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Theory, ideology and historical materialism

Organização Socialista Libertária

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This is a quick English translation by FdCA-International
relations of a text which was produced as a result of theoretical
debate by the OSL-SP together with other organizations in the
Forum of Organized Anarchism (FAO). It deals with what theory
and ideology are and what we understand as materialism.

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16. Historical materialism is not the dialectical materialism: dialectical materialism is the attempt to establish a-historical laws in order to understand the natural and social world, and the belief some of these laws can even be used to understand concrete situations. Historical materialism is the critique of capitalist social relations and the understanding of the world from the point of view of the class struggle of the workers; in this sense, historical materialism has a historicity and is part of a historical moment that if transformed, will have to transform its own way of thinking about the social being. (Teoria dei Comunisti Anarchisti)

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or models that “fit” the reality of fact, in empirics; on the contrary, concepts must be the product of historical analysis and must be transformed in accordance with the reality which is being worked on. Life is always more infinite of the knowledge we have of it (Bakunin).

13. Empirical research is an important element of historical materialism, but the understanding of the reality does not remain on the level of empirics, that is to say, on the level of being, of fact, of what is. Historical materialism includes empirical material in its historical process and in the establishment of trends in the process, also searching its past, its determinations in the present and its future, the what-is-to-be.
14. In order for the birth of the theory to be the product of the class struggle of the workers against exploitation in capitalist-bourgeois society, historical materialism is a critical theory, that is to say, it is not only concerned with the explanation and justification of what is concrete. Historical materialism is concerned with understanding what is real in order to transform it from the point of view of the workers, based on the experience of the workers’ previous struggles and current struggles.
15. In order to have a method of global understanding of the class struggle and not be only a method that could serve for any content, historical materialism cannot only be understood as a critique of politics or of the economy. It must at the same time make a critique of politics and achieve understanding of the economic dimensions of politics, as well as the influence that the plane of ideas has on the economy and politics. Historical materialism is the criticism of bourgeois capitalist society. (Marxism and Philosophy)

Theory and ideology

1. “ Theory aims at the elaboration of conceptual instruments that enable us to think rigorously about and obtain profound knowledge of the concrete reality. It is in this sense that we can speak of theory as being a science.” (Huerta Grande)
2. “Theory is an instrument, a tool, it serves a purpose, it is required if we are to produce the knowledge that we must produce.” (Huerta Grande)
3. Praxis, understood as an objective transformation of the social process, that is to say a transformation of the relations between man and nature (productive praxis) and man and man (revolutionary praxis), is the basis of knowledge, the criterion of the truth and the final goal of theory. This does not mean to say that theory only serves for practice, as it believed by pragmatism with its utilitarian conception, because the relationship between theory and practice is a relationship of dialectic unity where theory is not reduced to practice, but complements it and also allows it to advance, limited only in its accomplishment by human action. (Filosofia da Práxis)
4. Libertarian socialist theory was born from the class struggle of the workers: it was born as the conscious elaboration by the workers of their objectives, means and understanding of the reality in the historical process. (Teoria dei Comunisti Anarchisti)
5. There are two basic elements for a libertarian socialist theory: analysis of the concrete situation, understood as a synthesis of multiple factors (economic, political, of ideas) that can only be theorized through the process of abstraction; and analysis of the class struggle in its past, present and future,

in its aspirations, its understandings, its historical process – it is from this analysis that the libertarian socialist project derives.

6. Theory is the essence of the libertarian socialist party: it is the theory that provides the conditions to create a programme, defined as a strategic objective, strategy and tactics. A party without theory cannot be a party, but only individuals with ideological affinities that do not allow understanding of the reality and its transformation to advance.
7. “Ideology, on the contrary, is made up of elements of a non-scientific nature, that contribute to rendering action more dynamic and motivating it, based on factors that, though related to the objective conditions, do not derive from it, strictly speaking. Ideology is conditioned by objective conditions, even though it is not mechanically determined by them “(Huerta Grande). Together with theory, ideology was born from the class struggle: it can be understood as a set of values that, instead of explaining the reality – which is the task of theory – motivate people for action, for the struggle. Therefore, ideology is not some value, but the values that experience of the class struggle has already demonstrated can energize the movement of the masses (direct action, solidarity, etc.).
8. “The development of theory is not an academic problem, it does not start from scratch. It is based on, motivates itself and develops from the existence of ideological values and a political practice. More or less correct, more or less erroneous, these elements exist historically before the theory, and motivate its development.” (Huerta Grande)

9. Theoretical activity is not praxis: praxis is only the objective transformation of the social process. Theoretical activity is the attempt to understand the reality that complements praxis, therefore knowledge of the reality intensifies this transformation, but it cannot be understood as the transformation of the material conditions to which humans are subjected and by which they are determined. (Filosofia da Práxis)

Historical Materialism

10. Libertarian socialist theory is historical materialism: the attempt to understand the reality through analysis of the concrete situations as totalities, that is to say, facts do not exist by themselves or in themselves, but are the product of material circumstances (economic, political, of ideas...) that have social praxis as their centre. But this understanding, as it is born from the class struggle and as it is the analysis of the development of the class struggle in capitalist society, is not restricted to a method, but is a global understanding of the struggle and tasks of the workers’ class struggle.
11. Two basic propositions for historical materialism: 1) being and thought are not the same thing, but they cannot be understood apart: the autonomy between one and the other is only the autonomy of its dialectic relationship; 2) the primacy of being in relation to thought and of reality in relation to being, as what happens in reality determines the historical process to a greater extent than what is thought about it. This is also the priority of praxis in relation to theory. (Huerta Grande, Filosofia da práxis)
12. Historical materialism works with heuristic concepts, that is to say, concepts (instruments of theory) are not ideal types