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Towards a theory of action: ontology and politics as foundations of Herbert Marcuse's dialectical phenomenology*

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Abstract: This article seeks to analyze the modes of composition of the so-called dialectical phenomenology, proposed by Herbert Marcuse in 1928. It is one of his first writings, in which the author seeks to think of a theory of action whose starting point are the historical analyses derived from the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, orchestrated with the existential analytic provided by *Being and time*, by Heidegger. In order to interpret this pioneering philosophical architecture, (1) we will first show how Marcusean method establishes the understanding of a historical situation. (2) In the second section, we analyze how Marcuse interprets, in a very original way, the ontological aspects of *Dasein*. (3) In the last part, it is about showing how Marcuse operates a junction of both analyses in order to argue the need for a transforming action on the unveiled social alienation. Together, these three movements seek to emphasize the social concern that has always occupied Herbert Marcuse's philosophical reflections.

Keywords: dialectics, Herbert Marcuse, historical materialism, ontology, politics

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Hacia una teoría de la acción: ontología y política como fundamentos de la fenomenología dialéctica de Herbert Marcuse

Resumen: Este artículo pretende analizar los modos de composición de la llamada fenomenología dialéctica propuesta por Herbert Marcuse en 1928. Es uno de sus primeros escritos, en el que el autor busca pensar en una teoría de la acción cuyo punto de partida son los análisis históricos derivados del materialismo histórico de Marx y Engels, orquestados con el análisis existencial proporcionado por *Ser y tiempo* de Heidegger. Para interpretar esta arquitectura filosófica pionera, (1) primero mostraremos cómo el método de Marcuse establece la comprensión de una situación histórica. (2) En la segunda sección, analizamos cómo Marcuse interpreta, de manera original, los aspectos ontológicos del *Dasein*. (3) En la última parte, se trata de mostrar cómo opera Marcuse una unión de ambos análisis para argumentar la necesidad de una acción transformadora sobre la alienación social revelada. Juntos, estos tres movimientos buscan enfatizar la preocupación social que siempre ha ocupado las reflexiones filosóficas de Herbert Marcuse.

Palabras clave: dialéctica, Herbert Marcuse, materialismo histórico, ontología, política

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Introduction

After the publication of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in 1927, Herbert Marcuse returned to Freiburg, where he had finished his doctorate in 1922, in order to complete his *Habilitation* thesis with Martin Heidegger. He remained there until December 1932, when he left Germany to join the other intellectuals of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, then refugees in Geneva.¹ At the time, Husserl's proposal, then professor in Freiburg, to "return to things themselves" –which established the phenomenological method aimed at concrete phenomena and experience– as well as Martin Heidegger's incursion into existential analytic, attracted a whole generation of young philosophy students. In the eyes of the young Marcuse, Husserl and Heidegger marked a renaissance of philosophy, because of their radical attempt to establish its concrete foundations, taking into consideration human existence and its condition.² For Marcuse, who had been a reader of Marx since his youth, existentialism appeared to be an important philosophical contribution –through it would be possible to overcome the petrified bases of Marxism of the time, not only in the political field, but also in the academic world. In this sense, it is important to understand the Marxist debate within the context in which Marcuse wrote his first papers. This embryonic *corpus* of the Marcusean philosophy was given the name of *dialectical phenomenology*.

Between the end of the 19 and the beginning of the 20 century, the theoretical current then dominant in the Marxist milieu had a clear Neo-Kantian influence. One of its main theorists was the Austrian Max Adler, whose work aimed at a synthesis between Kant and Marx. In contrast to this perspective, Georg Lukács had written a critique, in *History and Class Consciousness*, challenging this transcendental reading of Marxism (see Lukács, 1923/1972, p. 11ff). For Lukács, the refusal or erasure of the dialectical method in the exercise of social comprehension meant the end of an understanding of history that took into account the genetic movement of capitalism, as well as its contradictions. In this sense, Lukács rejected the Neo-Kantian method that monopolized Marxism in Germany by the beginning of the 20th century. In addition, it is necessary to understand the dominant ideas within the Socialist Party, which emerged from the *Second International* and the work of Karl Kautsky.³

1 After completing his doctorate in Freiburg in 1922 with a thesis entitled *Der deutsche Künstlerroman*, Marcuse lived in Berlin, where he worked in the editorial field with S. Martin Fraenkel. During these years he also prepared his first publication, a compilation of the bibliography about Schiller, which appeared in 1925. On this subject, see Kellner (1984, pp. 33-37).

2 Later, around 1932, Marcuse changed his mind about Heidegger's philosophy for reasons that we will analyze in the following sections. On this subject, see the interview with Marcuse entitled *Theorie und Politik*, conducted by Jürgen Habermas, Heinz Lubasz and Tilman Spengler: Habermas & Bovenschen (1978/2016). Another important interview, which we will discuss below, can be found in Olafson (1977/2007, pp. 115-127).

3 In this sense, Marcuse closely follows Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923/1972), as well as Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923/2008), insofar as he positions himself in favour of the dialectical interaction subject-object. His career path therefore contrasts with the objectivist version of "scientific socialism" (closely followed by the Second International and

It was in opposition to these ideas that the young Marcuse, following the path opened by Lukács and Karl Korsch, enters into the debate around the Marxist theory of his time. Thus, Marcuse's efforts are concretized in a work of epistemological renewal in the face of the objectifying and economist interpretation of orthodox Marxism—or vulgar, to speak like Lukács—which despised the philosophical and dialectical background on which the critical force of Marxism itself was based (Wolin, 2005, p. xiv). Marcuse does not believe that Marxism could be seen as a scientific theory and, in this sense, Heidegger's major work opens up a philosophical horizon for the rehabilitation of the theoretical potential of Marxism, allowing a kind of materialist analytic of the *Dasein* (Habermas, 1971/1974, p. 222).

According to Marcuse's reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, philosophy deals with human existence, seeking its own access to it and opening up to relevant aspects of the concrete life. Heidegger's existential analytic initially approached the phenomenon of historicity, showing it as a mode of concrete human existence in its historical world, but also revealing the inauthentic and reified situation of that same existence. Heidegger establishes, according to Marcuse's interpretation, a philosophy whose starting point is the concrete human being immersed in his concrete historical situation, and suggests, from this situation, the idea of a transcendence of this inauthentic mode (Romero, 2013, p. 332). Marcuse's project, for its part, is dedicated to a rigorous analysis of the phenomenon of historicity in order to understand the historical necessity of a radical act of rupture with the current social situation, in other words, to understand the "mode of donation" of historical materialism as a way of accessing this transformative action (Schmidt, 1968, p. 20). It is in this context that the use of materialism, under the light of the fundamental Heideggerian ontology, marks the occasion for a renewal of Marxist philosophy. This is the context in which Marcuse wrote his first article "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism" ("*Beiträge zu einer Phänomenologie des Historischen Materialismus*"), which retains some rather original aspects.⁴ The most striking originality, of course, is the junction between historical materialism and existential ontology, in which Marcuse operates an act of reciprocal correction between the two philosophical fields in order to draw a new proposal of philosophy. But if a

Soviet Marxism), which believed in the objectivity of the scientific laws that would lead the capitalist economy to its collapse. See Dumenil, Löwy & Renault (2009, p. 64) and Kellner (1984, p. 39). As for the German academic context and the integration of positivist Marxism into universities after 1918, see Goldmann (1973, p. 59ff).

- 4 The *Beiträge zu einer Phänomenologie des Historischen Materialismus* were first published in July 1928, in the first volume of the Berlin-based journal *Philosophische Hefte*. It was published by Maximilian Beck from 1929 to 1936 (Cf. Spiegelberg, 1994, p. 188). The German text was also republished in the first volume of the *Marcuse Schriften*, this is the source to which we will refer (Cf. Marcuse, 1928a/1978, pp. 347-384). When necessary, we will use the translation of Eric Oberle edited by R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Cf. Marcuse, 1928b/2005). It is worth noting that the philosophical project included in the contributions was also addressed by Marcuse in other texts from the same period, i.e., the late 1920s and early 1930s. In this article, we will focus on the contributions, because we are specifically interested in how Marcuse achieves the historical and collective aspects of social construction within Heidegger's ontology. For knowledge of other aspects of Marcuse's concrete philosophy (Cf. Marcuse, 1929a/1978; 1929b; 2011).

correction is made throughout this essay, we will see that it goes hand in hand with a reading of the notion of Marxist history through the notion of historicity.⁵

With this scenario in mind, we can now focus on the specificity of Marcuse's early philosophical challenges. In the following sections, our goal is to analyze the Marcusean project of a dialectical phenomenology proposed along its *Beiträge*, thus clarifying the fundamentals of the author's thought developed in the 1920s and which later helped to build his path within the Institute of Social Research.⁶

1. Historical materialism and fundamental situation

Marcuse's very first article begins with an observation about the principles of Marxism, which are the main focus of his essay. Marxism, says Marcuse, is first of all a "theory of social action, of the historical act (*geschichtlichen Tat*)" (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 347; 1928b/2005, p. 1). The claim of this act, of this praxis, must be accompanied by a historical necessity, which Marxism alone reveals, as a theory of history. This unbreakable unity between theory and practice proves, thus, to be the guiding thread that runs through all Marxist fundamental research, and it is from within Marxism itself that one must think of the logical firmness that supports the necessity of the social act. These truths are not truths of knowledge in general, as would be appropriate in the case of a science. The truths of Marxism refer to the happening (*Geschehen*), which requires historical materialism for its interpretation.⁷ This approach constitutes within Marxism the theoretical complex allowing to deduce the meaning of happening, its "structure", its "mobility", its necessity (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 347; 1928b/2005, p. 1). The question is then to know if the theses of historical materialism fully understand the phenomenon of historicity, and Marcuse's entire article revolves around this question. Therefore, Marcuse's first works constitute an investigation into the fundamental Marxist situation.

The author begins his analysis by taking the individual –the human being– as a point of departure, by questioning his "fundamental situation". By such a situation he

5 According to one of Stephan Bundschuh's theses, the movement practiced by Marcuse in this essay is to read the Marxist notion of history under the light of Heidegger's *historicity*, through which a reformulation can take place (Cf. Bundschuh, 1998, p. 25ff). For an overview discussion of the concept in Heidegger, in the light of a discussion with Dilthey and Husserl, see also Liangkang (2018).

6 The issue of the rupture within Marcuse's philosophy in 1932, with his entry into the Institute of Social Research and with the abandonment of Heidegger's ontology, was the subject of much debate. Our objective here is not to detail the transformations that occurred within Marcuse's philosophy during the 1930s, nor to defend a rupture or a chronic adherence to Heidegger's philosophy in his work. For the reader who is interested in this discussion, we refer to the following important works: Jay (1973/1996); Kangussu (2008); Katz (1982); Peter-Erwin (1999); Raulet (1992); Reitz (2000).

7 By translating *Geschehen* as *happening* we follow here the work organized by Wolin and Abromeit. According to them, "with the possible exception of the concept of historicity, to which it is closely related, *Geschehen* was the most prominent and important concept that Marcuse appropriated from Heideggerian phenomenology during this time. *Geschehen* was so crucial for Marcuse because it captured the dynamic, "ontological" historicity unique to human Dasein, which he believed had been lost in recent discussions of Marx's theory" (Cf. Wolin & Abromeit, 2005, p. 181).

understands the general context within which a human being perceives his singular position towards the world around him and, above all, from this perception, the resulting task for this same individual (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 348; 1928b/2005, p. 2). But how can we come to an understanding of such a situation? Everything is in the method with which we seek to understand, and in this sense, what Marcuse wants to emphasize is that, if “human beings are both subjects and objects of history”, and if they begin to analyze their historical situation, object and subject merge, and such an analysis cannot be done without this determinism (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 349; 1928b/2005, p. 3). This is a key question for Marcuse since his aim is to delimit the ground on which he himself must analyze the fundamental theories of Marxism, that is, the *corpus* of the writings of Marx and Engels as “the original historical expression of Marxism” (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 349; 1928b/2005, p. 3.). Within this *corpus*, Marcuse identifies two central concepts directly related, namely, the *radical act* (*radikalen Tat*) and the *historical existence* (*geschichtlichen Existenz*). It is on the basis of these two notions that we must investigate if the “historical possibility of the radical act” brings to light a “new and necessary reality”, relating to the “realization of the human essence”, a “self-consciously historical human being” and the only bearer of such a necessity (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 351; 1928b/2005, p. 4).

Let us start with the radical act, following Marcuse’s argument more closely. According to the author, one of the main elements of the fundamental Marxist situation is the need for a radical act. This follows from Marx and Engels’ analysis of capitalist society. According to both authors, within this society, humans were grouped together and their situation determined by historical conditions and class and labour relations, where “individuals stripped of any effective vital content became abstract individuals” (Marx & Engels, 1845b/2014, p. 197).⁸ Such a situation, where the specific activity of humans is subject to the capitalist structure, requires an act by which the very existence of humans, then historically conformed to this system, is changed. Under this perspective, the radical act is an act that concerns human existence, and the change of that existence itself, *i.e.* an act that, while changing the historical circumstances in which human beings find themselves immersed, also changes human existence itself. Indeed, this claim of a practical activity that changes both the human being and his environment, Marcuse finds it in Marx’s thesis on Feuerbach: “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change (*Selbstveränderung*) can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*”.⁹ The radical act thus has an existential foundation, since it is through it that humanity takes its status into its own hands and brings the transformation of its own reality into “the decisive

8 This bilingual German-French volume takes into account the latest bibliographic advances involving the manuscripts of the so-called *German Ideology*. All translations of passages from this volume into English are our own.

9 Final part of the third thesis on Feuerbach (Cf. Marx & Engels, 1845b/2014, p. 4).

realization of the human essence" (*menschlichen Wesen*) (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 350; 1928b/2005, p. 4). The radicality of this act goes hand in hand with the existential change it seeks to promote, and since it is a reaction to an intolerable social reality, it is not limited to simple social, economic or political changes, but extends directly to changing modes of existence (Kellner, 1984, p. 41ff). Then, by virtue of the act as the fundamental determination of the human being, found in Feuerbach's Marxist critique, we encounter the realization or effect of an intrinsic necessity of existence. So, according to Marcuse,

the act is intended existentially in that it emerges from human Dasein as essential conduct and in that it is directed toward human Dasein. The radical act must (in relation to the doer) happen as a concrete necessity [*konkreten Notwendigkeit*] of concrete human Dasein and it must (in relation to the environment) be necessary for concrete human Dasein. The sphere of this concrete necessity is history [*Geschichte*]. All determinations of the radical act unite in their foundational determination as historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 352; 1928b/2005, p. 5).

This brings us to the second point that Marcuse made about Marx and Engels' work: historical existence. This existence, of which the act is the essential conduct, is situational, it is concrete. It belongs to a space and a time, in a relational framework from which it does not escape, in which it lives and where it is both determined and decisive. Therefore, this existence is effective, and it is in the concreteness of the surrounding world that the practiced act is to be done. However, this concreteness is historical. It results from the unfolding of history, from the reciprocal interaction between man and nature in history (Marx & Engels, 1845b/2014, p. 271). In search of this act, one is thus faced with the historical existence, for which the happening of the radical act is imposed as a concrete necessity (*konkreten Notwendigkeit des Geschehens*). All the determinants of this act are based in the historical determination of existence (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 352; 1928b/2005, p. 5). We are therefore in the presence of a historically determined existence, we are circumscribed by the historical situation which prescribes the "prevailing possibilities of concrete human beings", as much as its actual reality (*Wirklichkeit*) and its future. Within this historical existence, the radical act has an immanent necessity, it must be carried out in history, its direction and purpose can only come from history itself and aim at historical existence.

However, how does this Marcusean analysis proceed in order to comprehend such historicity and necessity of human activity in its own reality? Marcuse returns to Marx and Engels' starting point: "We know only a single science, the science of history" (Marx & Engels, 1845a/2010, p. 28). This postulate loaded with epistemological ambition allowed the authors of *German Ideology* begin to study the history of humanity, and find the way to their analysis. Their starting point is found in the "effective individuals" (*wirklichen Individuen*) who, along an empirical path, discover their action and their

material living conditions, that is, not only the conditions they find already given, but also those they generate through their own action (Marx & Engels, 1845b/2014, p. 271). This concrete dimension of the Marx and Engels' method allows Marcuse to find, first of all, that

historical humanity does not appear as an isolated individual, but as a human being among other human beings [*Mensch unter Menschen*] in an environment [*Umwelt*], as “dependent”, “as belonging to a larger whole”. In whatever the historical time or space the [*phenomenological*] gaze is cast, it always discovers society as that which is historically concrete, as the historical “unity” [*geschichtliche “Einheit” die Gesellschaft*] (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 353; 1928b/2005, p. 6).

From the notion of society, we discover its modes of production and reproduction of the material environment in which it is located. A constant renewal and a constant repetition of its existence show the maintenance and perpetuation of society in relation to natural conditions already present, under different modes of production each time. Humanity, in the pursuit of its ends, in its activity, in the succession of generations in which previous productions found and determine the productions of subsequent generations, stretches in historical time the continuity and dynamics of change, which is only made from what is given and present to it. The new generation can only develop and modify its heritage. Faced with this imposition of history,

the new generation can only become the *subject* [*Subjekt*] of history if it recognizes and grasps itself as the object [*Objekt*] of history, if it acts from the knowledge of its singular historical situation (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 355; 1928b/2005, p. 8).

Thus, it is through the unveiling of such mobility that Marx and Engels explain the increasing complexity of the production process and the emergence of the division of labour –from national to international– which leads to the emergence of the modern global market. Their analysis thus conducts to the formation of the universal class, that is the proletariat, whose purpose and necessary action are prescribed in advance by their historical existence. This universal class reveals itself to be the bearer of a necessity which, through a dialectical relationship set in motion due to the concreteness and affliction of its historical situation, aims at a transformation that is both existential and social (Kellner, 1984, p. 42). The act is born of this necessity, which can only be proven as such after an awareness of the historical situation: the awareness of such a situation thus reveals the need to change this situation. Within the framework of a class consciousness, the act is the result of a process that links a historical consciousness and a necessity resulting from this awareness:

Historical existence first becomes complete in the scientific knowledge [*Wissen*] of this existence, in the knowledge of its historical situation, its possibilities, and its task. Only then is it “immediately bound up with history”; only then can it do that which it must do—and do it radically. Only that which must be done can be done radically and it is only through knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] that human existence can become certain of this necessity. In the historical situation that we have been addressing, class is the decisive historical unity and the knowledge of the unique, historical-social necessity is the achievement of “class consciousness” [*Klassenbewußtsein*] (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, pp. 356-357; 1928b/2005, p. 9).

By claiming action based on the situation of a given subject, determined as a class, Marcuse makes the Marxist background of his theory resonate. A class conscious of its historical state is the only force able to trigger the revolutionary act for which his analysis tries to find the foundation.¹⁰ And this consciousness, Marcuse reaffirms, is only possible through the work of theory, which reveals necessity and opens the path for practice.

2. The material substrate of historicity

In the first part of his *Beiträge*, Marcuse carries out an analysis of the achievements of historical materialism and the theory of history that emerges from it. Even if the early work of Marx and Engels to which our author most often refers, the *German ideology*, is only a collection of fragments gathered in posterity, the theses of this ensemble show the human existence as being primarily historical. Marcuse's next step is then to analyze historicity from another perspective, that is, to demonstrate it as a way of being of the *Dasein*.¹¹ In order to promote such a turn, it is Heidegger's *Being and*

10 With regard to the proletariat as a revolutionary subject, Douglas Kellner suggests that, even if Marcuse merged the notion of the individual and that of class in his early writings, it would already be possible to see in it a doubt regarding the status of the proletariat (Cf. Kellner, 1984, p. 389, n 29). If we are allowed to take a relatively different analytical path from that of Kellner, it seems to us that Marcuse never abandoned the proletarian protagonist's conviction, and such a suggestion is based mainly on the author's subsequent work. Certainly, from the 1960s onwards, other social elements and others “damned”, previously ignored by Marxist criticism, were considered to have been important factors of social change in Marcuse's work. This does not indicate, however, that the Marcusean view of the proletariat has changed. On this subject, see the article of 1979—year of his death—, in which Marcuse affirms, despite the change in labour relations under advanced capitalism, the existential role of the proletariat: “the proletariat is, by its very existence, a potentially revolutionary force—this quality being definitive of its very existence. Given its existence, its (potential) function in the transformation of society is also given—realisation of its existence. Now I want to defend this reification, which has at least the advantage that it stops the desperate search for the lost revolutionary Subject: a loss held to be due to the prevalent integration of the working class into the capitalist system. The working class still is the “ontological” antagonist of capital, and the potentially revolutionary Subject; but it is a vastly expanded working class, which no longer corresponds directly to the Marxian proletariat. Late capitalism has re-defined the working class” (Cf. Marcuse, 1979, p. 20).

11 As is well known, the term *Dasein* crosses modern German philosophy and, precisely because of this, it is a word whose semantic load is too wide for an absolute definition to be attempted. However, the historicizing movement that Marcuse applies

time (1927) that the author will address, since in this book, starting from the question of the meaning of being, it is historicity as a mode of being of the *Dasein* that the author brings to light. We thus see the Marcusean interpretation turning towards Heideggerian phenomenological analysis, and its starting point is the constitution of being of the “being-in-the-world” (“*In-der-Welt-seins*”) (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 359; 1928b/2005, p. 11). The world is already given, Marcuse reminds us, and it is there that the *Dasein* meets others who, in their mutual relationship, compose a world of meanings (*Bedeutungswelt*), which presents itself as something we need, something we care about. The reality of the *Dasein*, in its multiple components, is “a concrete totality that cannot be torn asunder” (*unzerreißbaren konkreten Totalität*) (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 359; 1928b/2005, p. 11). This interpretation of being in the world thus shows that the *Dasein* is “being with” (*Mitsein*), that he shares the world with others who influence mutually for his determination. We then encounter the “they” (*Man*), the average subject of the *Dasein*, who takes charge of all the possibilities and decisions of the *Dasein*. This constitutes the scenario of the decay of the existing to its world, where the mode of being of the existing is an “inauthentic existing”. In his thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), he succumbs to the shared world, constantly turning away from his authentic being (*eigentlichen Sein*) (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 360; 1928b/2005, p. 12).

Nevertheless, according to Marcuse’s interpretation, there remains at the bottom of the *Dasein* an understanding (*Verstehen*) of what is authentic¹² to him through which he finds the possibility of seizing his own being, and this is thanks to temporality as the fundamental constitution of the *Dasein*.¹³ For Marcuse, this is the main point of the existential analysis presented in *Being and time*: the constitutive historicity of the *Dasein* shows that past, present and future are ways of being of the latter, and allow us to think of the resolution (*Entschlossenheit*) as a way of accessing authentic existence, by which the *Dasein* takes the transmitted and inherited possibilities, assuming its path towards death.¹⁴ In this assumption of inheritance lies the freedom of the *Dasein*:

to the ontological dimension of the term allows us, as his own text shows, to read *Dasein* simply as human existence, concrete *human existence*. In any case, we’ll follow the English translators and will use the original term in order not to ignore any of its possibilities of meaning.

- 12 See Feenberg’s definition on this issue: “inauthentic existence, average everyday existence, consists in conformism and refusal of self-responsibility. The insight into freedom represented by Heidegger’s philosophy is too hard a lesson to be commonly lived. To be fully human —authentic— is to acknowledge the groundlessness of human existence and nevertheless to act resolutely” (Cf. Feenberg, 2005, p. xii).
- 13 For Heidegger, historicity precedes history as the temporal mode of the being of the *Dasein*, regardless of how the *Dasein* exists as an entity (*Seiendes*) in time (Cf. Schmidt, 1968, pp. 21-22).
- 14 Once again, Feenberg’s comments are enlightening: “By resoluteness Heidegger does not mean arbitrary decisions but rather ‘precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factually possible at the time,’ that is, the response called for by the situation. In resoluteness the human being intervenes actively in shaping its world and defining itself, as opposed to inauthentic conformism. Unfortunately, Heidegger’s philosophy offers no means for determining criteria of what is ‘factually possible’ and so leaves the question of action in the air” (Cf. Feenberg, 2005, p. xii).

In resolutely handing itself over to historical inheritance, Dasein grasps its own “fate.” It brings itself out of the fallenness [*Verfallenheit*] of existing inauthentically and into authentic existence insofar as it becomes historical: it itself chooses its inherited, historically determined possibility [*geschichtlich bestimmte Möglichkeit*] and “recovers” its existence out of this possibility (Marcuse, 1928a, p. 361; 1928b/2005, p. 13).

Recovery (*Wiederholung*)—a crucial point in the understanding of historicity—, which unfolds from the inherited possibilities, is not a simple re-actualization of the past, but a reworking of failed possibilities, then actualized in the face of the present.¹⁵ It is the historical reality as it is presented, concrete and shared. It nourishes the future of the *Dasein*, which appears, in a cohabited world, as a shared event, as a co-destiny (*Geschick*). Thus, the historicity of the *Dasein* rooted it in a collective mobility, which extends to its entire generation. Thus, in Marcuse's methodological use of it, the Heideggerian contributions help to look at history from another perspective. *Being and time* allows ontological reflection in the concrete space of the historical present, and since this unveiling, the whole history must be thought based on the existing that acts *in its present and from its present situation*. This is when Marcuse's interpretation comes into play so that the results of the Heideggerian analysis be incorporated into “the living totality of the historical Dasein” (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 362; 1928b/2005, p. 14). Based on this knowledge recovered by Marcuse, philosophical problems enter into a “dialectical mobility” (*dialektische Bewegtheit*) and are indexed to concrete human beings who are, ultimately, the agents around which these problems appear. In a passage that makes explicit his use of Heidegger, Marcuse clearly shows the main reason why *Being and time* has become an essential work of his time:

Recognizing the historical thrownness of Dasein and its historical determinateness and rootedness in the “destiny” of the community [*“Geschick der Gemeinschaft”*], Heidegger has driven his radical investigation to the most advanced point that bourgeois philosophy has yet achieved—and can achieve. He has revealed man's theoretical modes of behavior to be “derivative”, to be founded in practical “making-provision”, and has thereby shown praxis to be the field of decisions. He has determined the moment of decision—resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*—]—to be a historical situation and resoluteness itself to be a taking-up of historical fate. Against the bourgeois concepts of freedom and determination, he has posed a new definition of being free as the ability to choose necessity, as the genuine ability to grasp the possibilities that have been prescribed and pregiven; moreover,

15 It should be recalled that, since the failure of the German revolution in 1919—in which Marcuse participated— collective and revolutionary action has remained as the biographical background from which his work has been conformed (Cf. Wiggerhaus, 1986/1995, p. 14f). For an introduction to the events of 1918 and 1919 in Germany, see Kuhn (2012).

he has established history as the sole authority in relation to this “fidelity to one’s own existence”. Here, however, the radical impulse reaches its end (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 363; 1928b/2005, p. 15).

The historicity provided by Heidegger’s philosophy is presented as the condition of ontological possibility of history and its knowledge,¹⁶ and for this reason it has the merit of having highlighted the concrete human being as the starting point for “philosophizing” everything. Nevertheless, Marcuse’s return to Heidegger is not without a critique, or even an overcoming of the theses written in *Being and time*. Moreover, it would not be inappropriate to argue that Marcuse imposes a correction to Heidegger’s ontology while appropriating it.

Starting from the requirement posed by the concreteness of the situation of the throwing of the *Dasein*, the philosophical act can only be done from its situation, which is a historical situation inscribed within a society where the *Dasein* finds himself thrown and with which he shares his fate. From this common ground, we can thus identify three important characteristics: the *Dasein*’s thrownness is historical, it has historical roots and it is subject to the historical determinants of its situation. All these determinations together mean that the starting point of philosophical activity is the concrete human being, within a historical situation where this existence gains materiality and implication that only history can both provide and determine. The resolution before it is ultimately a negation of the tradition implemented from a repetition aimed at bringing back the failed possibilities of the past. However, it is important to stress that this is not a total negation of the past. From the materialist perspective introduced by Marcuse, it is rather a negation of the historical situation in which the inherited possibilities were denied. The dynamics of repetition thus makes it possible to return to it so that a reappropriation can take place.¹⁷

But if there is in Heidegger’s existentialism a dynamic of reappropriation of the present, it must, according to Marcuse’s view, be transposed into the dialectical framework of Marx.¹⁸ For the latter, the possibilities of the future are not revealed

16 “The proposal: the *Dasein* is historical, is fundamental as an existential ontological statement. An enormous distance separates this statement from a purely ontic observation of the fact that the *Dasein* takes place in a ‘world history’. But the historicity (*Geschichlichkeit*) of the *Dasein* is the reason for a possible historical hearing which, for its part, still includes the possibility of giving historical studies a special development and making it a science” (Heidegger, 1927/1967, §66, p. 332).

17 “In resolutely handing itself over to historical inheritance, *Dasein* grasps its own “fate.” It brings itself out of the fallenness of existing inauthentically and into authentic existence insofar as it becomes historical: it itself chooses its inherited, historically determined possibility and “recovers” its existence out of this possibility” (Cf. Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 361; 1928b/2005, p. 13).

18 Kellner’s interpretation links alienation and inauthenticity. Thus, for Heidegger, even in a mode of inauthenticity, it is possible that an existence passes to authenticity thanks to a “potentiality” (*Sein-können*) that would allow an exit from the alienated existence. This passage, explains Kellner, must follow a path that begins in the experience of concern (*Sorge*), caused by daily life, and that allows the experience of resolution (*Entschlossenheit*). For Heidegger, as we have shown, it is a path of self-transformation that leads the *Dasein* from the experience of concern, of the inevitability of death, to reject his daily existence and to make a decision, a resolution for change. It is this resolution that triggers a process of self-transformation from the existing to authenticity, freeing

without a negation of the present history and its material conformation. However, according to Heidegger, authenticity can only be acquired by a *Dasein* determined to negate the tradition inscribed in the historicity of his present and to re-appropriate the failed possibilities, which remain part of its heritage. For Marcuse, the *Dasein* only has to revoke, from a conscious resolution, the current reality. This is the bridge of connection between existentialism and dialectics through which Marcuse proposes a Marxist interpretation of the Heideggerian concepts. It aims to transform the existing by transposing Heideggerian notions into a framework of social change.

Meeting this path towards concreteness within the existential structure proposed by Heidegger is one of the most original movements of the young Marcuse, especially because such an interpretation cannot be made without a critique of the Heideggerian work in question. If such a relationship between decay and inauthenticity allows us to wait for a radical act, it is locked into a general existential framework, without being able to apply to the present history. For Heidegger, this relationship could not only be valid for existential situations in all historical circumstances, but it is all the more obvious once one wonders what an authentic life is and how it is possible. However, what blocks the authentic existence of the present cannot be highlighted by Heidegger's existential analysis, but rather by a "ontic concretion" capable of meeting the conditions of possibility of the present (Kellner, 1984, p. 47). The "threatening situation of the contemporary human being", which Marcuse wants to address, can only be understood if we return to the historical density of the present, while questioning the nature of a concretely authentic existence (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 364; 1928b/2005, p. 15). This is where the limitation of *Being and time* lies with regard to an act of change in the *Dasein* mode. Since for the latter the only way to overcome the inauthenticity of decay lies within the individual sphere, existential analytic lacks precisely a possibility of authenticity that can be found resolutely within the collective life. Despite the opening of a path to concrete existence, Heidegger's existential analysis deals only with human existence as such, in a clear abstraction from the historical and social world. In addition, Heidegger's historicity considers the *Dasein* according to the model of the *individual*, losing sight of the social and concrete constitution of historicity (Romero, 2013, p. 333).

For this reason, the modification of past experiences, as proposed by Heidegger, is limited in the face of the common task of social restructuring, sought by Marcuse with its intersection between phenomenology and historical materialism. For Marcuse, the radical act must be carried out in public life by aiming at collective transformation, which is not on the Heideggerian agenda¹⁹ –which refers the decisive resolution to the

oneself from tradition in a movement that acts both from and against it. This is why the resolution, where the *Dasein* returns to itself, always opens up the possibilities of an authentic existence based on the heritage it receives. See Kellner 1984, p. 45ff.

19 According to Kellner, the epistolary exchange between Heidegger and Karl Löwith in the early 1920s, when the former was writing *Being and time*, clearly shows the intellectual environment of the time. In the Weimar Republic, Heidegger was not the only one to claim political conservatism after the First World War. Heideggerian philosophy would thus be a "pseudo-radicalism" that

solitary existing. The conditions of the radical act must therefore be sought elsewhere, in a theory of history capable of validating them, while giving them a necessary character. Thus, provided with the ontological foundations that seem correct to him –those that form historicity as a mode of being of the *Dasein*– Marcuse will take up the presuppositions stemming from concrete reality, as they are revealed by historical materialism.

In a text written in 1933, entitled *German Philosophy, 1871-1933*, Marcuse refined the criticism –already present in his *Beiträge*– of the incompleteness of the Heideggerian notion of historicity.²⁰ For the author, Heidegger’s phenomenology has made progress in the dimension of factuality, but not without having blocked its orientation towards history, insofar as the existence approached by it is a *pure existence*, deprived therefore of its history, and which finally forces man to accept and adapt to the situation in which he is precipitated.²¹ We allow ourselves to reproduce here below a long extract from this text, due to its clarity and importance. It shows the Marcusean perspective on Heidegger after the political events of 1933 in Germany.²² Marcuse writes:

Heidegger sought to develop Dilthey’s project. The new direction signaled by Heidegger’s ontology is his attempt at a universal interpretation of being in time. Here we witness a decisive abandonment of the traditional categories of bourgeois thought. Up to this point, the entirety of metaphysics sought to explain being conceptually and within the Logos (as the end result in Hegel’s philosophy, ontology becomes logic). According to Heidegger, it is not the Logos but time that constitutes the original horizon in which one finds and understands being. Heidegger aims to renew *ontologie* as *ontochronie*. In the same vein, he interprets human being in its temporal structures, in its relationships with time. The real

claims “authenticity” while refusing socio-political commitment (Cf. Kellner, 1984, p. 49). Also, Jean-Michel Palmier describes the academic environment in Germany at the time as follows: “The nationalism that characterized the German University and the students was maintained, reinforced by the absence of German unity and amplified by the emergence of reactionary ideological currents encouraged by the empire until 1914 (...). The University has constituted a closed world, a caste, cut off from reality, imbued with its pride, its knowledge, contemptuous of politics considered vulgar, attached to the imperial tradition” (Cf. Palmier, 1983, pp. 345-346).

- 20 We consulted the original of this text, written by Marcuse in French, in the archives of the same author, at the library of the University of Frankfurt, in February 2017. Important data regarding the date and place of production of this writing are not noted in the manuscript, but can be obtained from the library’s digital catalogue. From the latter it is possible to know that the document was produced in 1933, in Geneva, shortly before the author left for the United States. The manuscript, identified under the code “Na 3, Nr. 29” and named *La philosophie allemande entre 1871 et 1933 (German Philosophy between 1871 and 1933)*, consists of 20 pages typewritten, on which are found some handwritten corrections. As for the version we use here, it was published in Wolin & Abromeit (2005, pp. 151-164); (Cf. Marcuse, 1933/2005). A Portuguese version of this manuscript, translated by us, will be soon published, thanks to the kindness permission of Harold Marcuse and Peter Erwin-Jansen.
- 21 Richard Wolin underlines the interpretative path that includes the inauthentic *Dasein (das Man)* from a peaceful attitude of adaptation to its environment, without realizing any change in his existence (Wolin & Abromeit, 2005, p. xii).
- 22 For a more detailed discussion of Heidegger’s notion of history during the 1930’s, in the light of his “Black Notebooks”, see Immanen, 2018 and Haase, 2019.

temporality of human being is its historicity. Heidegger understands man as essentially historical; he considers the actual possibilities of the human being and the conditions of his realization as determined by history. However, opposed to this tendency toward historicity in his philosophy there is also a transcendental trajectory necessitated by the very idea of phenomenology and ontology. Heidegger's "existential" analytic distorts concrete man and orients itself toward human existence *in general*, in the neutrality of its ontological essence. Heidegger's philosophy is wedded to the idea of an authentic existence that is realized through a firm willingness to die for one's own possibilities. It is here that Heidegger's existential analytic is transformed into a politics of heroic, racist realism. Pure consciousness as a residue of the destruction of the world in Husserl becomes, with Heidegger, pure human *existence*, human existence in its transcendental purity. The original inclination toward historicity is paralyzed; history is transported into human existence, it even becomes identical with real existence (Marcuse, 1933/2005, pp. 160-161).

What is most striking in this piece is the critique of the phenomenological approach by which Heidegger attempts to account for the real and material constitution of the historicity of the existing, always marked by a socio-historical world crossed by political and economic antagonisms. Thrown into a common world, the *Dasein* is nevertheless unaware of his concrete historical situation, and Marcuse relates this philosophical aspect of *Being and time* to Heidegger's subsequent commitment to National Socialism, from 1933 onwards (Cf. Fariás, 1987/1989, p. 79 ff). Thus, this 1933 essay clearly shows the criticism already inscribed in 1928 in the *Beiträge*, where Marcuse—as we have shown, despite the use he makes of the dynamics of resolution and the revocation of inauthentic existence—reproaches *Being and time* for its decisive resolution which only concerned the solitary existing. According to Marcuse's correction, more than a modification of past existence, the radical act must be a reconfiguration that has an impact on all spheres of public space (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 364; 1928b/2005, p. 16). Marcuse's requirement thus concerns a "life space" ("*Lebens-Raum*") where the meanings of the present are contextualised in a historical mode, in a concrete historical situation. This is what Marcuse defines as the "material substrate of historicity" (*materiellen Bestand der Geschichtlichkeit*), *i.e.*

the circle of concrete historical conditions within which a concrete *Dasein* exists and in which, in every case, *Dasein* and the totality of involvements [*Bewandtnisganzheit*] of its world are rooted (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 365; 1928b/2005, p. 17).

3. Life space and praxis

After having shown the reasons why *Being and time* carries an important asset to understand historicity as a way of being of the *Dasein* in his quest for authenticity

—despite the forgetting of the concrete material and historical conditions necessary for a resolution to be reached—, Marcuse begins an analysis of the methods for understanding the need for action in his current historical situation. For the author, it was a question of synthesizing the possibilities inscribed in the dialectical method of historical materialism and those inscribed in the phenomenological approach to reality. Only this junction, whose arguments we have just examined, can make it possible to understand the historical reality and the practical necessity inscribed within it. On the one hand, the dialectical method immediately sees its object as a historical object, allowing access to it while inscribing it in mobility and temporality. It thus makes it possible to study its subject by considering all its aspects, its mediations and its development. It also requires the observer to be caught in this mobility, which means that his practice enters as a constitutive factor in the definition of his object. This is precisely the case of the theory of history that we can extract from historical materialism, since it considers its object as part of a historical process and approaches it from a specific historical moment (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 366; 1928b/2005, p. 17).

On the other hand, there is the phenomenological method, which has been able to highlight the historicity of the *Dasein*. Phenomenology ensures that the question we ask come from the objects themselves. It can, however, abstract the object of any historicity, as would be the case in mathematics or physics. It is precisely against this sense that Marcuse advocates for a transformation of phenomenology, not without criticizing Heidegger's approach. Thus, for him,

phenomenology should never let its investigation end simply with the exhibition the historicity of its object, only subsequently to return it to the sphere of abstraction. Phenomenology must constantly maintain its object in the most rigorous concretion. This means that as an examination of a historical object —as an examination grounded in historicity— phenomenology must allow the concrete historical situation, its concrete “material content”, to work its way into the analysis. Thus a phenomenology of human *Dasein* would be lacking in necessary richness and clarity if it were to pass over the material content of historical *Dasein*. This, as has already been suggested, is the case with Heidegger (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 369; 1928b/2005, p. 20).

Unlike Heidegger, Marcuse aspires to a concreteness whose appearance can only take place through a dialectical method, precisely because the latter makes justice to the concrete historical situation corresponding to its object. Also this dialectical method —as the existential analytic had done by drawing from inauthenticity the consequences that lead to the resolution— must make its contribution in the sphere of existence by trying to show the practical necessity that derives from history and culminate in a method of action in conformity with historical knowledge.

It is precisely in this sense, as we seek to show, that Marcuse proposes a unification of the two methods, a *dialectical phenomenology* (*dialektischen Phänomenologie*),

which by its concreteness can give right to the historicity of the human *Dasein*. This method corresponds to Marcuse's two requirements, while taking up phenomenology and dialectics again: it allows the approach initiated by Heidegger to be accomplished in a phenomenology of the concrete and historical existence, as well as it allows dialectics not only to locate the historical place of reality, but also seeks in this reality a possible proper meaning. This method thus deals with human existence, "historical in its very being—in its essential structure as well as in its concrete forms and configurations" (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 370; 1928b/2005, p. 21). With this new methodological proposal, Marcuse returns to an analysis of the fundamental theses of historical materialism, while revising the existential situation. However, the *Dasein* finds itself thrown into a world of relationships and values. It is not, however, a question of a world in general, or an existing one in general, but of a framework of relationships formed with a concrete *Dasein*, in a concrete world defined by a determined historical situation. Thus, if each time the existing is determined and developed in this concrete situation, and if—according to what the phenomenological interpretation had highlighted—the primary mode of *Dasein* behaviour is a practical concern, this means that it is necessary

that concrete-historical *Dasein* should be understood primarily in terms of how it has provided for itself in its world and according to its world. *Dasein*'s primary care [*Sorge*] is for itself, for its production and reproduction (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 374; 1928b/2005, p. 25).

However, these production and reproduction are not to be understood in a pure sense, since the modes through which the practice and action of the *Dasein* intervene in reality are also historically localized in the temporality of the world and in its spatiality. From there appears the "life space" ("*Lebensraum*") of the *Dasein*, the natural environment where the existing is located and from which he draws all the possibilities of his own existence. It is therefore from everything that is predetermined by this space that the *Dasein* begins the production that takes care of his being and realizes the historical mobility in which he sees himself as thrown. The *Dasein* thus finds itself in front of a pre-determined material and ideological framework with which and from which it realizes its existence and where the construction of historical units takes place. From both existential and dialectical analysis, the concern for the formation and continuation of the *Dasein*'s being is made in the middle of a circle of objects that appear as matter available for existential needs, whose care is ordered by a practice aimed at these same needs. However, says Marcuse, all the concerns aimed at covering these existential needs constitute the economy. It is in this sense that, understood in a broad way, social production and reproduction are "the most originary and the ultimate constituent of every historical unity because they, without exception, affect its pure existence" (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 378; 1928b/2005, p. 28). This is how Marcuse localizes, this time from a materialist perspective, the analysis implemented

by Heidegger. The mode through which the determined *Dasein* takes care of its being appears only within the mode of production highlighted in its historical development. From these concrete determinations, that is, social and historical determinations, the contradictions of the capitalist system discovered by dialectical analysis are then seen from the existential perspective of the *Dasein*. This enables Marcuse to state that

historical society constitutes itself in the modes of production corresponding to its thrownness, in the modes in which it provisions its life-space in accordance with its existential needs. Only then, when a society truly provisions its life-space in a unified way as a society, is it a historical unity, the bearer of historical movement. In the moment when this unity is torn asunder, when the whole society no longer exists in making-provision for its existential needs, and where a *division of labor* is sufficiently advanced that the provision for life-space is no longer regulated through the voluntary act of the whole society, but is rather distributed by means of various coercive measures (such that now the hardest work appears as the activity of the subordinate and the inferior) –in this moment the existential needs, too, grow out of and differentiate themselves from this division of labor within a society that was once unified (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 379; 1928b/2005, p. 29).

Indeed, it is through primary modes of the behaviour of the existing and the fundamental structure of historicity that nature becomes history based on the action of the existing, aiming at the concern of its being and its life space. This is highlighted by the existential analytic. Nevertheless, it is the dialectical side of the analysis that highlights the contradiction of economic-historical relationships in the given situation of the *Dasein*. Thus, if on the one hand, the being acting on the existing constitutes the whole domain of what happens, on the other hand it cannot act until the contradictory and torn situation of its vital space and society become highlighted by a dialectical perspective.²³ This means that where the modes of production are in contradiction with the forms of existence, it is up to the productive class, the proletariat, to break the relations that act at the bottom of this contradiction (Marcuse, 1928a/1978, p. 383; Marcuse, 1928b/2005, p. 32). Thus, by pushing the possibilities already inscribed in his vital space, and in possession of the knowledge of the historicity of the world –which also offers him the knowledge of his own historicity– the *Dasein* can aim at an authentic existence only through practical intervention in the world.²⁴

23 Andrew Feenberg underlines the thesis that a primacy of practice can be found in the reading of *Being and Time*, and this primacy would have been the interpretative path that led Marcuse from Heidegger to the young Marx, in his writings of 1932: “Marx claimed that the fundamental relation to being is not consciousness but praxis. Being and Time similarly describes the human relation to the world as fundamentally practical. In his student days, Marcuse noted the parallel and read Being and Time as the key to Marx” (Feenberg, 2005, p. xiv).

24 As Romero reminds us, we see a reformulation of the Heideggerian project from the categories of the first Lukács: the reification where existence was thrown is not necessarily an ontological reification, defined by impersonality, but can be interpreted as a

Conclusion

After this analysis, implemented with the help of phenomenological and dialectical contributions, Marcuse succeeds in showing that, starting from a transformative act of revocation of the present, the existing can create a new world, that is, a reality in which the framework of meaning that constitutes the world of the discarded being would be freed from the contradiction revealed by historical materialism (see Casati, 2019; Valentim, 2016, p. 295ff). It is not surprising, therefore, that we find here, in a still germinal way, one of the most important themes of Marcuse's entire work, namely, the ways of overcoming alienation. More specifically, in this inaugural essay, we see how Marcuse uses two distinct "philosophical schools" to argue about the need for a radical act that must take place in existence.

The phenomenological analysis implemented by Marcuse, under the influence of *Being and time*, helps him to highlight the fact that the human existing is essentially historical and that practice is the original mode in which the existing relates to things. Nevertheless, to operate a sort of correction to the Heideggerian proposal, which was about an existing in general, Marcuse resorted to dialectics and, based on the theses resulting from historical materialism, he managed to give a concrete interpretation of existential analytic. It fills it with the materiality of existence and historical mobility, where modes of production within the capitalist system shape the existence of the rejected being and make that resolution and revocation appear only as a radical act, that is, as a revolution in the face of an existence that has become unbearable.

Our intention, in retracing this analytical journey of the young Marcuse, was precisely to shed light on an important part of his thought, which today is relatively forgotten. It remains to be discussed, on another occasion, the details that led to the rupture between Marcuse and Heidegger, as well as the subsequent deepening in the theses of Marx. In any case, the important here is to verify not only the ways in which the young philosopher seeks to conform his own thinking, but above all, to verify a constant concern for human existence within Marcuse's work. To return to the first steps of the genesis of Marcusean thought is, most of all, to be able to understand the historicity of a thought that, like few of its generation, was able to conceptualize the diverse experience of the 20 century.

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