

# **Materialism and Idealism**

Anarchist Collective “Zumbi dos Palmares”

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# Contents

<b>Initial Considerations . . . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Causality and Materialism . . . . .</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Materialism and Subjectivity . . . . .</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Importance of the Materialist Method for Overcoming Capitalism . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Bibliography: . . . . .</b>	<b>9</b>

## Initial Considerations

The attribution made to anarchism that it would be idealistic is known. How exactly was it put? subjectively? Favorable to materialism, its concrete practices and theoretical conclusions came of an idealistic perspective, which, normally, attributes to human will the determinant role in the transformation of the world. Such is the perspective that normally fits anarchism.

In fact, we are able to identify idealistic aspects in certain thinkers of anarchism, or this changed itself into the proper basis of their theoretical formulations. Allied to this we have confused and a-historical interpretations of anarchism, often pronounced by the proper anarchists, coated in an evolutionism with doses of naturalism, which seem to confirm this supposed truth. Here we can cite Kropotkin and the English anarchist historian George Woodcock, that went as far as Greek philosophy and that of Ancient China or the christian heretical sects of the Middle Ages in order to find the roots of anarchist thought. Nothing more jocular.

However, anarchism proper is nothing other than a concrete historical product, that has its origin under determined material conditions. Anarchism circumscribes at the moment of ascension and consolidation of the bourgeoisie while dominant class, with their bourgeois revolutions, that give new forms of production and reproduction of social life, new material bases and also philosophies.

If the material, concrete basis of formation of anarchist political thought and practice was a bourgeois society in formation, with the predominance of the relation of wage-earning work, under which philosophical base does anarchism goes to firm its space? To respond to this question is not an easy task. We take, in order to initiate the discussion, he whom first gave a positive conception of anarchism, we are speaking, therefore, of Joseph Proudhon. This Frenchman was one of the most influential socialists of his time. His first works, "What is Property?" (1840) and "Philosophy of Misery" (1846) have as a foundation a criticism of the English political economy and of French utopian socialism, that is basically the point of departure for socialism, we would not say "scientific", but founded on a concrete analysis of capitalism in the perspective of its overcoming.

Thus we see rank, perhaps for the first time in judgmental form, the necessity and possibility of overcoming the regime of private property and the end of antagonism between classes, which means the end of their end. But for this, they had been necessary determinant conditions to make the apprehension of the question possible. After all, the class struggle already existed before anyone took it as an object of study and transformed it into a concept.

Proudhon goes on to make the link between economy and philosophy. You cannot understand economy without also treating the philosophy, and this observation is very important, therefore it treats to say that the economic organisation is also the result of conceptions in terms of philosophy and not something simply data, disconnected from a vision and comprehension of the world.

*"[...] economic science is for me the objective form and the realisation of the metaphysical; it is the metaphysical in action, the metaphysical projected above the plane of the duration and all that which occupies the laws of labour and trade is truly and especially metaphysical<sup>1</sup>/" (PROUDHON, 2003, p85-6)*

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<sup>1</sup> Metaphysics, in the sense that Proudhon uses it here, signifies the proper philosophy.

In this sense Proudhon goes to occupy in inquiry the considerations of the political economy and criticizes the utopian socialists for these abdicate to understand it and surpass it, finishing by trying “to reconstruct the society above nonexistent basis”. In a criticism made of political economy by Proudhon, it places that its vice is “to affirm as definitive state a transitory condition”. Here, in spite of the same the criticisms made by Bakunin that affirmed that Proudhon went of the right to the economy, and not the economy to the right, Proudhon goes on to conclude that if the political economy is false, the jurisprudence while a science of right and of custom is still more false, therefore the guideline for the “principle of individual appropriation and of absolute sovereignty of the individuals”. It consists that the political economy, that is, “the code or immemorial routine of the property”, together with the Right represents the “organised practice of the robbery and the misery”.

These observations of Proudhon’s, for more than covering the thought of this revolutionary can still point to his mistakes, as Bakunin made when saying that the Frenchman, no matter how hard he has strengthened “died metaphysical” (idealistic), they are important for the construction of a materialist criticism of the capitalist society. More than this, they demonstrate that anarchism can only be anarchism, under determined material conditions. And exactly under these material conditions, acting under them and assuming themselves of what was formulated in ideas until then, it is that anarchism could develop itself while a tool not only of ideology, but political theory in the bosom of the international workers movement.

## **Causality and Materialism**

To have a clear conception of the factors that happen in the development of human society, under which basis and conditions it constructs, it is the power to think correctly of the reality which we dare transform. For this it is important to have a discussion between reality and thought, between object and subject, or simply between idea and substance. We start with a few questions. Where is man situated in the world and how does he establish his relation with it? Are we speaking of a relation established by mere chance, in the mere reflection of concrete situations or of a deliberate relation? Or is it not so simple and purely like this? And does there exist unity in the universe? Bakunin affirms that “Everything that exists, the beings that constitute the indefinite set of the Universe, all the things existing in the world, any that is its nature, under the aspects of the quality as large quantity, averages or infinitely small, close or immensely far away, exert, without the same fondness or being able to think about this, one against another and each one against all, either immediately, either for a transition, a perpetual action and a reaction that, combining itself in a unique movement, constitutes what we call universal solidarity, life and causality. “(BAKUNIN, 1988; p. 57)

However, such universal causality is not a primary and absolute thing. It is more a “resultant always produced and reproduced by the simultaneous action of an infinity of particular causes” where “each point is acting on all (the universe is produced here), and all acting on each part (the universe is producing or creative here) “(1977, P. 186). One is about the real unity of the universe, that being neither pre-definitive, nor pre-conceived, is the perpetual transformation, without start, limit or end: it is the negation of God, therefore with a “legislator” arbitrarily imposing its laws such unity could not exist. Therefore, it is this movement, which Bakunin calls universal causality, which forms all the world, from the mineral to the animal (including man),

nature. Man being inserted in this chain of relations and mutual transformations, it implies that he is submitted to it, not being able more than to act in accordance with the limits imposed by nature and in which he takes part. Man acts and in virtue of the laws of nature, product and producer of the universal causality, therefore, cannot withhold them nor change them by action and spontaneous free will. Being thus, man does not create the substance, he first of all is part of it. That is, “the man with his magnificent intelligence, his subliminal ideas and his infinite aspirations, is nothing more, as everything that exists in this world, is a product of the vile substance.” (2000; p. 13)

In this respect, the human conscience is determined by the material condition, which appears as an ideal expression (not necessarily true) of one given material reality. And it is because of this that free will does not exist, therefore proper human will is determined by the material conditions of existence that are necessarily the base for any agreement how much to the necessities and historical possibilities of development of humanity.

## **Materialism and Subjectivity**

The starting point of the animal life is the struggle for life. Before everything, living beings of all species need to establish minimum conditions in order to guarantee their existence, not only of individual life, but of its species. It is under such conditions that it gives all its development and satisfaction of so many necessities in such a way while individual how much of the species, exactly that this development and necessities limit the more elementary, the vital ones, in order to be born, and grow until death. However, this development and the satisfaction of its necessities, presents itself in different forms in the various species and between man and the excessively animal species in a totally distinct form.

*“In the animal societies all of the individuals make exactly the same things: the same nature to drive, one same will animates them. A society of animals is a set of round atoms, circles, cubes or triangles, but always perfectly identical; its personality is unanimous, one would say that only one governs them all. The work that animals execute, it wants individually, it wants in society, they reproduce its character trace for trace: in this way the swarm of bees composed of units of the same nature and equal value, thus the honeycomb is formed by the unit cavity, constant and invariably repeated. But the intelligence of man, destined at the same time for the social destiny and for the necessities of the person is of a completely different invoice and it is what it becomes, by a consequence easy to conceive, the human will prodigiously divergent. In the bee the will is constant and uniform, because the instinct that guides it is inflexible and it is this unique instinct that makes life, happiness and all the being of the animal; in the man, talent varies, the reason is indecision, therefore, multiple and vacant will: it looks for society but it runs away from the difficulties and the monotony: it is imitator but loving of its ideas and crazy for its work.”(PROUDHON, 1997; p.218–19)*

All of this citation of Prodouhn seems sufficiently opportune. The French thinker establishes in the human universe, a subjective sphere, which deals with something essentially human. It is precisely in this subjectivity, in the possibility of, through the abstraction and of the construction of notions, to formulate ideas, that we are able to delimit a separation between the animal world

and the world of humans. The ideal world consists in the “last and highest expression of its animal life “ (Bakunin, 1977; p. 199). All this power of abstraction developed throughout the centuries, allows the man “to conceive the idea of totality of the beings, of the universe and of the absolute infinite” (idem, p. 202). However, wouldn't such an affirmation send us to an idealistic conception? Negative. This differentiation, the intrinsic possibility to the human being to acquire thought not for the individual, but for humanity in general for establishing ideas, is what gives it the possibility of overcoming its animality, thus to construct a historical world. But this, when not realised in concrete terms remains mere formality, not constituted in reality.

*“Man creates this historical world through the force of an activity that you will find in all living beings, that constitutes the proper bedding of any organic life and that tends to assimilate and to transform the exterior world according to necessities of each one, activity, consequently, instinctive and fatal, previous to any thought, but that, illuminated for the reason of the man and determined by its reflected will, transforms itself in him and for him in free and intelligent work.” (BAKUNIN, 1988; p. 70)*

The relation between a bee and its will, is not of transformation. It can adapt to a more or less different reality normally lived by its species, since that guarantees its reproduction, but this will not represent progress in the species, therefore it does not create history. The history of the bee is, substantially, the same in any time and space. The history of a bee is the history of all bees. Man, to the contrary, is transformed in social being and in this quality, transformer of his proper will, more or less in accordance with its necessities and within concrete historical possibilities.

What we have is that, if we can say that man differentiates himself from the animals by his capacity of abstraction, his capacity to think (inseparable from the one to establish ideas), these in turn, only become realised by the act of work. Therefore, it is only with the material act of work that man will go to transform nature, the way in which he lives, and when transforming this way will transform himself exactly into the measure whereby he is part of this way. Work is, therefore, the necessary mediation established between man and nature, a concrete action that constructs the basis and conditions of human existence, therefore we are not what we think but what we do, being, therefore, through this concrete action before nature that man is able to conquer the conditions for the full satisfaction of his potentialities. And it is precisely because of this that work appears as a central category and the conductor wire for apprehension and analysis in our society.

But as we have seen, if work is the act with which man transforms his will, this transformation is stimulated, in the primary and primitive moment, by the basic, vital necessities, of animal life. But with the proper magnifying of its necessities and complication of the social world, these necessities, this impulse, tends to be more directed, each time, by ideas. But how have ideas been produced in men?

*“By verification and by a kind of consecration of realised facts, because in the practical developments of humanity, as much as science correctly said, realised facts always precede ideas, that test once again the content of human thought, its real basis, is not a spontaneous creation of the spirit, but it is always given by the reflective experience of real things.” (BAKUNIN; 1977, P. 202)*

That is, the idea in itself does not create anything, before everything, it is a response to a given situation. But this response can not be understood as something mechanical, merely as material

reflex. It presents itself to the human beings as an idealised response — but not necessarily realised -, therefore it commands and one subordinates to it its proper necessities, taking choices in accordance with the open and abstracted options. But in the same way these choices, this idealisation, are not something simply personal or dislocated from proper society, from the material reality. We can differentiate perfectly a chair from a table, but this and that can be idealised of different forms ( and in this way have been throughout history) without that left to be a chair or a table.

What we have, therefore, is that humans possess the possibility to construct their history. To assume a position not of simple objects, but of active subjects, due to this subjective aspect as we have just said, is something essentially human. But the history of humanity is not one of its thoughts (ideas), which are limited and determined by material condition, where it concludes, therefore, that “thought elapses, in contrast, to life, and that, to modify thought, it is necessary to transform life”(Bakunin, 2003).

This is not to disrespect the possibilities of ideas to coincide with life, after all, they too are part of it, but to understand that we do not change life by a simple act of will, even though because, this proper will, is not something that is born in man, and yet, is determined by its relation with things and the rest of people. It is necessary that a material basis exists to make such transformation possible.

## **The Importance of the Materialist Method for Overcoming Capitalism**

*“The people are not doctrinaire nor philosophical. They do not have time nor habit of interest for diverse questions at the same time. In being passionate for one, they forget the others. From there the obligation elapses, for us, to present to them the essential question of which, more than any other, depends on their liberation. However, this question is indicated by their proper situation and by all their existence; it is the political-economic question: economic in the sense of the social revolution, political in the sense of the suppression of the State.”(BAKUNIN; 2003, p. 249)*

Inside of what has already been sketched, we can enter into the central question that is the joining of a perspective of material analysis with that of social transformation. This implies the discussion as much as to the necessary mediations between the current state of things that we have and the search for its overcoming, that which we long for. We know the adverse conditions in which the working class is presented as a whole, as much in what is referred to as its material conditions, but also in ideas. The penetration of the bourgeois ideology in our class to passivity and confinement in terms of the perspective of social transformation. Such ideas gain universal amplitude and start to be accepted as unquestionable truths, being in full compass with the reproduction of this reality, that is, with exploitation and domination between men.

It is not through ideas that transformation happens but through concrete facts and actions, as materialism teaches. But when we speak of actions, it implies, as we have already displayed, in that it motivates it, either by an immediate material necessity, or, later, by more idealistic aspects. However, what makes us take part in the social revolution is not a desire our liking for great events. It is about a possibility, as well as of an historical necessity, for men and women to take for

themselves the domain of their activities, of their lives. For in such a way, social transformation will only be able to be accomplished when objective conditions for such exist. Would we remain with folded arms, then, awaiting these “objective conditions” to present themselves? Negative, therefore one is not about a fatality. Are we going, therefore “to conscientise” the working class in order that we have such conditions? This is also not the question, therefore we would fall into an idealistic perspective.

Then, it occurs that the materialistic perspective does not only have to serve for us to theorise, as well as it is not about something mechanical. Theory and practice are not separate or we would lose strength in both aspects. It is in this sense that we must also seek the organisation of forces of the proletariat under a materialist perspective, that is also taken as the method of mobilisation and organisation. We say, therefore, that the struggle emerges under a material basis, therefore it is to concrete, on top of it, historical cohesion between the working class.

*“The basis of this great unity, that we are searching for, and in going with the philosophical ideas and politics of the day, one meets given entirely by the solidarity of the sufferings, of the interests, of the necessities and of the real aspirations of the proletarian of the whole world. This solidarity does not have to be created, it exists in reality; it constitutes the proper life, the daily experience of the labouring world, and all that remains is to make it become known to the labouring world and to help it to organise consciously of this. It is the solidarity of the economic claims.”* (BAKUNIN, 2001, P. 66)

Although the fights can emerge initially assuming a more vindicative character (the form of which some want to say is necessarily reformist), remitting to a question more central than agglutinates the working class in a unit inside of diversity, they should be worked in the perspective that such struggles can elevate themselves to a greater level, of political struggle, of revolutionary intention. Therefore, the unity of the workers gives especially under material basis to development of the struggle. There does not exist a better pedagogy than the class struggle. There exists no education more revolutionary than the practice of the struggle of the organised working class assuming the protagonism in it, competing, now, with the bourgeois ideology in the measure where it constructs a proper politics of the workers, explicitly of class antagonism, yet these expressions in terms of class consciousness.

We understand two indispensable but distinct, not antagonistic, spaces of organisation: the social, relative to the way in which the organisation inserts itself (university, factory, residence etc), that is the space of organisation and construction of popular power, the social movements in general; and one specifically political, programatically anarchist. We must have clarity as to how much the role of the organisation fits politics and to the social movements. Considering that they possess distinct dynamics, but that it does not mean to say they are opposed, possessing different roles in the class struggle. But if we understand that the popular organisations, the organised and supported working class in its proper mechanisms of decision is the principle agent of transformation, why the necessity of anarchist organisation? We agree with Bakunin when he said that “all the determination in theory corresponds fatally to an exclusion, to an elimination in practice.” (Bakunin, 2001, P. 59). Therefore, the social movements, the organised working class in general, are agglutinated in more concrete questions and tends to linger itself at the peculiarities of its movement and space of struggle. And this is beneficial and indispensable. But with the Political Organisation of revolutionary intention the opposite occurs: what it loses in numerical



strength, it must gain in theory and in political programme to be defended, therefore it will go to think not only of the global form, coordinating forces in different locations of performance, as well as in long standing term, not falling into immediacy, it therefore has a more clearly defined political programme. Here it is important to add that we are not speaking of a hierarchy, being able to seem of implicit form, of the political organisation (which would be the principle responsible for the theoretical-programatic elaboration) and the mass organisations (responsible for the practical action). The mass organisations (entities, unions etc) are spaces of construction of the revolutionary theory and of its programme, or even better, it is in these where the struggle and all its implications are fundamentally constructed .

*"[...] what we call ideal of the people does not have any analogy with the solutions, formulas and socio-political theories worked outside of this life, by graduates and semi-graduates, that have the freedom to make it, offered of generous form to the ignorant multitude as the express condition of its future organisation. We do not have the minimum fate in these theories and best amongst them give us the impression of layers of Procusto, very scanty to contain the ample and powerful course of popular life."*  
(BAKUNIN, 2003; p. 237)

As we must fight against the fragmentation of the working class, for a political unity, without disrespecting the fact that its varied fractions will never have the same degree of revolutionary conscience, the mass organisations, the popular organisation from its workplace or community, must be treated as the central element in the social transformation. First because this unit must be real, the fruit of accumulate forces, experiences and of a process in which the protagonism of classes is an indispensable element for the revolutionary process. The second question is that the political anarchist organisation must be a political expression of the historical interests of the emancipation of the working class, giving to it theoretical and material support (present and operating militancy). The organisation does not set itself above, nor does it represent the working class, therefore the organised working class alone can speak for itself.

An important question to be identified is that different importance exist, some more relevant other less, between the various factions of the proletariat in each reality. In terms of capitalism, the labouring class, that which deals directly with the transformation of nature is, in the measure of its strategic position in a worldwide system of domination, the revolutionary class. This is not to give disdain to fractions of class and privilege to others, but serves to understand, for example, that definitive sectors, when mobilized and in struggle, cause more impact to the economic structure than others. To know how to identify which they are and to search for insertion in these spaces is a strategic point.

However, we make struggles in the conditions that we have, not as we want, but always having as north the magnification of the fronts of operation and considering the work of human emancipation as being the task of all the working class.

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