and cause, at the same time, of human society and of the social human being himself.

By poiesis we understand the social and human subject, historically constituted, its capacity for creation. It is this creative subject (producer, Marx would say) that is primordial. Marx's historical materialism starts from this recognition that the primary is the producing subject, from which derives our understanding that production and economy are founded, that is, they are because there is a society that allows them to exist, and not, naively, the other way around. There is production, and there is economy for society. It is a nonsense to present the economy as a Moloch to which human beings have to immolate themselves. Neither the economy nor production produce, it is we human beings who produce, the society constituted in a human way on the basis of culture.²

FROM ECONOMICISM TO REASONED UTOPIA

Currently they try to invent that the social world is written in economic language.

(Bourdieu, 1997, p.1)

For Bourdieu (1997), in the discourse of the neocapitalism offensive, neoliberalism is a new ideology of efficiency, which enhances the value of the economic and is based on a mathematical theology: "this philosophy has and recognizes as its sole objective the permanent creation of wealth and, more secretly, its concentration in the hands of a privileged minority" (p. 2). With the fundamental objective of maximizing profits.

The prominent French sociologist stated that Reagan, Thatcher and their demiurges put all the emphasis on giving maximum freedom to the financial markets "to wage a total war against the unions, against the social acquisitions of the last centuries, in a word, against all forms of civilization associated with the social state" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 2). He goes on to point out the serious social consequences that neoliberalism has brought about and adds: "The autonomy enjoyed by the universes of cultural production in relation to the market, which had grown continuously through the struggles of writers, artists and scientists, is increasingly threatened" (p. 3). Neoliberalism intends to wipe out all kinds of socio-cultural conquests.

Bourdieu, still current in so many respects, explained how the market and the commercial threaten to sweep away all literature and cinema, and other arts, of value. And this can only be avoided if artists are given control of production and also of distribution. He lamented how many intellectuals actively collaborated in favor of the imposition of the neoliberal ideology, and He especially denounced the damage done by postmodern philosophers in dismantling utopian-participatory narratives. He proposed reasoned-utopianism (which is a concept that had already been used by Ernst Bloch in his critique of Bacon).

Bourdieu did not forget to point out that, for Marx, sociology is pure submission to economic-social laws, while utopianism consists in the audacious defiance of these laws. At the present time, we need utopianism and an all-out struggle against economism and, in particular, against one of its most obvious manifestations, which is that of warmongering entrenched behind the arms industry and the promotion of wars that bring succulent "dividends" to those who provoke and promote them, but do not suffer them.

In the face of this unbridled desire for excessive profit, rational utopianism is a balance, based on the equilibrium between a profound knowledge of the laws and the hopeful practice of achieving a better reality, possible only if we act with illusion, organization and will. It requires going far beyond romanticism, superficial humanism and hopeless skepticism. Therefore, neither chimerical illusion nor defeatism.

To say that the economy is fundamental is the same as saying that money is the measure of all things. This is the thinking that bankers and owners of financial capital, and those who want freedom to get richer, are trying to impose: "by establishing profit as the sole criterion for evaluating education, culture, art, literature, we are condemned to a prosaic civilization of fast food, airport novels and television soap operas" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 4).

There are many and very dangerous economic dazles, both those emanating from neo-capitalism and those propagated by the mediocrity of authoritarian bureaucratism. At both extremes, necessary and useful economic reflection is abandoned in the name of crementism, which, in the direction I denounce, is too much like efficiency at all costs, the love child of chimerical rationalism. The warning issued in 1993 by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte about the lack and even soullessness that a science can suffer is still

valid: “Economics, which is the most mathematically advanced social science, is the most socially and humanly backward science, because it has abstracted itself from the social, historical, political, psychological and ecological conditions that are inseparable from economic activities” (1993, p. 189).

THE TRUE WISDOM

The knowledge that does not belong to us and the ignorance that belongs to us form for me true wisdom.

(Lezama, 1988, 417)

In the Cuban insular case, José Martí and José Lezama Lima give us nature and supernature, understanding the latter, within Lezama’s conception that is consistent with that of the universal harpist, as the ephemeral human capacity to free himself from time through the reconstruction of the image; on this point, the Argonaut of Trocadero in the essay “Confluences”, makes an imperishable inscription: “Faced with the determinism of nature, man responds with the total arbitrariness of the image” (Lezama, p. 418). And for his part Martí, meanwhile, does not let us escape the astonishment and goes in his reflections from the natural to the social, from the collective to the personal, from the artistic to the scientific, from the moral to the political and so on with a balanced and harmonious tone. He believes and is guided by the law of balance and wherever he places his gaze, he bewitches with the grace of moderate passion, of reasoned virtue, of measured ardor. As in Lezama, in him there is not the slightest disdain or underestimation of the scientific:

It is not that we disdain science; we embrace it with fervor; with active admiration we pursue it; we learn what it tells us, veneration is inspired by its efforts, but when science becomes conceited and overbearing, especially against those who think and ask questions, we reject it with softness, but with energy (Martí, 1987, p. 413).

However, it has not been an easy path to access the true wisdom that is capable of incorporating certainties in the midst of uncertainty, and vice versa. The history of Western science itself provides many examples of misunderstandings and intolerances against paradigms and modes of thought different ways of thinking. Lezama (1988) lurks and suggests it in his “Prelude to the Imaginary Eras”, already in 1958:

FIGURE 2
DANCE EXHIBITION, IV YEAR (2012). DANCE ART, ASAB. EMPHASIS INTERPRETATION.



Photograph: Carlos Mario Lema.

With irritated eyes they contemplate causality and the unconditioned. They contemplate each other irreconcilably and close ranks on the two enemy shores. Causality, pacified, liked the most visible links. Links that submerged or acquired their halo of visibility in the pleasurable criteria of finality (p. 370).

Martí (1975), who has known Comte in depth and is neither against positivism nor against realism, but against its exaggerations, pointed out the qualities of the former and even classified it according to its rank as follows: “Positivism has two values: the absolute and the relative. The absolute is that of its method. The relative is the extreme opposite of exaggerated ideologism” (p. 410). Consequently, for the most profound observer we have ever had, there is a “positivism that stops at the phenomenon. (Another that) recognizes something more than the phenomenon (and, finally, a third, much superior to the previous ones, that sees) the relationship that moves them” (p. 411), the parentheses are his own) If the first is dogmatic positivism, the third is critical positivism. Martí is, no doubt, with this critical positivism that opts for the essence without disdain the details. Not for an essence in the abstract, of stale metaphysics, but concrete, inclusive, made of participation, of parts and, for this very reason, dynamic, historical, changing, transforming. Thus, “positivism wielded wisely is useful” (p. 409).

It is the most demanding path, that of the understanding of astonishment, where doubt and certainty hold hands and are able to build the same course. Hence the above illuminating excerpt: “The knowledge that does not belong to us and the ignorance that belongs to us form for me the true wisdom”. This is a fundamental issue, to which José Lezama Lima devotes extensive and very intense meditations, as if he were pursued by the questioning: Where can causality and the unconditioned concur? This question seems to be one of the primordial questions of his “Prelude to the Imaginary Eras”.

We must follow him, even if it is briefly, in what he says about chance, causality and double concurrence. For example: “Chance is a selection that springs from a decipherable reading; the causal

chains, moving forward, are the towers where chance succumbs” (Lezama, 1988). Meanwhile, the struggle of causality and its unconditioned was of much more tragic root than that offered by causality and metamorphoses. Transferring the antithesis of causality and metamorphosis to the Greek world of poesis, causality seemed to be converted into substitution and metamorphosis into image (p. 375).

And, then, what is this double concurrence: “Residue of causality on the unconditioned, it is a double. Echo of the unconditioned flooding and illuminating causality, it is a double” (p. 378). The Argonaut of Trocadero has made the most profitable readings of the best homunculus of the nation, José Martí (1975), who in his essay “Darwin is dead”, writes the primordial questions:

Is the science of the soul insane, which closes its eyes to the science of the body that moves it, settles it and enslaves it, and is the science of the bodies insane, which denies the laws of the radiant soul, which fills the minds of men with celestial, canopy, confusion and madness? (And, already in the middle of the tunnels, he exclaims:) Life is double. He who studies the simple life is mistaken (p. 373).

We have glimpsed that for Lezama “the exchange between the oblique experience (of causality) and the sudden (of the unconditioned) creates (...) the conditioning unconditioned, that is, the potens, the infinite possibility” (Lezama, 1988, p. 383). Let potens be understood as the possible in infinity. But where can they concur, because in poetry, where Saturn stops devouring his children and the unconditioned becomes visible through a tree: “That concurrence (...) offered by poetry is so far the greatest homunculus, the most mysterious double created by man” (Martí, 1975, p. 378).

In turn, the Justiciero de la calle Paula, who tested his weapons against dogmatic positivism and has come to exclaim that “in art, there are no real or accidental truths (...), (but) what is, is eternal” (Martí, 1975, p. 428), and who has looked deeply into the dangers emanating from all exaggeration, from all extremism that kills or tyrannizes, and to whom, then opportunely says:

In the name of freedom of thought (...) he condemns those who have the audacity to think differently from the founder of positivist philosophy! Go with the founders, whoever they may be, (never forget that) love is the only fruitful thing (p. 426).

Where love appears as antecedent and metaphor of the Lezamian concurrence, in the embrace of causality with the unconditioned.

THE SUBJECTIFICATION OF ECONOMICS AS THE PATH WE MOST NEED

The man grows with the work that comes out of his hands.

José Martí

The living work. (...) Work as subjectivity.

Carlos Marx

Production is not the economy, and this is not the opposite of spirituality, but what constitutes nature as an object of labor. Karl Marx speaks of production, distribution and consumption, about how the first determines the others, but also vice versa, because they occur in reality in a very rich and complex, non-linear way. Nor does Marx speak of structure and superstructure, because the latter metaphor is very simple and does not fit in his rich thought.

It is interesting, too, that Marx calls objectified labor, and therefore dead labor, that which has already been converted into material means. Before Marx it was thought that it was these means of production, the private property of the capitalist, which magically produced profit. The great discovery of the Prometheus of Trier is the discovery that surplus value does not come from dead labor, but from living labor: “The only thing different from “objectified labor” is “non-objectified” labor, which even though is not the only thing that produces profit, is not objectified, labor as “subjectivity.” (Marx, translated by Scaron, 1971).³ That labor as subjectivity can only exist as a living subject, that is, as a worker. The worker is an individual but social subject and the society he produces is a collective subject. It is subjectivity (social living labor) that produces the economy. This is what the defenders of economics forget or pretend to forget every time they try to convince us that culture is not necessary or, at least, that it can be put in the background, left for later.

FIGURE 3
DANCE EXHIBITION, IV YEAR (2012). DANCE ART, ASAB. EMPHASIS INTERPRETATION.



Photograph: Carlos Mario Lema.

Enrique Dussel develops these ideas of Karl Marx, and considers the living subject, the worker, as exteriority (that which is external to capital), that is, that which is distinct.⁴ Living labor is non-capital but it is that which creates surplus-value. The owner of capital does not understand him, because he is distinct, but the true creator is the one who works. In our discussion with technocratic with an economic vocation, we find this same antagonistic contradiction between the included (who possesses the levers of decision and command) and the excluded (who is sometimes treated as an object and suffers the consequences of this).

The short-sighted economic technocracy, which does not see the immediate, is going to reduce, as much as it can and as much as we allow it to, to the different-creating. Economics, beset by the needs of immediacy, considers culture a luxury because for it there is only the present problem; it cannot see the process and much less can it foresee that the socio-economic movement will not stop to wait for the “crucial” economic problems to be solved. While economics (bureaucratism) and its retinue of servants (the technocrats) solve the pressing immediate economic problems, the socio-cultural ones accumulate, worsen and will explode and, on top of that, when they come to realize it, they have not solved the economic ones either, because society is a whole that cannot be divided into parts. Without intending to do so, five years later they will not have solved the economic problem and will have contributed to the deterioration of the validity and legitimacy of the symbols we defend.

Because it is cultural, because it is human, and because from this perspective it is clear to us (since Marx), that to uproot, reduce, subordinate culture is to deprive the economy itself of its main engine, because it can only produce living labor (and free, moreover, in socialism understood as an extension of freedom and subjectivity, that is, as the opposite of authoritarianism and repression; even in capitalism “free labor” is also the primordial thing, since the worker has to be “free” in order to be able to sell his labor power) and, at the same time, it is to dig an antagonistic contradiction between production (which must be for life) and reproduction (of course of human life, which is so because it is cultural). Culture represents

for me the maximum representation of living labor, capable of creating the “infinite universal possibility of wealth” (this last phrase is Marx’s).

We must pay attention to the economy, we must organize production, we must save as much as we can save, among other things, but what must not be said, and what we must not accept, is that culture is secondary, mediate, that it must and can wait. Improving the economy, making production more efficient and cost-saving, and all that is wanted in this way is simply impossible if it is not inspired and done by and for culture. If living labor, in socialism, only works to improve-enrich the economy (without a cultural vision and purpose, without shared symbols of fraternity, justice and equality) it would cease to be “free” and would become, as in capitalism, alienated labor, labor for another, which neither gives joy nor develops: “Under the conditions of private property, the alienation of my individuality is such that this “activity” is detestable to me, it is a torment” (Marx quoted by Dussel, 1991, p.143).

By the path of economy we would end up accepting that material wealth (the economy) is what produces the human being. One does not have to be a Marxist to know that it is women and men who produce wealth. And we must not produce it, at least in a social project that calls itself “emancipating”, neither for the capitalists nor for the bureaucrats (who are not those who work in offices, but those who present their particular interest as the interest and benefit of all and fight with the weapons of secrecy to increase their privileges), nor do we produce it for the future, but for ourselves and for today.

It will be better understood what we say about the defense that we must make of culture, when it is understood that by culture we should not only understand the fine arts, nor reduce it to the intellectual world (science, education, art and literature...) nor, much less, limit it ontologically to what is traditional or already created that, as a frozen identity, must be defended. When we say culture we are thinking of two pillars: one, as a capacity for human creation, that is, as living work and, two, as a set or system of more or less shared values, senses and meanings that precede-coexist-succeed all social practice. We also clarify that we do not accept the populism of saying that art and literature are not important, because more than important they are essential and must be conceived as the best resources, often utopian, that we can count on to unravel where we come from and where we are going and that they are more necessary and useful, precisely, the darker a given social context gets, because they are like light

We should not be afraid of being labeled as idealists, utopians, romantics... Even those who so label us will be aware that today’s world is in dire need of romantic idealism, of tenderness and dreams, of pre-occupation with the “other” human being and of symbols that help us to live and to share. We also clarify that we are not dogmatically Marxist and, at the same time, we do not renounce to his essential contributions to the “materialist” understanding of history and social processes, which are also “idealist” and dialectically subjective, as is evident from a careful reading of the original texts of Carlos Marx, where the terms subject, subjectivity, living labor and emancipation through will and struggle germinate everywhere.

We do not believe in the “textbook Marxism” that speaks to us of objective and determining laws of development. To accept the existence and force of these laws is to renounce the human will and the infinite capacity for cultural creation and, more than anything else, it is also to renounce the growing need for a reasoned utopia.

On this issue of the relationship between culture and economics we must not let up one iota. Economistic is demagogic even in those moments when it believes it is acting out of love, it is part of the same logic of capital, which pretends not to realize where the surplus value comes from, which then materializes in profit. Since Marx we know that in production capital obtains surplus-work, which it does not pay for, and then, in circulation, it realizes more than it actually put in. Capital, moreover, has an infinite thirst for profit. If we were to heed the economists, even in socialism, we would also be feeding “its infinite thirst to produce for its own production” and this vicious circle leads to production for the profit of the economists. Both the owners of capital and the economists (owners of the universalization of discourse) oblige to produce for themselves.

Precisely, what we require is not the infinite expansion of needs on the basis of the endless expansion of the economy (which demands to produce more to satisfy all kinds of appetites, sustainable or not): what we demand is the constant growth of culture to live with more quality of life and greater quotas of happiness, which has to do directly with the creation of different lifestyles and the satisfaction of real needs. For those

who think that we are proposing an Arcadian idealism, a return to the past, we clarify that we are not, because in the past this utopia never happened, at least at the scale of a civilization, empire or nation. Nor are we scorning the civilizational (understood as productive forces), but trying its “rational”, “sentimental” and “utopian” submission to the dictates of ethics and culture.

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ENDNOTES

1. See especially pages 177 and 178, including notes, of Marx’s Theoretical Production. Un comentario a los Grundrisse, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1991; in which Dussel shows that, although Marx had little to do with Engels’ “Anti-Dürhing” and “Dialectics of Nature”, dialectics is still alive in these two works and does not fall crudely into naive and cosmological materialism, although he did give reasons for the emergence of this “ideology” that will be gaining ground especially from 1929 onwards. Dussel identifies as the same “ideology” cosmological materialism and Stalinism, where Marx’s theory of production is buried. For Dussel, Marx is more of a critical realist than a materialist, and much less of that group of positive materialists or scientific-naturalists. This has to do with Marx’s philosophical greatness, which can be seen even in Capital, despite the fact that this is a work of political economy.
2. Saint John Perse, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 1960, said: “Only inertia is a threat. The poet is the one who breaks, for us, the custom”. Thus, there are not only poets in verse, there are also poets in narrative and essay writing, in work organization and, of course, in the workers, peasants, artisans, self-employed, scientists, doctors... The one who “breaks the custom”, who rebels against oppression, who understands and looks from the “other”... is a poet. Lamming, goes so far as to say: “Poetry is a form of listening.” (2010, p. 29)
3. See C. Marx, Elementos fundamentales para la crítica de la economía política (draft), translated by Pedro Scaron, Editorial Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires, 1971. According to Dussel, La producción teórica de Marx. Un comentario a los Grundrisse, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1991, p. 137.
4. Recall that for Dussel the distinct is not the same as the different. “Distinct” indicates someone (the other) who is outside the totality. Whereas the different is that which is subsumed in the totality.

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