

# METHOD AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN MARX'S THEORY OF STATE AND ECONOMY IN THE *GRUNDRISSE*: REDUCIONISM, SYSTEMS AND COMPLEXITY

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## Abstract

This article aims to show Marx's methodology thought as it is exposed in his *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, ordinarily referred as *Grundrisse*. This methodology lies behind his theories of economy and State. The paper examines only the parts of the *Grundrisse* where Marx explicitly writes about methodology and describes how his intellectual way is walked. These objective of the paper is to compare Marx's methodology conceptions to the contemporary issues of the systems and complexity epistemology. By doing that, the article perceives that in some aspects Marx's epistemology is ahead of its time, working with some conceptions that would be later developed by the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries epistemology. In other aspects, however, Marx appears as a product of his time, and some other conceptions present in his works are now overcome by the development of methodology and epistemology thoughts.

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**Keywords:** Karl Marx; state; economy; epistemology; complexity

## Introduction

The Marxism as a political theory and as a guide for an action often overshadows other aspects of Marx's philosophy. One of the interesting aspects is the methodology that Marx follows and the epistemology that lies beyond it. Some people commonly understand Marx's method as "true" or "definitive" science, as if it could achieve "real truth". Others find that some kind of definitiveness is impossible in science. Others simply refuse to think about Marx's methodology because they are against Marxist politics. And by remaining on this statement, some interesting aspects of Marx's method that could be related to contemporary epistemology are not exposed.

This article aims to show Marx's methodology thought as it is exposed in his *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, ordinarily referred as *Grundrisse*. These scripts contain preparatory works that would make its final shape in *Das Capital*, as much as other ideas that would not be published by the living Marx.

To pursue this objective, this article will examine the parts of the *Grundrisse* where Marx explicitly writes about methodology. The book studied was the Brazilian translation into Portuguese made by Mario Duayer and Nélio Schneider, published in 2011 by Boitempo Publishing House.<sup>24</sup> Also, this paper will make use of Enrique Dussel's *La producción teórica de Marx: un comentario a los Grundrisse*, in its fourth Mexican edition of 2004.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, the paper will show how Marx's epistemology incorporates elements of an epistemology of complexity based on the theories of systems. This is interesting because the theories of systems would develop later, in the twentieth century, but it is noticeable how some of the worries of the complexity epistemologies are present in Marx's work.

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<sup>24</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*: manuscritos econômicos de 1857-1858; esboços da crítica da economia política. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2011 – edição eletrônica.

<sup>25</sup> Dussel, Enrique Domingo. *La producción teórica de Marx: un comentario a los Grundrisse*. 4 ed. México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004 – available at <<http://ifil.org/dussel/html/18.html>>

*1. The method from reality to abstract determinations and from them to concrete totality:*

One of the biggest problems of human cognition is the relation between our thoughts and ours linguistic knowledge, in one side, and reality itself, in the other side. Knowledge is always a linguistic thought or a linguistic expression that tries to explain reality. When I want to understand the computer I'm working on, I'll make linguistic sentences about it. These linguistic sentences are not the computer itself, but are somehow related to it. When this relation match, we say knowledge is true; when it doesn't, knowledge is false. When this relation is comprehended as impossible and the Philosophy conceives real as the manifestation of thought itself, this Philosophy is a form of idealism. When this relation is comprehended as possible and so the work of the knowledge is to make thought as related to real as it is possible, or that reality is a condition of possibility of the thought and the understanding, this Philosophy is a form of realism.

Hence knowledge is always an abstraction of something that can be concrete (this computer) or abstract (my thoughts). In a special metaphor, we say that knowledge is above, that it rises from the concrete to the abstract. Concrete is in reality, abstraction is in thought. But Marx says that the concrete appears in thought as a result, not as a bottom line. He also says that, notwithstanding, the concrete is the bottom line of the intuition and the representation. And Marx also talks about the method of to ascend from the abstract to the concrete.<sup>26</sup> What does that mean?

According to Marx, reality we see is the “real” and “concret” (*Realen und Konkreten*).<sup>27</sup> But this reality is different and something that remains out of the representation, something exterior, an externality. Representation is an abstraction of reality. As Marx says, for example, population or social classes are abstract representations of reality because when we think or say “population” we leave unadvised the real people that form real population.<sup>28</sup> Hence “population” is something abstract, in our heads, and not reality itself. So far we have two different things: reality (concrete) and the representation (abstract).

This representation is chaotic because it is not yet simplified by abstract concepts. The next step in knowledge is to take this representation and work in abstraction and analysis, separating the different parts of the representation and taking each one of them as a whole. Now we have determinations.<sup>29</sup> Hence from concrete to representation and from representation to determinations there are three steps in Marx's method. But only this second movement, from representations to determinations, is really theory, because representation itself is the pre-scientific knowledge, common sense.<sup>30</sup> Also it is scientific knowledge because it should be able to explain why some thing is as it is. To explain what are the relations that determines the phenomenons. This is why this knowledge is not only description, but also explanation: it explains what makes a thing be the way it is.<sup>31</sup>

These multiple determinations, each one a part but taken as a whole to be comprehended, are then understood in the totality. To Marx, this fourth step is the achievement of the concrete totality. And it is also an ascension from abstract (determinations) to concrete (totality). This is the dialectic method: the knowledge of putting the part in a totality. The movement from step three (determinations) to four (concrete totality)

<sup>26</sup> “...o concreto aparece no pensamento como processo da síntese, como resultado, não como ponto de partida, não obstante seja o ponto de partida efetivo e, em consequência, também o ponto de partida da intuição e da representação... método de ascender do abstrato ao concreto” (MARX, *op. cit.*, p. 95).

<sup>27</sup> Dussel, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 93-94.

<sup>29</sup> Dussel, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Dussel, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>31</sup> Cardoso, Miriam Limoeiro. Para uma leitura do método em Karl Marx: anotações sobre a “Introdução” de 1857. *Cadernos do Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Filosofia da Universidade Federal Fluminense*. Rio de Janeiro, n. 30, set/1990, p. 20-21.

is the dialectic act.<sup>32</sup> And why this totality, even if it is a thought, is “concrete”? Marx explains: “Concrete is concrete because it is the synthesis of multiple determinations, hence, unity of diversity”.<sup>33</sup>

Now we can understand why Marx says that the concrete appear in thought as a result of the synthesis procedure. In the first movement of theory (in fact the second movement of knowledge), representation is volatilized in an abstract determination; in the second movement of theory (the third of knowledge), abstract determinations take to the reproduction of the concrete in the through the spirit.<sup>34</sup>

In this fourth plan, of concrete totality, the single determinations are combined. Dussel explains this process with these words:

Lo simple es p.ej. la producción (determinación que puede por su parte ser descrita en sus determinaciones esenciales en sí). Pero al ir elaborando las relaciones mutuamente constitutivas de la producción con el consumo primero, con la distribución posteriormente, y por último con el intercambio, se construyó así un *todo* donde las cuatro determinaciones constituían una nueva totalidad con mutuas codeterminaciones.<sup>35</sup>

Of course this concrete totality is a work of thought and lives in the spirit. Marx is aware of that, but he says this is the only way thought can appropriate reality. Most important, to Marx those concepts that form concrete totality are not a product from concepts themselves, like concepts generating concepts, lying above intuition and representation. They are a product of the elaboration of intuition and representation in concepts. It is possible because of this that Marx says that this procedure is different from art, religion and mental-practical: it maintains a connection with the intuition of reality.<sup>36</sup> So we could say this is a form of empirism: even if science begins in the abstract, with the determinations made from the representations, thought begins with representations that are made from reality.

According to Enrique Dussel’s explanation, this dialectic construction is a double movement. First, it takes the determinations (abstract concepts created by the scientist) and relates one to each other, like the relation between production and consume. Production defines consume and consume defines production, so the opposed co-determines each other. Second, these opposed form a new autonomous totality. A unity formed by oppositions. The simple (determinations) forms now a complex (totality).<sup>37</sup>

Marx sees his method as better than the way other economists worked before him, because he doesn’t take that representation as reality itself. Differently, he knows that the chaotic representation is not the concrete reality, so he cannot work with it. He must know the determinations in an abstraction work and then conceive the concrete totality, a conceptual world that comprehends the determinations that form the concrete, a quality not present in the chaotic representation. To Marx, true science is made when we work with this concrete totality that maintains a connection with reality, once it was created working with the determinations and the representations of reality. So concepts depend on reality and reality is prior to thought. According to Miriam Limoeiro Cardoso, in Marx’s Philosophy the concrete reality preexists, underlies and subsists to thought.

In Marx’s thinking, this way from simplicity (abstract determinations) to complexity (concrete totality), which he regards as an “elevation”, corresponds to history, where more

<sup>32</sup> Dussel, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> “O concreto é concreto porque é a síntese de múltiplas determinações, portanto, unidade da diversidade” (Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 95).

<sup>34</sup> Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 52-53. A free translation to English could be this: “The simple is, for example, the production (a determination which can be described in its essential determinations). But the process of elaborating the mutually constitutive relations between production with consume first, with distribution next and at last with exchange, constructs a *whole* where the four determinations constitutes a new totality with mutual codeterminations”.

<sup>36</sup> Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 53.

simple realities develop to become more complex. There would be a match between reality and thought.<sup>38</sup>

Also, Marx thinks about the categories as abstract and general, valid to all times, but as product of historic relations and full valid only to these relations and in its interior.<sup>39</sup> It is like this because the modern categories are more complex and can be compared to ancient categories. The category “work” in the bourgeois society is more complex than in ancient societies, so it can be used to describe and understand these ancient societies and what work meant there. But this use must be made being aware that there are differences between modern world and the previous societies. Bourgeois society is different from others and we should not see bourgeois society in these ancient ones, although the categories stay useful to compare and understand reality in its historical difference. And this method will be productive when the modern society is capable of self-criticism, not comprehending itself as a superior and infallible development of ancient societies.<sup>40</sup>

### **Marx’s method and the contemporary systems and complexity epistemology:**

In this point we can make a partial balance of Marx methodology and try to understand the epistemology that supports it. We can compare it with the contemporary epistemology issues regarded to the opposition between the classic method of reductionism of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the needs of an systemic and complex scientific knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

First, is noticeable that Marx is worried with the connection between the science’s abstract propositions and the concrete reality. Marx can be understood as an empirist here. In these methodology scripts, he refuses to create a world of concepts that would be sufficient to science and that would go without reality. This methodology can be read as a partial reaction to German idealism that came before Marx, mainly Hegel, with who Marx seems to dialogue assuming some parts of his Philosophy but repelling others. It could have an ancient reference in Francis Bacon’s epistemological ideas. Contemporary epistemology seems to keep working with empirism, although overcoming the logical positivism of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, it is possible to identify confusion between reality and the metalanguage that describes it. It is noticeable when Marx calls “categories” the abstract concepts but also the reality itself. Also, it is noticeable when he says that the subject exists in reality as well as in the head, hence the categories express forms of being.<sup>42</sup> But it is also possible to understand this identification as a result of the way down, descending from thought to reality, as a step beyond concrete totality. Concrete totality is abstract when compared, for example, with bourgeois society. It is a further level of cognition when we examine modern society with the cognition we developed from representation to concrete totality.

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<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 103-104.

<sup>41</sup> For these systemic and complex epistemology issues, it is important the reading of Capra, Fritjof. The hidden connections: integrating the biological, cognitive, and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability. New York: Doubleday, 2002; The turning point: science, society and the rising culture. New York: Bantam Books, 1988; The web of life: a new scientific understanding of living systems. New York: Doubleday, 1997; Le Moigne, Jean-louis. The intelligence of complexity: Do the ethical aims of research and intervention in education and training not lead us to a “New discourse on the study of our time”? *In*: Sísifo: Education Sciences Journal. Available at <http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt/pdfs/13-ConfIEN.pdf>; Montuori, Alfonso. Complexity, epistemology and the challenge of the future. Available at [http://www.academia.edu/1425652/Complexity\\_Epistemology\\_and\\_the\\_Challenge\\_of\\_the\\_Future](http://www.academia.edu/1425652/Complexity_Epistemology_and_the_Challenge_of_the_Future); Delattre, Pierre. Teoria dos sistemas e epistemologia. Porto: Sousa Martins, 1981; Morin, Edgar. Restricted complexity, general complexity. Available at <http://www.pensamientocomplejo.com.ar/docs/files/Edgar%20Morin,%20Restricted%20Complexity,%20General%20Complexity.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

Second, is perceptible how Marx does not create only linear cause-effect chains of concepts. One of the greatest perceptions of contemporary theories of systems and complexity is that the multiple elements of reality are connected and influencing each other. Hence we can say that what sometimes is a cause of an effect is affected by this effect as well, in a way that this effect becomes a cause of an effect in the prior cause. Marx conceives a partially systemic and complex relation between some determinations that co-determinates each one another. For example, production determines consume and is determined by consume, as well as consume determines production and is determined by it. There is here something that can be related to the systemic theory that would be developed later, where a system is a totality formed by elements in interaction. But Marx stops here, not going on. It is somehow a step into complexity made by Marx.

Third, Marx method can be interpreted as if the determinations could be understood first on their own and then, in a second moment, integrated in totality, where new determinations appear co-determining each other. It is a method that assumes the possibility to know a part aside from totality and then, later, to insert that part in totality generating a wider knowledge. There is here something that can also be related to the systemic theory, but now as an idea that would be overcome by the complexity epistemology. The theories of systems and complexity often claim that it is sometimes impossible to know parts of reality without the vision of the whole totality. This totality cannot just be thought later, because it determines the parts, that have some emergent characteristics only present when understood as parts of a totality.

Fourth, reality preexisting thought is another problem. This precedence may be often chronological, but the contact with reality is already conditioned by the existence, which, in an ontological sense, preexists the objects and the representations. Some theories of complexity assume existentialism philosophies such as Heidegger's and Sartre's

## Conclusion

Karl Marx exposes some of his methodology conceptions in his *Grundrisse*. These conceptions can be compared to the contemporary issues of the systems and complexity epistemology. When we do that, we can perceive that in some aspects Marx's epistemology is ahead of its time, working with some conceptions that would be later developed by the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries epistemology. In other aspects, however, Marx appears as a product of his time, and some other conceptions present in his works are now overcome by the development of methodology and epistemology thoughts.

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