



**IKERLANAK**

**ARE LABOR AND FREEDOM  
COMPATIBLE? POLITICAL ECONOMY,  
HEGEL'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY  
AND THE YOUNG MARX**

by

**Kepa M. Ormazabal**

2017

Working Paper Series: IL. 103/17

**Departamento de Fundamentos del Análisis Económico I  
Ekonomi Analisiaren Oinarriak I Saila**



**University of the Basque Country**

***ARE LABOR AND FREEDOM COMPATIBLE? POLITICAL ECONOMY,  
HEGEL'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE YOUNG MARX***

ABSTRACT

The question discussed in this paper is whether a political society not emancipated from labor can be a free society. In a less abstract way, the question can be posed as follows; can a society with a laboring class and a labor market be free? The question arises because labor and freedom seem to be in conflict, so a society with a working class and a labor market can neither be free nor democratic. The opposition between labor and freedom has always been a central theme in Practical Philosophy, and its recurrent idea that labor involves an irretrievable loss of self-consciousness and, thereby, of freedom has survived right up to this day. The Marxian treatment of alienation is just an outstanding example of this old idea, but not a real novelty. In this paper I intend to explore an alternative path to the still dominant idea of Practical Philosophy by examining the ontological foundations of the alternative response developed by Hegel in his Philosophy of the Spirit.

I gratefully acknowledge the critical comments that I got on an earlier draft of this paper from Asger Sorensen. I also gratefully acknowledge the financial aid of Partheartuz Research Project, IT 300-10, Department of Political Science, University of the Basque Country.

Key words: liberal democracy; political economy; freedom; labor.

Kepa M. Ormazabal  
Department of Economic Theory I  
University of the Basque Country  
Lehendakari Agirre etorbidea 83  
48015 Bilbao, Spain  
Phone: 34-94-6013772  
Fax: 34-94-6013891  
e-mail: [kepa.ormazabal@ehu.eus](mailto:kepa.ormazabal@ehu.eus)

## *Introduction*

The problem addressed in this paper is the relationship between labor and freedom. I understand that an essential element of democracy is freedom, or, to put it a different way, that the foundation of democracy is freedom, so that democracy is the only political regime in which freedom is effectively realized: the only free society is the democratic society. This is why the question about the relationship between labor and democracy is approached in this paper as a question about the relationship between labor and freedom: can a society where there is labor be authentically democratic?

The mention of the words “labor” and “freedom” brings many authors to mind, but most surely Marx will be among them. In Marx, the laborer is not free because labor consists in an externalization of the self-conscience of the laborer. Accordingly, the reason why labor is not free in a capitalist society is not that the capitalist class manage to, legally or illegally, to steal surplus value from the laboring class. Marx stresses that this is not the case; that the capitalist class does not cheat on the laboring class and does not pay the “labor-power” (“*Arbeitskraft*”) sold by it at less than its value<sup>1</sup>. This is the first point that I would like to make clear in the formulation of the problem addressed in this paper. But there is a second point which I regard as more important than the previous one, namely, that the “alienating” character of labor is not a peculiar property of salaried labor, but an immanent character of labor as such<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, it is plain

---

<sup>1</sup> “Every condition of the problem is satisfied, while the laws that regulate the exchange of commodities, have been in no way violated. Equivalent has been exchanged for equivalent. *For the capitalist as buyer paid for each commodity, for the cotton, the spindle and the labour-power, its full value* (KO: my emphasis). He then did what is done by every purchaser of commodities; he consumed their use-value. The consumption of the labour-power, which was also the process of producing commodities, resulted in 20 lbs. of yarn, having a value of 30 shillings. The capitalist, formerly a buyer, now returns to market as a seller, of commodities. He sells his yarn at eighteenpence a pound, which is its exact value. Yet for all that he withdraws 3 shillings more from circulation than he originally threw into it.” (Marx, 1867 [1971], 145)

<sup>2</sup> “Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general. This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces –labor’s product– confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* (“*Vergegenständlichung*”) of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.” (Marx 1844 [1970], 107-8)

that a society with a laboring class cannot be properly democratic (for Marx, the so-called “bourgeois” or “liberal” democracies are not really such), but the problem is more radical, because, if labor is an essentially alienating activity, then it follows that no society in which labor is present can be free –let alone democratic. Of course, the labor market is not any space of freedom, but the place where the alienation involved in labor is materialized in practical terms. A “free labor market” is but a space where the alienating character of labor is realized in an unfettered way.

As I am going to argue in the course of this paper, this idea that labor is an essentially alienating activity was not originated by Marx, but is an old idea that can be seen already playing a central role in Ancient Practical Philosophy. In this paper, I would like to delve into the foundations of the Hegelian response to this long tradition, because Hegel proposes an original alternative which is definitely worth exploring. Greatly impressed by English Political Economy, Hegel struggled since his youth with the problem about the relationship between labor and freedom, and as a result of this struggle he put forward a new mode of conceiving the foundations of Practical Philosophy (mostly, in his 1807 “*Phenomenology of the Spirit*”) in which the alienation involved in labor is followed by a second moment of self-recognition of the spirit that transforms labor into an activity conducive to freedom. It is the foundations of this second moment of self-recognition that I would like to critically analyze in this paper.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first one consists in a brief statement of the essentials of democracy as seen from the Hegelian standpoint of Marx. I have chosen to appeal to Marx rather than Hegel in order to define this first reference point for this paper simply because of reasons of economy: Marx provides a condensed characterization of the essence of democracy in his critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right which is entirely Hegelian and, very importantly, brief. The second section is devoted to the analysis of the ontological foundation of the old idea that labor is opposed to freedom because it involves a loss of self-consciousness for the laborer. The third and final attempts to critically examine the foundations of the Hegelian alternative conception of Practical Philosophy in relation to the conceptual framework inherited from Ancient Thought.

---

## *1. The Concept of Democracy*

In order to define the terms of the problem, we have to start by democracy, as labor is the focus of this paper. I take as reference point the conception of democracy that Marx develops in his “*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*”. As Marx rightly points out, democracy is not just another “political constitution” among the many possible ones (both in theory and in practice), but the political constitution as such. The reason is that democracy represents the suppression of the distinction governed-governing. Democracy represents the objective realization of the autonomy of the will, of self-determination, of the will not constrained by something alien to the will, but of the will which has become self-conscious and recognizes in the political constitution not an external limit to it, but the objective manifestation of its self-consciousness and of its freedom.

It is plain that Marx is understanding the word “demos” in a sense which is quite different from its original Greek meaning. In Ancient Greece, a “demos” was a community in which the fundamental bond was consanguinity. In the sense in which Marx uses the term “democracy”, the “demos” is the “people”, but the bond that defines the community in virtue of which people are a people (or the *demos a demos*), is not consanguinity or anything else of a *material* character, but a “spiritual” determination. This “spiritual” determination is essential, in the sense that it is the essence of man; to put it otherwise: the people or the “demos” is a community of men as men, not of men as Greeks or any other particular determination, but as men. Hence the idea of Marx that democracy is the only possible “political constitution” for a *human society*; all the other “forms of constitution” are not properly human, but sub-human, in that they fail to realize freedom and self-consciousness.

By contrast to all the other “constitutions” (Marx pays special attention to the one that, at first sight, might be -wrongly- taken to be the negation of democracy, that is, monarchy) democracy is the realization of the free will, and the objective manifestation of this is the abolition of the duality governed-governing:

“In a certain respect democracy is to all other forms of the state what Christianity is to all other religions. Christianity is the religion *kat exohin*, the essence of religion, deified man under the form of a particular religion. In the same way democracy is the essence of every political constitution, socialised man under the form of a particular constitution of the state. It stands related to other

constitutions as the genus to its species; only here the genus itself appears as an existent, and therefore opposed as a particular species to those existents which do not conform to the essence. Democracy relates to all other forms of the state as their Old Testament. Man does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good of man. Democracy is *human existence*, while in the other political forms man has only *legal existence*. That is the fundamental difference of democracy.” (Marx, 1843 [1977], 30)

This is why the notions of democracy and freedom must go together. Now that we have made a minimum characterization of the essence of democracy, we can proceed to look into the central notion of this paper, which is labor.

## ***2. The Problem: Labor and Alienation***

Labor is one of the two human productive activities, the other one being art. Both the laborer and the artists are engaged in productive activities, that is, in activities that result in an object external to the conscience of the actor. But whereas the artist is exercising a “liberal art”, the laborer, on the contrary, is exercising a “servile art”. The activity of the artist makes him free, but the activity of the laborer makes destroys his freedom (hence the ecclesiastical prohibition of exercising the servile arts on Sundays and festive days: this prohibition suggests that the Church viewed labor as a necessary evil which was to be contained within boundaries). Why?

Riedel approaches this question from a very insightful standpoint in his “*Between Tradition and Revolution. The Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy*”. The basis of his presentation is provided by the Aristotelian distinction between “poiesis” and “praxis”. Riedel understands that, by “poiesis”, Aristotle understands the activities that result in an object, in an “ergon” or “opus” alien to the conscience of the actor. By contrast, “praxis” would be the activity that remains in the actor, and, thereby, somehow perfects the actor, which basically means that it makes him free. Religion, Hegel’s “ethical life” and Politics would be the spheres of human activity where human activity is “praxis”: the end of those activities is not to put some object outside the conscience of the actor, but the “improvement” of the actor not in any particular human dimension, but as human being<sup>3</sup>. We can add to this list art, even

---

<sup>3</sup> “With this approach Hegel inverts the basis of classical practical philosophy. He cancels the hidden aporia in its account of the relationship between labor and action. This aporia might be described as follows: if the agent’s activity (*energeia*) exists as his own proper activity (as in the case of ethical-

though art is an activity that results in an “*ergon*” that confronts the conscience of the actor in an objective way. The difference between art and labor is that the works of art are not made for the sake of satisfying needs; thus, the work of art is not a means to an ulterior end, like the works of labor. Let us then leave art aside and let us focus ourselves on labor. In order to that, let us begin by revisiting the Aristotelian distinction *poiesis-praxis*.

This distinction can be found in several places along the “*corpus Aristotelicum*”; here I quote one of the clearest instances I have found in it:

“Since of the actions which have a limit (“*peras*”) none is an end but all are relative to the end, e.g. the removing of fat, or fat-removal, and the bodily parts themselves when one is making them thin are in movement in this way (i.e. without being already that at which the movement aims), this is not an action (“*praxis*”) or at least not a complete one (for it is not an end); but that movement in which the end (“*telos*”) is present is an action. E.g. *at the same time we are seeing and have seen, are understanding and have understood, are thinking and have thought* (while it is not true that at the same time we are learning and have learnt, or are being cured and have been cured). At the same time (“*hamá*”) we are living well and have lived well, and are happy and have been happy. If not, the process would have had sometime to cease, as the process of making thin ceases: but, as things are, it does not cease; we are living and have lived. Of these processes, then, we must call the one set movements (“*kinesis*”), and the other actualities (“*energeia*”). For every movement is incomplete (“*pasa gar kinesis atelés*”) -making thin, learning, walking, building; these are movements, and incomplete at that. For it is not true that at the same time a thing is walking and has walked, or is building and has built, or is coming to be and has come to be, or is being moved and has been moved, but what is being moved is different (“*heteron*”) from what has been moved, and what is moving from what has moved. But it is the same thing that at the same time has seen and is seeing (“*heoraké de kai horá hamá to autó*”), or is thinking and has thought. The latter sort of process, then, I call an actuality (“*energeia*”), and the former a movement (“*kinesis*”).” (Aristotle, “*Metaphysics*”, book IX, chapter 6, 1048b, 18-34)<sup>4</sup>

---

political *praxis*) it can never objectify itself –if on the other hand the activity is objectified, it is not in the agent but his work, where it is simultaneously extinguished. On the classical model of *poiesis* there is no reflexive connection between the work and the worker, and certainly not that coupling movement between worker and work, between subject and object, expressed by Hegel’s concept of development.” (Riedel, 1969 [1984], 20)

<sup>4</sup> “ἐπεὶ δὲ τῶν πράξεων ὧν ἔστι πέρας οὐδεμία τέλος ἀλλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸ τέλος, οἷον τὸ ἰσχυαίνειν ἢ ἰσχυασία [20] αὐτό, αὐτὰ δὲ ὅταν ἰσχυαίνῃ οὕτως ἔστιν ἐν κινήσει, μὴ ὑπάρχοντα ὧν ἕνεκα ἡ κίνησις, οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα πράξις ἢ οὐ τελεία γε (οὐ γὰρ τέλος) : ἀλλ’ ἐκείνη ἢ ἐνυπάρχει τὸ τέλος καὶ ἡ πράξις, οἷον ὄρᾳ ἅμα καὶ ἑώρακε, καὶ φρονεῖ καὶ πεφρόνηκε, καὶ νοεῖ καὶ νενόηκεν, ἀλλ’ οὐ μαθάνει καὶ μεμάθηκεν [25] οὐδ’ ὑγιάζεται καὶ ὑγίασται: εὖ ζῆ καὶ εὖ ἔζηκεν ἅμα, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖ καὶ εὐδαιμόνηκεν. εἰ δὲ μή, ἔδει ἄν ποτε παύεσθαι ὥσπερ ὅταν ἰσχυαίνῃ, νῦν δ’ οὐ, ἀλλὰ ζῆ καὶ ἔζηκεν. τούτων δὴ δεῖ τὰς μὲν κινήσεις λέγειν, τὰς δ’ ἐνεργείας. πᾶσα γὰρ κίνησις ἀτελής, ἰσχυασία μάθησις βᾶδισις οἰκοδόμησις:

“Kinesis” and “poiesis” belong to the same realm of imperfect actions or movements: “poiesis” is the “kinesis” that results in an object. The examples listed by Aristotle are sufficiently explicit: walking or building. In both cases, we have movements that do not possess their end *in present*. We can see in this passage that the Aristotelian poiesis-praxis distinction is not primarily about whether or not the action remains in the actor, but about whether or not the movement possesses its end in present. The presence of the end is the feature that distinguishes the “praxis” or “energeia” from poiesis; As Aristotle said, “praxis” is “that movement in which the end (“telos”) is present”. In contrast to “kinesis” or “poiesis”, praxis is therefore a perfect action. Poiesis would be an imperfect action, and it is imperfect in so far as it involves potency (“dynamis”), which implies lack of actuality. In contrast to, say, building, we think, have thought and go on thinking. In thinking, unlike in building, the end does not stop the action, it is not a limit for it, but all the contrary: that which is thought is not an obstacle to the development of thought, but all the contrary, namely, it is what makes possible the continuation of thought, as it opens more possibilities of thinking and opens the door for thought to go on thinking *more*, so to speak.

The reason is that thinking possesses *in present* that which is thought; building never possesses that which is built: all the contrary, to the extent that the house is *already* built, there is no building, and to the extent that there is building, there is *not yet* a house: as Aristotle says, in building and the built are “heteron”, whereas thinking and the thought are “hamá to autó”: the same simultaneously. Let me stress this “not yet” characteristic of the “poiesis” which is what distinguishes it from the “already” or “in present”, of the praxis. As building and the built are different, the action of building is imperfect because it cannot possess its end in present. By contrast, thinking or being happy are perfect actions, because the action and its object are strictly simultaneous: at no time we are thinking but have not yet thought. Unlike in building, there is no potentiality (“dynamis”) in thinking: it is a *perfect* action. Thinking is not an action that transforms something exterior to it. The transformation of something presupposes that

---

[30] αὗται δὴ κινήσεις, καὶ ἀτελεῖς γε. οὐ γὰρ ἅμα βαδίζει καὶ βεβάδικεν, οὐδ' οἰκοδομεῖ καὶ ὠκοδόμηκεν, οὐδὲ γίνεται καὶ γέγονεν ἢ κινεῖται καὶ κινήται, ἀλλ' ἕτερον, καὶ κινεῖ καὶ κινήκεν: ἑώρακε δὲ καὶ ὄρᾳ ἅμα τὸ αὐτό, καὶ νοεῖ καὶ νενόηκεν. τὴν μὲν οὖν τοιαύτην ἐνέργειαν [35] λέγω, ἐκείνην δὲ κίνησιν. τὸ μὲν οὖν ἐνέργεια τί τέ ἐστι καὶ ποῖον, ἐκ τούτων καὶ τῶν τοιούτων δῆλον ἡμῖν ἔστω



that something has a potency, and the action of actualizing that potency must be imperfect, because it spends itself in the actualization of the potency. This is what happens in building. In thinking, by contrast, thought does not actualize any potency; this is why thinking is perfect and does not have to “go out” in search of anything exterior to it. Unlike the house and the building, thoughts do not exist apart of thinking: they only exist in thinking (thinking possesses that which is thought *in present*, whereas building never possesses that which is built: they are always separated, different).

Therefore, the effect of the “praxis” falls primarily not upon the subject, but upon some faculty of the subject: thought, sight, etc. The “praxeî” that are characteristic of man, that is to say, the ones that make man free and, thus, truly human, are the intellectual “praxeî”; hence the famous Aristotelian thesis that the way of life proper of the human being is contemplative life (“*bios theoretikós*”), which at the same time is the truly free life. The reason why the “poiesis”, being imperfect, stands in the way of the humanization of man (of the realization of freedom) is not exactly that the action does not remain in the subject; as we have just seen in Aristotle’s text, the “praxis” is not perfect because the action remains in the subject, but because it is not a tendency, because it is already complete; actually, the “praxis” does not *remain* in the subject, but it *improves* the subject, which is more. Accordingly, the reason why the “poiesis” poses an obstacle to freedom is that it involves a waste of vital time for the actor; in Hegelian-Marxian terms, it involves an irrecoverable loss of self-consciousness.

Interestingly enough, in order to show the implications of the Aristotelian distinction for Practical Philosophy, Riedel does not quote Aristotle, but Aquinas. In “*Summa Theologica*”, I-II, quaestio 57, articulum 5, Aquinas asks whether prudence “*prudencia*” is necessary for living well (“*ad bene vivendum*”). He answers in the affirmative and argues as follows:

“The good of an art is to be found, not in the craftsman (“*non in ipso artifice*”), but in the product of the art (“*in ipso artificiato*”), since art is right reason about things to be made (“*ratio recta factibilium*”): for since the making of a thing passes into external matter, it is a perfection not of the maker, but of the thing made (“*factio enim, in exteriorem materiam transiens, non est perfectio facientis, sed facti*”), even as movement is the act of the thing moved: and art is concerned with the making of things. On the other hand, the good of prudence is in the active principle (“*in ipso agente*”), whose activity is its perfection: for prudence is right reason about things to be done (“*recta ratio agibilium*”), as stated above. Consequently art does not require of the craftsman that his act be a good act, but that his

work be good. Rather would it be necessary for the thing made to act well (e.g. that a knife should carve well, or that a saw should cut well), if it were proper to such things to act, rather than to be acted on, because they have not dominion over their actions. Wherefore the craftsman needs art, not that he may live well, but that he may produce a good work of art, and have it in good keeping: whereas prudence is necessary to man, that he may lead a good life, and not merely that he may be a good man.” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, quaestio 57, articulum 5)<sup>5</sup>

As production does not involve any perfection for the producer, but only for the produced (“factio non est perfectio facientis, sed facti”), it follows that “factio”, i.e., labor, which is an action that “goes out to external matter” (“transiens in exteriorem materiam”), has no effect on the self of the laborer; moreover: it involves a loss for the laborer, who is wasting his vital time in an action which stands in the way of contemplative life. Labor, thus, involves an “alienation”, a waste, a loss of the self-consciousness of the laborer *qua* human being in the object which is the product of labor.

In practice, the Aristotelian-Thomistic idea that man loses his freedom and self-consciousness in labor can be seen in the sharp separation between the *slave* and the *citizen* in the Greek *Polis*. The member of the democratic political community is the citizen. The citizen is the *free* man, but the free man is free in so far as he is free from labor; in so far as man is free from labor, he can devote his lifetime to the cultivation of his spirit –to “bios theoretikós”. The defining feature of the man who is not a citizen and, therefore, who is not a member of the political community, that is to say, of the *slave*, is labor. Certainly, to be free, the citizen has to be educated and has to exert the operations proper of the human spirit, but, at the political level, the citizen is free in so far as he is *free from labor*, whereas the slave is not free and is excluded from the political community because he is bounded to labor, and labor, by its very nature, is alienating; thus, labor is the reference point in relation to which Aristotle is conceiving

---

<sup>5</sup> “Bonum artis consideratur non in ipso artifice, sed magis in ipso artificiato, cum ars sit ratio recta factibilium, factio enim, in exteriorem materiam transiens, non est perfectio facientis, sed facti, sicut motus est actus mobilis; ars autem circa factibilia est. Sed prudentiae bonum attenditur in ipso agente, cuius perfectio est ipsum agere, est enim prudentia recta ratio agibilium, ut dictum est. Et ideo ad artem non requiritur quod artifex bene operetur, sed quod bonum opus faciat. Requiretetur autem magis quod ipsum artificiatum bene operaretur, sicut quod cultellus bene incideret, vel serra bene secaret; si proprie horum esset agere, et non magis agi, quia non habent dominium sui actus. Et ideo ars non est necessaria ad bene vivendum ipsi artificis; sed solum ad faciendum artificiatum bonum, et ad conservandum ipsum. Prudentia autem est necessaria homini ad bene vivendum, non solum ad hoc quod fiat bonus.”

political freedom. Although just in passing, it is interesting to note that the concept of freedom that underlies this reasoning is a *negative* one, as freedom is implicitly thought of as absence of a bond.

The free man, who is the free citizen, is the man emancipated from labor; the slave, on the contrary, because of his subjection to labor, is infra-human, because having not emancipated himself from labor, cannot develop his self-conscience.

The view that labor and contemplation (theory; from “theorein”: “vision”) are mutually exclusive leads to an uncomfortable dichotomy in theoretical as well as in practical terms. Labor becomes bodily activity and contemplation the negation of the bodily side of man. We could say that labor is body without spirit and contemplation spirit without body. Man is condemned to be either a beast or an angel, but the fact is that he is neither. The proper activity of the free man is contemplation; production is the negation of contemplation, so the laboring man is a frustrated man.

In Aquinas, labor is all about its product, and the product of labor is totally separated from the laborer. Production is indifferent to the producer as person, totally external. To the extent that labor is separated or external to the laborer as person, labor is harmful for him, because it implies a waste of vital time. Labor time is wasted lifetime, because labor is an activity from which the laborer gets no freedom.

One may reply to Aquinas that the product of labor is not indifferent to the laborer. After all, man labors in order to live, that is, in order to be able to get things that are necessary for his life. Man lives thanks to the products of his labor, because they are the means to the satisfaction of the needs of life; therefore the freedom of the laborer is enhanced by the product of his labor. Aquinas would reply that, obviously, the fact of the existence of needs imposes the need to labor in man, but that this need is an *imposition*. With labor, man is just responding to an imposition of nature and, to this extent, laboring is not a free, but an imposed activity; a manifestation of the imposition of nature over man. Labor precludes freedom; production precludes contemplation.

The situation is worse where the division of labor is developed, because the laborer cannot consume the product of his labor. The good that satisfies the need and the producer of it are totally separated; the “economy” is indeed the one who has

produced the good, but “the economy” is purely objective and has no subjective basis – is totally disconnected from subjectivity and freedom in so far as the products of labor are disconnected from the subjectivity and the freedom of the laborer. Therefore, the “economy” is an abstract subject that, properly speaking, is but an empty subject, or, to put it in Marxian terminology, an alienated form of existence of human self-consciousness.

There is another interesting opposition in Ancient Political Philosophy not between labor and *contemplation*, but between labor and *property*. Property seems to be a necessary pre-condition of contemplation, because without property the contemplating man cannot satisfy his needs. But if the contemplating man has property without having produced, it is because others, which are not contemplating, have produced, so, again, we arrive at the conclusion that the exercise of contemplative activities by some demands the de-humanization of others, which means that there is no such a thing as “man”, because a man who is not free is not a man.

Riedel takes a step forward and claims that the view that labor involves the alienation of the humanity of the laborer can also be found at the very basis of “modern” Political Philosophy. Moreover: according to Riedel, the defining feature of what he calls “Classical” Political Philosophy is the conflict between labor and freedom; labor involves the negation of freedom. This idea appears not only in the Political Philosophy of the pre-capitalist period, as we have just seen, but also in the Political Philosophy of the capitalist period. Riedel mentions Hobbes, Kant and Rousseau<sup>6</sup>. There is a common trait in all these authors and in the traditions they represent, notwithstanding the profound differences existing among them, which is the lack of integration of labor in Political Philosophy –more in general, in *Practical* Philosophy. “Lack of integration” means here that labor is explicitly or implicitly viewed as a negation of freedom.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Hegel lays out the basis for a theory of work and thereby gives proper stress to that portion of philosophy called poietics, whose discussion had not advanced a single step since Aristotle and which remained as good as absent in modern natural law theory (Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant). The new poietics is the result of a connection between national economy and transcendental idealism which arose in the young Hegel’s thinking and was completed in the Jena lectures.” (Riedel, 1969 [1984], 17)

### ***3. The Hegelian Alternative to “Classical” Practical Philosophy***

How is it possible for the action that maintains human life to be a source of alienation of human life? After all, is not labor an action performed by human beings? Animals do not labor, for they are not conscious beings; only man labors –“*homo faber*”. How is it possible then for labor not to be an activity of the human spirit? Labor should be an activity of the spirit that, being such, necessarily leads to the development of the spirit, and not to the contrary result. To these considerations, which lie in the realm of Political Philosophy, we can pose a further problem for Aquinas, of a Theological nature. We have seen that the view of Aquinas that “*factio non est perfectio facientis*” implies that the laborer is not free *qua* laborer and, thus, not properly human. However, without labor there is no human life –at least, as of nowadays. This means that human life condemns some humans to be non-humans. This looks like a contradiction, because human freedom is universal, in so far as it belongs to every man as human, that is, to man as man. It follows from the view of Aquinas that labor is a loss of freedom that *some humans (the laborers) have not been redeemed*. One can aspire to the *religious* life once one is redeemed from labor, but not before. The conflict between freedom and labor, therefore, clashes in a straight-forward way against the universal character of Salvation. However, it is essential that Christ has died for all the humankind; if the redemption of Christ is not universal, that is, of man *qua* man, it is not redemption, but favoritism.

As human nature is universal, it does not matter how many people the political community requires to carry out the work needed to get the goods that the community deems fit to get. Thus, the very existence of a class of laborers shows the internal and essential insufficiency of the political constitution, which, as far as it fails to be universal and fails to materialize freedom in a universal way, fails to be a truly political constitution.

These are the reasons that drive Hegel to look for an alternative way to think of the role of labor in Practical Philosophy. Labor, being an activity of a self-conscious being, must somehow lead to the development of that self-consciousness, of freedom. The problem is that it is indubitable that labor involves a certain alienation or externalization (“*Enttäusserung*”) of conscience; how can conscience grow despite of this loss? The answer of Hegel implies, as Riedel correctly sees, a veritable revolution

in Practical Philosophy. The answer of Hegel is that the externalization of conscience in the products of labor is not the end of the labor process. The position of an external object that is but an objective expression of the consciousness of the laborer cannot be the end of the story, as the “Classical” tradition mistakenly thought. The reason is that the object shows its character of object only in relation to a subject (the laborer), and the laborer perceives his condition of subject only with confronted with the objective manifestations of his consciousness<sup>7</sup>.

Without the objectification of labor, the conscience of the human being remains “*fuor sich*”, a conscience that has not yet recognized itself as conscience –and self-consciousness, which is the essence of the free will, is constituted only when conscience becomes an “*an sich*”, only when consciousness recognizes itself as such. Therefore, the “Classical” tradition has forgotten the most important stage in the process of formation of self-consciousness, which is the confrontation of the subject with the object that results from his labor. Externalization or alienation, therefore, are followed by a reverse movement of self-recognition, in which the subject can distinguish his essence, which is that of being a free conscience, from his objective mode of existence.

Riedel is therefore right to claim that the big novelty in Hegel’s Philosophy of Labor is his implicit conception of labor as a sort of “praxis”. If we look at Hegel’s thought from that standpoint, we get a comprehensive view of the evolution of Practical

---

<sup>7</sup> “Through work and labour, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself. In the moment which corresponds to desire in the case of the master’s consciousness, the aspect of the non-essential relation to the thing seemed to fall to the lot of the servant, since the thing there retained its independence. Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby unalloyed feeling of self. This satisfaction, however, just for that reason is itself only a state of evanescence, for it lacks objectivity or subsistence. Labour, on the other hand, is desire restrained and checked, evanescence delayed and postponed; in other words, labour shapes and fashions the thing. The negative relation to the object passes into the form of the object, into something that is permanent and remains; because it is just for the labourer that the object has independence. This negative mediating agency, this activity giving shape and form, is at the same time the individual existence, the pure self-existence of that consciousness, which now in the work it does is externalized and passes into the condition of permanence. The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct apprehension of that independent being as its self.” (Hegel, 1807 [2004], par. 195)

Riedel pointedly comments: “Put into a terse Latin phrase, this passage says: *factio perfectio facientis est.*” (Riedel, 1969 [1984], 22)

Philosophy. We can go back to Aquinas' quote in order to clarify the gist of Hegel's view of labor. What Hegel is doing with his view that the interesting part in the dialectics of the constitution of freedom is the moment that comes after externalization, that is, the moment of self-recognition, is to cancel the distinction between "agibilia" and "factibilia": "factibilia" are ethical too. Note, however, that the rejection of this distinction does not imply the rejection of the distinction praxis-poesis; if it did, Hegel would be deprived of a basis from which to put forward an alternative to the Classical tradition in Practical Philosophy. The point that Hegel makes already in the Jena Lectures of 1805-06 and, in a more explicit way, in the famous passage of the 1807 "*Phaenomenologie des Geistes*" in which he analyzes the dialectical relation between master and bondsman, is that labor cannot consist in a negation of freedom, that labor must be a way to freedom. Accordingly, labor has to be a kind of "*praxis*", in addition to its obvious character of "*poiesis*"; by this Hegel means that labor is, first of all, an activity of a subject, of a conscience that develops itself through labor.

Unless labor is viewed in this fashion, labor remains outside Politics and the result is the disconnection of labor from Politics. In other words: the Greek ideal of contemplation as well as the modern ideas of freedom and equality become empty abstractions devoid of theoretical content and of practical import. The conception of political freedom as emancipation from labor is a negative conception of freedom, and the political order based upon it is consequently *abstract*, or to put it better, *empty*. Without an integration of labor in the formation of liberty, there is no consistent conception of human liberty, and all the political projects that aim at the "big ideals" of Politics without integrating labor will end up in the negation of themselves; this is the necessary consequence of emptiness. According to Riedel, this is a fundamental critique of Hegel to "modern political Philosophy": Hegel complains that the freedom of "modern" Political Philosophy, that is, the freedom of Rousseau, of Kant, of the French Revolution and the like is not actually such, but an empty notion devoid of content<sup>8</sup>. It is just a negation of the medieval personal ties, but this does not constitute

---

<sup>8</sup> "Hegel discovered what neither he nor the natural law theoreticians had seen previously: that the concept of a subject of rights, as well as the individual freedom and equality contained in the 'individual' will's renunciation of itself in the 'general will', presupposed liberation from nature by labour. Hegel interpreted the general will of Rousseau and Kant as a bare abstraction because it ignored labor and as such lacked objective relatedness and enduring being. (...) Will and intelligence are related just as labor and action are. What, primarily and initially, are included under the general will are not

any affirmation and, consequently, the political projects based upon such negative conception cannot lead to the constitution of a truly democratic political society.

Thus, what Hegel is doing when rejecting the distinction between “agibilia” and “factibilia” and the “Classical” reduction of “agibilia”, that is, of “ethical life”, to the realm of Religion and Politics, is to view labor as a sort of *knowledge*; indeed, one can fairly say that the “Classical” conception of the laborer as subjectively alien to production implies the conception of the laborer as a *tool* of production and, subsequently, the conception of the laborer as a *thing*, not as a free conscience. The conception of labor as a commodity, as a *thing*, is a defining feature of Political Economy; a defining feature of which Economics remains unaware, but which so strongly impressed Hegel and Marx. This “reification” of man and his labor comes as no surprise to Hegel, who traces this patently insufficient comprehension of democracy and freedom to the exclusion of labor from the whole tradition of Practical Philosophy.

As long as labor remains unconnected to praxis, it remains unconnected to freedom, which means that Civil Society remains separated from the State. Political ideals remain separated from the actual workings of society, of the system of the division of labor; thus, Political Philosophy becomes a utopia that is constantly contradicted, in theory and in practice, by Political Economy. Hence the unending conflict between the lofty political ideas that inspire our modern “democracies” and the “economic laws” that stubbornly stand in the way of the realization of those ideals. As long as freedom and labor remain disconnected (or worse, opposed) the State and Civil Society remain alien and even opposite to each other, in such a way that the realities of Civil Society systematically contradict the political ideals of freedom and equality. This is why labor must be an activity of spirit that leads to the formation of self-consciousness; if it were not, if labor left nothing in the subject that labors; moreover, if labor involved an irretrievable loss for the laborer, then labor would be alienating under any economic regime and the human being would be an essentially frustrated being. But, if man is not a cruel joke and labors (and only man can labor -the rest of the

---

conceptual constructs like the unification of wills and contract, which are equally abstract socially and historically, but rather these moments which originate in the mediative process of man with nature: labour, work and property, which are presupposed by every relation involving will.” (Riedel, 1969 [1984], 24)



animals, as Marx explains in his 1844 manuscripts, do not labor however much they do the same physical actions as humans<sup>9</sup>) labor must somehow be “liberating” or “redeeming” for man, so to speak. To be so, the spirit has to recover itself or find itself anew in its objective expressions. The products of labor are, thus, objectifications of the human spirit. Labor is the first step towards freedom, towards the formation of self-consciousness. This is the origin of the so-called “labor theory of value”, the theory that claims that exchange value consists in the manifestation of the identity of commodities as particular moments of social objectified labor. The basic reason why this theory has performed so poorly in the History of Economics is that its most prominent proponent, Marx, failed to develop the novel and original way of conceiving labor that Hegel had inaugurated in his Philosophy of the Spirit.

As Hegel poses the problem, the products of labor are viewed in the same way as the objects of knowledge. Color is the objectification of the operation of seeing; thought is the objectification of the operation of thinking; the shoes are the objectification of the operation of laboring. What Hegel is doing to introduce labor in the sphere of “ethical life” is nothing less than put labor on the same footing as knowledge –concretely, as the operations of knowledge. If freedom and labor are to be compatible, then labor cannot be an alienating activity. Alienation must be an intermediate step in the process of formation of self-consciousness, that is, of the free will.

## REFERENCES

Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. In *S. Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Summa Theologica. Diligenter emendata De Rubeis, Billuart et aliorum notis selectis ornata*. 1932. Marietti: Taurini.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. In McKeon, Richard. 1941. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Random House: New York.

---

<sup>9</sup> The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labor reverses the relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential being*, a mere means to his *existence*.” (Marx, 1844 [1970], 113]

Feuerbach, Ludwig. 1842 [2002]. *Tesis provisionales para la reforma de la Filosofía*. Biblioteca de Filosofía. Folio: Barcelona.

Friedrich, Carl J. ed. 1954. *The Philosophy of Hegel*. The Modern Library: New York.

Hegel, G. W. F. 1803-1806. [1984]. *Filosofía real (Jenenser realphilosophie)*. Fondo de Cultura Económica: México DF. Edición de Jose María Ripalda.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1807 [2004]. *Fenomenología del espíritu (Phänomenologie des Geistes)*. Fondo de Cultura Económica: México DF.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1940 [1986]. *Razón y revolución*. Alianza Editorial: Madrid.

Marx, Karl. 1843 [1977]. *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, UK.

Marx, Karl. 1844 [1970]. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Lawrence & Wishart: London. Edited with an introduction by Dirk J. Struijk.

Marx, Karl. 1867 [1971]. *Capital, volume I*. George Allen and Unwin: London.

Polo, Leonardo. 1985. *Hegel y el post-Hegelianismo*. Universidad de Piura. Piura: Perú.

Polo, Leonardo. 1984. *Curso de Teoría del Conocimiento*. EUNSA: Pamplona.

Riedel, Manfred. 1969 [1984]. *Between Tradition and Revolution. The Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP. English translation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition. 1<sup>st</sup> German edition in 1969. *Studien zu Hegels Rechtsphilosophie*. Suhrkamp Verlag.