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I. General Introduction

We would like to start by saying, that in this paper we will not proceed to a type of «critique of mainstream economics», but rather into a critique of this critique. So, we criticize critical political economy from the point of view of the critique of political economy. We will consider a series of critical accounts against neoclassical economics that took place during the last decade, from the aspect of the so-called pluralist economics, and how these are connected, in one way or another, with the realist epistemological movement in economics. Our paper will not concern, the epistemological articulation par excellence of the realist perspective that is very well represented in the work of Tony Lawson (Lawson 1997). In this paper, we chose to treat a more applied aspect of this criticism of neoclassical economics, and try to figure out the deficiencies of this critique “in action”, so to speak. We are referring here, to the critique of the dominant economics as incapable of seizing up the complexity of their object. Our aim is to bring up the mode according to which this critique is unable to really break away from the presuppositions of neoclassical economics, a critique that from our point of view - that we have to admit, is a Marxist one- regresses in many cases to an even more metaphysical orientation.

Having this aim, we concentrate on three recent attempts, all of which have as their central motive the complex character of the social and economic relations. Three attempts which we consider to be amongst the most interesting in the field of alternative economics. We are talking about the book of the French economist E. Shapir, Les trous noirs de la science économique, that was published in France in 2000, and re-published in 2003 provoking a lot of discussion, we discuss the recent work of G. Hodgson on historical specificity, and finally we focus on the very recent book of Chr. Arnsperger on the Critical Political Economy (2007), that can be considered as a valid synthesis of this kind of arguments.

II. Three versions of the complexity argument in Pluralist Economics.

We will start from Shapir’s argument, which takes as its point of departure, the idea of the decentralized character of contemporary economies (Shapir 2003: 35). This decentralized character, is the main element that provides the dynamic nature of capitalist economy, a fact that renders irrelevant any effort of ex ante prevision of the movement of multiple actions. That is to say that the emphasis of any theory of economy must be placed on the crisis, and not on the equilibrium. It is because of this, that the institutions, which frame the economic actions, are equally complex and open to transformation, thus being totally alien to the laboratory conditions of mainstream economics.

Neoclassical economics are not nevertheless a simple scientific hypothesis, in contrast, Shapir emphasizes the normative role that plays the irrealist character of the economics: where society does not correspond to its principles, does not mean anything else than that it should fit to them. Behind this exigency lies, for Shapir, a
clear totalitarian aspiration (Shapir 2003: 72), that homogenizes any temporal and institutional variety of the socioeconomic action. The market of neoclassical economics becomes a closed totality that presupposes agents with complete transitivity, continuity and individuality (Shapir 2003: 77-78). These elements render the general equilibrium a total normative theory. This is why the whole social complexity must be reduced to a unique and stable equilibrium (90-97).

It is primarily to this general character of the equilibrium theory that Shapir’s perspective is opposed, and for doing this, he contraposes a variety of individual empirical realities, implying here the need of a stratified conception. His treatment of money is maybe the most crucial example which shows how Shapir opposes himself to the theoretical generalization, even when this comes not from standard economics, but from heterodox approaches as well. We consider his criticism of the conception of money that develop Orlean and Aglietta in their book La Violence de la Monnaie. These authors are led to a defective approach, when they finally reduce the multiplicity of socioeconomic interactions, to a monetary expression, transforming it to a kind of metaphysics (Shapir 2003: 250). In contrast, Shapir’s aim, is to highlight the necessity of the non-economic elements, and especially of institutions, for the production of the economic notion of money (Shapir 2003: 254-255 and 276-277). He thus brings up the argument implied in the conditions of the general equilibrium: namely the pre-existence of a whole array of authoritarian institutions. Against this Shapir opposes the republican order (Shapir 2003:345), as a conscious institutionalization of the crisis of coordination, that creates the complexity of the free agency of individuals. Into this image of an “economiste-republicain”, cannot nevertheless be hidden that, what Shapir espouses as the main line of his argument, is one of the fundamental ideological predicaments of today’s dominant thought (especially in France): that of the distinction between Democracy and Totalitarianism.

From his part, Geoffrey Hodgson also begins his argument with an attack on the totalizing character of general theories, and of their highly restrictive conditions (Hodgson 2001: 15-16). These conditions maintain a theory with unhistorical character that considers market as an eternal ideal not subjected to any historical evolution. This last notion however, gives us the key to understand Hodgson’s silent shift, from the issue of the historical specificity, to that of the ontology (Hodgson 2001: 37-39). Referring back to the ontological argument of the realist methodology, as well as to his biological analogy, he sets as his basic question the research of the evolutionary universals. (Point which constitutes besides his critique of Marx, as he considers that the last one underestimates and does not clarify his transhistorical notions –Hodgson 2001: 50).

We thus observe an apparent tension between, on the one hand Hodgson’s tendency to oppose the totalizing notions as being based on the non-reducible and complex character of the historical specificity; on the other hand, his tendency to look for general notions that correspond to the ontological character of the human socio-historical life. In reality, this tension is eliminated, when we understand that Hodgson localizes the common basis of the whole variety of historical and institutional transformations, into the notion of habit. The term basis that we used must be understood here in its literal sense, given that for Hodgson all economic life, as well as the culture, and finally all the emergent properties are explicated through

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1 For a development of his perspective on democracy and economics see Shapir 2004
2 See for example his definition of production as the “the universal of all human societies” (Hodgson 2001: 315)
this fundamental notion\textsuperscript{3}. His insistence, on attributing into this procedure a materialist primacy to the provision institutions, must not lead us to conceive habit in biological terms (Hodgson 2001: 299). We are much closer to a universal notion of interpretation of the human social dimension, as the notion of action in Max Weber. However the real source of his inspiration is to be found in Veblen’s exegesis of institutions (Veblen 1898), an approach that is praised by Hodgson, precisely because it detached the factor of habit from its only biological connotation (Hodgson 2001:141).

Thus the notion of habit for Hodgson takes on the character of a transcendental pseudo-biology, the material condition of the specific human creativity\textsuperscript{4}, as the fundamental source of the complexity of historical institutions. This becomes clearer when we consider Hodgson’s perspective for the historical institutions and their evolution. This perspective is based on the idea of a «deep continuity», namely on the idea that a historical stage produces an institution that is inherited in the next stage, and then in the next one forming the identity of the human historical condition (Hodgson 2001: 339).

The creative critical action of human subjects, as the normative reference of complexity, becomes explicitly the central issue for Christian Arnsperger (Arnsperger 2007: 4). Arnsperger dedicates the main part of his criticism of neoclassic theory, precisely in the denunciation of the reduction to egoistic automata. Into this context, one of the fundamental deficiencies of the models of dominant economics is that they are deprived from the two sources of critical rationality: lived experiences and suffering (Arnsperger 2007: 45 and 53). Moreover, he addresses a similar criticism to Marx – one that reminds us of Hodgson, and claims on the main that Marx shrinks the social field to two or three classes, pretending the hegemonic eye of the omnipotent scientist (Arnsperger 2007: 58-59). Finally, Arnsperger is also critical towards the contemporary complexity economics, which completely de-humanize their object, and thus promote an even worse situation from that of traditional economics, which at least recognized a kind of freedom of choice.

Against these versions of de-humanized political economy, Arnsperger explicitly proposes the return of critical humanism, inspired from the values of Enlightenment\textsuperscript{5}. The equal of this project in political economy, will be a program of critical harnessing of complexity, through the conscious action and interaction of individuals (Arnsperger 2007: 167-168). With this aim in mind, Arnsperger goes into a paradoxical, but from a certain point of view, justified connection between Hayek and the original critical theory of Frankfurt school, especially that of M. Horkheimer. In Hayek on the one hand, he finds the emancipatory aspect of Scottish Enlightenment, especially as this is expressed in the respect of individual freedom. Hayek as a humanist “has in mind a normative conception of individual empowerment” (Arnsperger 2007:87), when at the same time his image of the theorist is bound by an ethical commitment in not to violently impose an ex ante order to the complex plurality. Nevertheless, being a victim of his faith in the rationality of the market, Hayek regresses in the conception of rationality, as a subjectless process. This

\textsuperscript{3} “The change is always in the last resort a change in habits of thought. In short culture and Geist are both manifestations of a system of shared habits of thought and behavior. As habits are foundational for all human activity, they are for culture too” (Hodgson 2001: 294). On the ontological primacy of habit, Hodgson 2001: 351.

\textsuperscript{4} For a critique of this subjective principle from the point of view of objectivity of the Marxian concepts, see Campbell 2004.

\textsuperscript{5} His main reference here is the French Kantian philosopher Alain Renault (Arnsperger 2007: 74-75).
gap is healed, through the reference to Horkheimer with its necessary political-normative aspect. It is however, a reference purified explicitly from the Marxist elements of the Frankfurt school (Arnspenger 2007: 127 and 138). His insistence is to be found on the value of a Critical Theory (with capital C and T), that refers mostly to the general capacity of the conscious, rational subject to normatively reflect upon the circulating dominant theories and the possibility of a better society (Arnspenger 2007: 142).

In the articulation of this program, we have to admit that Arspenger does not proceed to any particular analysis of the objective relations that contextualize the dehumanized economic theory. In contrast, the means of the normative theory that he proposes are particularly subjective. The main burden of his argument relies on the distinction between the critical and non-critical behaviors, as well as on various motivational themes and microeconomic models that could lead individuals to think according to rational critical criteria (critical political economy is conceived as “motivational ideal”- Arnsperger 2007: 266). It does not therefore come as a surprise, that he is closing his critical theory, with the figure of the economist as a reflexive and socially sensitive enlightener that accepts and discusses the pluralism of paradigms (Arnspenger 2007: ch. 11).

We can now figure out the common elements of the aforementioned approaches and also systematize the points raised in our critique:

a) The pluralist approach in economics constantly evokes the hegemonic and even oppressive character of neoclassical economics. In this way, they denote the neoclassical institutional domination in the universities, and the role of the state, in order to achieve this domination. Simultaneously, they don’t formulate any theory as to how and why this is happening in a systematic way; in other words they lack a theory for the capitalist institutions, and especially of the state.

b) Pluralist economics display a general suspicion and even rejection, towards what we call general or grand theories. They insist that a general theoretical notion, cannot possibly conceive the dynamic, multidimensional, and finally complex character of social phenomena, and additionally they warn of the reductionist, metaphysical and maybe totalitarian danger. Simultaneously, they seem to ignore, or deliberately to conceal that in their propositions, there can be found notions of an over-generalized character, such as habit and critique, that achieve an omnipotent explicative capacity, and imply very strong metaphysical assumptions, on human nature that are never posed or clarified explicitly.

c) Pluralist economics, in spite of their ferocious rhetorical opposition to neoclassical economics, cannot in reality break from their methodological individualist framework. For all their insistence on the complex nature of social phenomena, their standard methodological practice in the explication of mass social phenomena relies on the reduction to individual and subjective motives or at least in the “relations” between individuals (Hodgson 2007). What is more, is that their evocation of the normativity of freedom, does not provide us with particular elements on how this is connected with theoretical practice, beyond some vague references to democracy and pluralism. Following this, we can conclude that the notion of complexity in a large part of today’s heterodox economics, mostly fulfils an ideological, rather than a

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6 Especially this aspect is one of the most important aspects of Hodgson approach and constantly returns to his work under the term “impurity principle”, for a development of this term see also Hodgson 1991: 163-165.
theoretical function, thus being part, of the general humanist and normative constitution of (heterodox or orthodox) liberal economics from their very beginnings.

The reason that we can call this theoretical attitude ideological can be better understood, if we think how different the conception of this notion is conceived from the point of view of the contemporary systemic social theory.

III. A Note on the notion of complexity in the systemic social theory.

In this type of social theory we are focusing our attention on the concrete construction and use of the concept of complexity; particularly for the German theorist Niklass Luhmann –which had the audacity to characterize his theory as “radically anti-humanist, radically anti-regional and radically constructivist”. For Luhmann the question of complexity is not posited as a point of general reduction, given that it is always understood as structured complexity. This means that complexity is always understood as the difference between a system and its environment, and also always, as an internal differentiation within the system itself (Luhmann 1995: 7-9 and 21). The internal closure of each system is assured from the function of its proper guiding difference, which posits through exclusion so to speak, its proper environmental conditions (Luhmann 1995: 32). Thus the reference to a fundamental ground becomes an inappropriate principle. For example Luhmann’s interesting account of the economic system, falls into this framework, as being internally differentiated into two circuits - that of commodities, and that of money (Luhmann 1988: 134-140) – both of which have the market as their common internal environment. In any case, it seems to be impossible to have a, somehow conscious or political, total synchronization through some kind of environmental control (Luhmann 1995: 36 and 43). Through this perspective, the continuous presence of contingency, or of disequilibrium, is not interpreted as the outcome of a particular creativity or vitality, but as the need of each system, not to lose completely contact with its environment (see the example with the instability of prices- Luhmann 1995:50). In other words contingency as systemic maintains the communication between the system and its complex environment that is formed from the other systems. That’s the reason that Luhmann does not presuppose here a kind of human consciousness but only mutual irritations.

Within this conception of complexity, we can understand that Luhmann’s provocative position for the separation between the social system and the human subject –which as such belongs to the environment of the system (Luhmann 1995: 212) - is in direct opposition with the aforementioned unifying and humanistic approaches. Being given, that complexity as structured is a selective process that works through division and differentiation (Luhmann 1995: 25-27 and 214), and not through a pluralistic multiplication, it is evident that Luhmann understands human action, not as a property ensuing from a unified human consciousness, but as a unit adapted to the communicative and semantic exigencies of the respective subsystems. Simultaneously, it is interesting that although Luhmann adopts part of the evolutionary perspective, he does not imply any kind of deep continuity of human history, but underlines the role of the historical rupture, that establishes the passage into modern social formations. It is exactly this rupture that forms the modern social system, rendering possible a distinction of action from a unified and moral

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7 Cited in Ferrarese 2007: 64
8 The concept of self-referential systems takes the place of the (Kantian) subject, Luhmann 1995: 28.
9 A radical holism is clearly assumed by Luhmann, Luhmann 1995: 224, 228
consciousness (Luhmann 1995: 240). The particularity of modern social systems permits the existence of a differentiated social order, not through the conscious harnessing of contingency, but through and as a consequence of this contingency (Luhmann 1998: ch. 3).

As we have already mentioned, the reason for taking this detour through Luhmann’s account of complexity, is not because of our agreement with this perspective, but in order to highlight how differently, the concept of complexity into a systemic framework can be interpreted, and thus underline how weak this is as a normative basis for the return of the critical subject or for a pluralistic democratic order.

IV. From Complexity to the concept of the Capitalist Mode of Production

We can question, if in the perspective of the critique of political economy, there exists a post-humanist systematic concept that prevents us from the regression into the metaphysics of the critical human subject, or the metaphysics of the autonomy of politics. We consider that there is indeed such a concept, and that this is the concept of the capitalist mode of production. It is true that this concept, at least during the last three decades, has fallen into oblivion, in the wider Marxist bibliography. This concept which has played such a critical role for Marx today appears to concern, only some students of the old structuralist Marxism. One of these being the French theorist Jacques Bidet, who continues to use an expression (Bidet 2004: part II), that in our opinion can play a role of replacement against the easy and ideological use of complexity. In other words this can be the concept of complexity, conceived from the structural perspective of the capitalist mode of production. This is to evoke the term of topology (or topography\textsuperscript{10}) which is of course a metaphorical expression but gives us a good representational account of what Marx called the articulation (Gliederung) of the capitalist mode of production. So, we can use this metaphorical but determinate term in order to replace the equally metaphorical rhetoric of complexity.

Into this topology of the capitalist mode of production, we can figure out three structural spaces (or topoi):

a) The first topos is that of production, which also has the peculiarity of being the space of the explicit division of social classes, and concerns the famous dialectic between forces and relations of productions. From the point of view of the critique of political economy, this space also has a specific political role to play, as the space where, a relatively explicit and visible form of the class struggle can be expressed. At the same time we must not forget that the hegemonic discourse into the topos of production is that of technique, and thence its dominant binary code of communication becomes that of productive/non-productive.

b) The second topos is that of the market, which in a Marxist perspective has the peculiarity, that its forms must be understood from the beginning as being mediated by money, as monetary forms (Murray 2000, Arthur 2002: ch.2, Milios 2009). The ignorance of this factor, from the structuralist perspective, because of its hostility towards value-form theory\textsuperscript{11}, was besides one of its basic disadvantages (a hostility that made them finally, conceive market relations through the lenses of the individualist- contractual framework –Bidet

\textsuperscript{10} This was the term used systematically by Louis Althusser (Althusser 1976: 140, 177, 183 and Althusser 1990: 213-215, 220)

\textsuperscript{11} This hostility is continued until today: Bidet 2007: ch. 9.
The fundamental mediation that achieves capital through money into the market consequently, transforms the difference between payment / no-payment as market’s dominant binary code.

c) The third topos is that of the state. We know well from Marx’s developments on the working day into the first volume of Capital, that the state has a particular power and ability to intervene (Marx 1976: 348, 382) which gives it an autonomy vis-à-vis the technical exigencies of production, and towards the monetary forms and forces of the market. This particular capacity of intervention makes the state the central space of validation, for any radical change of class struggle in the capitalist mode of production. Simultaneously the mechanism of the state achieves the neutralization of its power of intervention, through the juridical language that supports its decisions, thus making its dominant binary code, that of the legal versus the non legal.

From the above tripartite topology of the capitalist mode of production, we can focus on two main conclusions that for us are here the most interesting. The first concerns, the modes of causal explanation into this conceptual scheme. A very well known proposal, gives primacy to the economic factor, or better still to the economic base. An equally classic interpretation, speaks of a relative autonomy of the political factor, and especially of the state (Poulantzas 1973). In contrast to both of them, it will be interesting to accept the absolute autonomy and the operative closure of the three topographic spaces that we mentioned above. Consequently, the contact between them should be considered neither as a free-will conscious reflexivity nor as causal relation between base and superstructure, but as a relationship of mutual irritations. At the same time should be recognized, that the determinant factor -as the final instance of the capitalist mode of production- is not the “economy” but capital itself, as the mode of the common mutual structuring and symmetrization. In this way, and by being completely autonomous the three spaces of the capitalist mode of production, are simultaneously, totally depended on capital as a mode of communication –a process that in Marxism traditionally took the name of reification. It’s worth noting here, that there indeed exists a topos where capital finds the easiest way for its expression and to which can be attributed not a dominant, but a specific role. This space is the topos of the market. We must recognize its important coordinating role, as Marx has already done so in his exceptional pages on market competition in the third volume of Capital\textsuperscript{12}. In these pages it is made clear, that the market is the point where capital is expressed as a social impersonal power (Marx 1981: 297).

The second conclusion, concerns the way with which we conceptualize the relatively permanent historical character of the capitalist mode of production, and thus the topology of its articulation. To formulate our conclusion in a provocative way, we can say that from the moment that we accept this concept, we must also accept its independence from the historical conditions of its genesis, and construct concepts that give priority to its static character over its dynamics and its crises.

\textsuperscript{12} The coordinating role of the market competition through the function of equalization of the different market prices towards the market value of the (social) capital in-general is clearly conceived by Marx, Marx 1981: 281, 1012, 1030
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