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# Critical Marxism and the Theory of History: Antonio Labriola's "Difference"

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# Critical Marxism and the Theory of History: Antonio Labriola's "Difference"

At the turn of the 20th century, Antonio Labriola developed a critical conception of Marxism that still merits consideration today. First and foremost, he *rejected* the teleological point of view – advanced by many communist scholars in the second half of the 19th century and by quite a few in the 20th – according to which it is possible to envisage or “foresee” future society. Instead of a grand narrative or a total vision capable of telling us what the future will or should be like, Labriola conceives of Marx’s historical dialectic as a “philosophy of *praxis*”. This statement alludes to a *philosophical criterion* that can be used to draw the different aspects of concrete realities into a unified vision, based on the *practical nexus* that lies at the heart of the social dynamic. For Labriola, the discovery of the practical nexus does not mean reducing political ideas and institutions to reflections of economic data, but instead helps to conceptualise culture, politics, and the facts of individual consciousness themselves in a tensile relationship with the struggle for basic needs. Therefore, as we shall argue at the end, the issue of knowledge cannot be separated from that of action.

Friedrich Engels, Eduard Bernstein, Georges Sorel, Karl Kautsky, and Vladimir Il’ič Lenin – just to mention the most important names – considered Labriola’s writings decisive for theoretical Marxism. Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile, and Antonio Gramsci either adopted or challenged his approach to the philosophical problem and drew from it insights for their reflections. Lastly, the impact of his writings on the development of the theory and philosophy of history was addressed and discussed by Ernst Bernheim, Charles Andler, Emile Durkheim, and Charles Seignobos. The revival of Labriolian studies in the last decades of the 20th century was fuelled by the discovery of a previously unknown substantial part of the epistolary exchange between Labriola and prominent personalities of his time. This helped to promote the Edizione Nazionale delle Opere (National edition of the works), launched by the publisher Bibliopolis in Naples with *Carteggio*, edited by Stefano Miccolis (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2000–2005), and up to now the publication of eight of the thirteen volumes planned.<sup>1</sup> The work carried out on the texts and the presentation of many unpublished documents subsequently stimulated substantial historiographic activity. Labriola’s contributions in the specific areas of the history of philosophy, economics, historiography, and pedagogy have been painstakingly brought to light. This has also resulted in a diachronic examination of

his intellectual development, which carefully accounts for any continuities and discontinuities. On a strictly political level, attention was paid to the transition from liberalism to socialism; on a philosophical level, the transition from youthful Hegelianism to Herbartianism and finally to Marxism was examined. Finally, the relationship with the fundamental tenets of Italian philosophy and the European debate on historical materialism has been clarified.<sup>2</sup>

The essential elements of Antonio Labriola's theory of history can be understood in the light of recent research work. Although he asserted the philosophical autonomy of Marx's thought, his version of Marxism remained in line with the critique of speculative philosophies developed in the course of his earlier studies. For this reason, his version cannot be reconciled with the mainstream narratives, and contains a critical evolution of the doctrine towards a unitary but non-totalising conception of history. From this stem not only individual objections (often overlooked by critics) to Marx and Engels, but most of all the *differences* between Labriola's doctrine and the contemporary and later versions of Marxism alluded to in the title of this post.<sup>3</sup>

In his third letter in *Socialism and Philosophy*, Labriola wrote that Marx and Engels "never treated history as though she were a mare which they could straddle and trot around."<sup>4</sup> This polemic observation was directed against the distorted use of Marx's thought for political purposes by European socialist parties. However, it is of interest here because it serves to characterise Labriola's approach. Marx is not considered a *revolutionary* of the International in the same way as Michail Bakunin, nor is he a *moralist* who wants to restore the ill-gotten gains to the proletariat (Achille Loria), or a *utopian* who expounds the iron law of the wage earner (Ferdinand Lassalle). What counts is his philosophy, his scientific reading of history, his very concept of scientificity.

## Critique of speculative and positivistic philosophies of history

According to Labriola, Marxism puts an end to all ideology because it prevents any relapse into rationalism or belief in an ideal norm to which all things respond. There is, however, a scholasticism of the doctrine, where the problems inherited from rationalist conceptions lurk and resurface. From the scholastic versions of Marxism, Labriola draws both voluntarist visions of socialism and fatalist ones.<sup>5</sup>

Enlightenment rationalism postulates a society free of contradictions where the eternal ideas of liberty, justice, and brotherhood prevail, and it seeks to apply this mental image to reality by subverting the existing order. Theories that emphasise the voluntarist-Promethean element (Jacobinism) based on a revolutionary political action that cuts bridges with the present and builds a world in the future that exists on an ideal level, can be traced back to this matrix. It also provided the basis for the palingenetic and utopian dreams of major figures such as Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier, who wanted to fix the world by changing its legal relations without changing its economic structure.<sup>6</sup>

Even Hegel's speculative rationalism does not escape Labriola's criticism. While abandoning the plane of the timelessness of the eternal principles, it postulates an ideal norm of progression, a law of development *within* history that must be exposed and clarified. An immanentist providentialism thus emerges, where the real dynamic can be reconstructed through concepts because it has already been revealed using a logical principle. According to Labriola, in the legalistic transition between concepts lies the exemplification of a constructivist procedure, of a design predetermined by trajectories and milestones that ultimately arrives at a certain destination.<sup>7</sup> The European representatives of the orthodox Marxism of the Second International were forewarned: Karl Kautsky, Georgij V. Plechanov, and Paul Lafargue. But even more interesting is the fact that Labriola identified this theoretical positioning as the matrix of all forms of historical fatalism.

A similar criticism is levelled at evolutionary positivism, considered the parodistic or vulgar facet of the idealistic conception, because it anchors the already marked course of events in sociological abstractions and empirically deducible laws. Enrico Ferri, Antonio De Bella, Filippo Turati, and many others in Europe could thus combine Marx's thought with that of Herbert Spencer or August Comte.<sup>8</sup> This led to the tactical narrow-mindedness of political action and the expectation of a guaranteed future.

## The philosophy of *praxis*

In Marx's works, Labriola sees a philosophical point of view that is either implicit or only occasionally spelled out. He therefore believes that some elaboration is needed in order to clarify it and offer a critical development. In a note from his lectures at the University of Rome in 1893, he writes that we are facing a "total conversion of the philosophical spirit."<sup>9</sup> This sets out the reason, later taken up by Antonio Gramsci, for the autonomy and independence of historical materialism

from other doctrines, since it is rooted in the process whereby the proletariat becomes aware of their task and imposes a discontinuity with the past (classical German philosophy had reached its dissolution with Ludwig Feuerbach).

In *Socialism and Philosophy*, the author calls the philosophy *inherent* in historical materialism the “philosophy of *praxis*”. Quite unlike a professional or professorial philosophy, it posits a critical principle appropriate to developments of the experimental disciplines, not because it incorporates the results of the sciences into a system of laws and uniformities (Comte, Spencer), but because it critically understands their processes and connections with social experience.<sup>10</sup> The concept of *praxis* is not about contrasting the symbolic activity of thought – which is carried out in ethics, politics, institutions, the sciences, and the arts – with the economic dynamic of needs and thus hypostasising a principle of determination that causes superstructures to derive from structure, but rather it is about considering human activity from the unitary perspective of social labour.<sup>11</sup> Social labour, together with its resulting manifestations (classes, etc.), is the subject and at the same time the object of history. The transcendent hypostases of God, of a separate nature, of spiritual forms as something that are eternally operative, of the state, of the church, are indeed the result of the activity of consociated men and the man-made terrain.<sup>12</sup>

This unitary vision resolves the theoretical problem of the thought–reality relationship – from which agnostic and critical conceptions derive – through its practical inversion. Taken abstractly, the two terms (“thought” and “reality”) are fetishes and, in truth, instances of the concretisation of social labour. The new philosophy does not so much aim to dismiss them, as to explain their concrete formation (in the dynamic of need) and thus subject their entification to critical analysis.

In addition to the *formal* principle of social labour, the philosophy of *praxis* involves the “reversal of the dialectic”: by positing movement in the *praxis* rather than in the concept, the contradiction can only be understood through concrete and well-defined configurations of labour.<sup>13</sup> Overcoming social contradictions also requires both intelligence and action. The result of the development is therefore *potentially* inherent to individual historical structures rather than *necessarily* so, as Giovanni Gentile argued in *La filosofia di Marx* (1899). Hence, the “philosophical principle”, which concerns the totality of the process, does not translate into a speculative view of human affairs, into a stadial and teleological narrative, but is realised

through determined *historical judgements* that have a relationship with *social action*.<sup>14</sup>

## The genetic-morphological method

The philosophy of *praxis* requires methodical observation, an understanding pursued using a precise technique. Labriola calls it a genetic-morphological method. The method of observation is *genetic* because the very form of thought, the act of synthesis, is inseparable from the content, it is conceived together with it and cannot evolve beyond it into a law of development. As a condition of thinkability or a function of a particular content (concept-type), the *Begriff*, on the other hand, cannot be a condition of thinkability of an object in general either. The concept of *homo economicus* or ophelimity is, for example, without any substance for Labriola because it is focused on economic activity in a very general sense, whereas the concept-type of "labour-value" does have substance because it is a generalisation of a particular set of historical relations occurring in a capitalist society.<sup>15</sup> The method is morphological because it permits the identification, in a particular historical configuration, of its distinct aspects and places them in relation to each other (it considers, for example, scientific development and institutions relating to labour capacity and social needs). By placing the forms in relation to each other, moreover, this method also makes it possible to perceive their fracture points and tensions, determining in each case the conditions of instability and the potential for development. The theoretical vision is always relative to a particular set of unstable correlations (there is a theory of feudal society, one of capitalist society, and so on), in which the reasons for change or transition from one epoch to another are embedded. "Historical law" is therefore constituted as a genetic series or a progressive interconnection of particular configurations: *it is created*, not given! The critique of metaphysics does not, however, leave room for a theory of the merely empirical understanding of historical reality, for a vulgar historicism that then produces generalisations of facts as is the case in factor theory, because it links back to a philosophical criterion of connection.<sup>16</sup>

## Morphological prediction

According to this approach, foretelling the future is not fiction, nor a prophecy or a "chronological fact", but is instead dependent on insight into and theory of the present. How the present is structured, however, does not permit the inference of a

necessary development, but instead of various trends. On the one hand, these must be genetically ascertained because deviations, delays, unforeseen complexities can occur, and indeed do occur; on the other hand, understanding this complexity depends on the development of a relevant theory that also indicates the political direction to be taken.<sup>17</sup>

Labriola's critique of Marxism still today invites us to think of history as the domain of human action and understanding, without reference to transcendent ideas of a religious (providence), mythical (fortune, the logic of things), or rationalistic (the society of equals) nature. Nor does the author propose a gnoseology or an epistemology of historiography that would illustrate how historians' narratives should be written or indicate the logical structure of historiographical explanations. In his eyes, philosophy thus conceived is an abstraction, a camouflaged survival of the religious mentality, because it isolates knowledge by anchoring it in logical or rhetorical structures, whereas an immanentist philosophy should lead the forms of knowledge back to the practical dimension or even to the historicity of existence itself. This not only ties the forms of knowledge to the degree of overall social development, but also shifts the focus of philosophical reflection from knowledge to the relationship between knowledge and action. For Labriola, true knowledge is not that which reflects the past as it really happened, one whose purpose can be stated once and for all in a logical or rhetorical form, but that which fosters an active and transformative relationship with the present, a risk, a leap towards the future.

*Translated by Vanessa Di Stefano*

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**Tags:** Labriola / Marxism / theory of history

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bibliopolis.it/a-labriola-edizione-nazionale/>.

<sup>2</sup> Davide Bondi, "Come dire di Lui? Antonio Labriola a cent'anni dalla morte," *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 62, no. 2 (2007), 359–376.

<sup>3</sup> We will quote below mainly from his three essays on historical materialism, which Labriola conceived of as a unified project: I – "In Memory of the Communist Manifesto" appeared in three editions while the author was still alive, the first two published in 1895 and the third in 1902; II – "Historical Materialism" appeared in two editions while the author was still alive, the first published in 1896 and the second in 1902; III – *Socialism and Philosophy*, a collection of letters on critical Marxism written to Georges Sorel, which appeared in two editions, the first published in 1898, the second in 1902. Direct quotations from the first and second essays on historical materialism will be taken from the translation done by Charles H. Kerr published in 1908, while indirect quotations will be taken from the critical Italian editions published in 2021. Direct quotations from the collection of letters will come from a translation done by Ernest Untermann in 1907, while indirect quotations will be taken from the last Italian edition approved by the author, i.e. the one dated 1902, as the critical (Italian) edition of this is still a work in progress.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and Philosophy*, trans. by Ernest Untermann. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1907, available at <<https://rowlandpasaribu.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/antonio-labriola-socialism-and-philosophy.pdf>> (last accessed 02.06.2022).

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Del materialismo storico. Dilucidazione preliminare*, ed. Davide Bondi and Luigi Punzo, vol. IX of "Edizione Nazionale delle Opere". Naples: Bibliopolis, 2021, 33–41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–41 and 97–103.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia. Lettere a G. Sorel*. Rome: Loescher, 1898–1902, 83–97.



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<sup>9</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Marx*, ed. Davide Bondì and Alessandro Savorelli. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2020, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia*, 56–70.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–55.

<sup>12</sup> Labriola, *Del materialismo storico*, 17–32.

<sup>13</sup> Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia*, 71–82.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–152. See also Davide Bondì, *La teoria della storia. Pasquale Villari e Antonio Labriola*. Milan: Unicopli, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia*, 71–82 and 155–168.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–25, 56–82 and 155–168.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Labriola, *In memoria del Manifesto dei Comunisti*, ed. Alberto Burgio, vol. IX of “Edizione Nazionale delle Opere”. Naples: Bibliopolis, 2021.