

VICO, FICHTE, HEGEL, CROCE AND MARXIAN HISTORICAL MATERIALISM  
IN RECENT ANGLO-AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

Abstract:

The aim of my article is to reconstruct and evaluate the original non-Marxist interpretation of Marx and historical materialism proposed by Tom Rockmore, who seeks to demonstrate, contrary to the Marxist reading, the essentially anthropological and constructivist approach of Marx's theories. In the first part, we will see what kind of links Rockmore identifies between Marx, Fichte, Hegel and German idealism. In the second part, we will see how this hypothetical constructivist approach of Marx, according to Rockmore, can also be traced back to the thought of Gian Battista Vico and, at least in part, to Kant's epistemology. Finally, questioning Rockmore's problematic conclusions on the definition of "materialism" and "historical materialism" in Marx, we will verify the similarity between Rockmore's reading of Marx and that of the young Benedetto Croce\*\*.

*Keywords:* Anthropology, Constructivism, Historical Materialism, Marx, Rockmore

1. *Fichte, Hegel and the Marxian subject*

To reconstruct Rockmore's original and decidedly heterodox reading of Marx, it is worth considering his 2008 essay *Marx e il costruttivismo*<sup>1</sup>. This earlier work reveals important aspects of the interpretative approach to Marx's thought that Rockmore would go on to develop over the following two decades. Departing both from the "analytical" Anglo-American tradition and from ideological and orthodox approaches to Marxism, Rockmore seeks from the outset to trace Marx's thought back to a modern constructivist anthropology that was consistent with the systems proposed by German idealism, in particular those developed by Fichte and Hegel<sup>2</sup>. Thus, even in this early essay, he makes clear from the outset that «before discussing the relationship between Marx and constructivism, it will be necessary to show that Marx can be read from a non-Marxist point of view»<sup>3</sup>. This position was anticipated by Rockmore in his *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (2002) and reiterated in his 2018 *Marx's Dream: From Capitalism to Communism*<sup>4</sup>. Generally speaking, Rockmore's goal was to counter the «tendentious and unwise»<sup>5</sup> interpretation of German idealism proposed by Engels, who, following Marx's death and throughout the 1880s, at a time when «many of Marx's central texts were not

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\*\* To remain as consistent as possible with Rockmore's reading, in addition to original writings by Marx and Engels, I will also refer in the following (where helpful) to the English translations of Marx's works on which Rockmore himself relied.

<sup>1</sup> See Rockmore (2008), pp. 26-45.

<sup>2</sup> Rockmore's reading of Marx draws on various authors and currents of thought, including authors from the French *Hegel Renaissance* and early-twentieth-century phenomenology. In *Marx's Dream: From Capitalism to Communism*, for example, Rockmore cites Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Rockmore, 2018, pp. 151-152, n. 13). Further influences include Max Weber, György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

<sup>3</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Rockmore (2002), (2018). The first part of this paper analyses *Marx e il costruttivismo* and *Marx's Dream* as parallel and complementary texts.

<sup>5</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 27.

yet available», contributed to the emergence of Marxism as a coherent ideology<sup>6</sup>. For Rockmore, the ideological approach to Marx's thought initially nurtured by Engels rested on two main premises: 1) the notion that Marx turned his back on philosophy (and German idealism in particular) in the post-1840s era in favour of a rigorous and scientific study of political economy; and 2) the conviction, canonically proposed by all Marxist readings of Marx from Engels onwards, that in order to resolve the questions left open by philosophy in general and German idealism in particular, Marx relied on Feuerbach's materialism, first and foremost to re-establish the relationship between thought and being – a relationship that German idealism, and Hegel in particular, had ultimately mystified<sup>7</sup>. This is exemplified, for Rockmore, in the Engelsian (and Feuerbachian) conviction that idealism «wrongly reverses the relationship between subject and object, thought and being, spirit and nature, in that it provides a derivative and fictitious image of the world, or of the nature of spirit»<sup>8</sup>, and that it is only the materialism developed by Feuerbach – regarded as a radical critic of Hegelian idealism – that can restore the relationship between thought and being and the priority of nature over spirit (*Geist*)<sup>9</sup>. From this perspective, the critique of Feuerbach articulated in *Thesen über Feuerbach* (1845) was merely an improvement of «materialism, which was the correct solution to the central problem of philosophy from a point of view external to philosophy itself»<sup>10</sup>. In short, for Engels and for «all Marxism»<sup>11</sup>, it was Feuerbach who awakened Marx from a dogmatic slumber steeped in idealistic philosophies inherited mainly from Hegelian thought, inspiring him to develop a materialist theory that was both fully-fledged and rigorously scientific – that is, naturalistic, deterministic and positivistic.

This is the problematic conclusion of the Engelsian reading, which would be followed and reiterated by all subsequent Marxist interpretations of Marx. From this perspective, using the epistemological models proper to the natural sciences of the time (in vogue especially in the second half of the nineteenth century)<sup>12</sup>, Marx had discovered «the law of human history», just as Darwin had discovered «that of the evolution of organic nature»<sup>13</sup>. For Marxism in general, it is from this naturalistic and deterministic perspective that one must approach Marx's materialism – a materialism that is truly scientific, anti-philosophical and thus anti-Hegelian, inevitably in radical tension with idealism of all forms.

It is precisely these cornerstones of Marxism – an «influential but largely imaginary tale»<sup>14</sup> initially fuelled by Engels – that Rockmore aims to topple: «Engels is doubly mistaken: on the one hand, simply accepting the Darwinian explanation of biological evolution does nothing to illuminate the problem of knowledge, and on the other, a materialist approach to knowledge, as imagined by Engels, is problematic»<sup>15</sup>. For Rockmore, «it would also be appropriate to question Engels' account of Feuerbach's role in the formulation of Marx's position», insofar as it rests «on two conditions: 1) whether Marx's position was indeed influenced “significantly” by his reading of Feuerbach and 2) whether Marx's position was a form of materialism»<sup>16</sup>. On these crucial aspects Rockmore leaves no room for interpretative doubt, asserting: «I consider both hypotheses to be false»<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> As Rockmore notes, these then unavailable texts included «*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law [Elements of the Philosophy of Right]*, the *Paris Manuscripts*, the *Grundrisse*, *Capital* volumes 2 and 3, and *Theories of Surplus Value*». Cf. Rockmore (2018), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> On this subject, see Engels (1895 [1886]).

<sup>8</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> On this, see Rockmore (2018), pp. 74-82.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Ivi, p. 75; CW, 24, p. 468.

<sup>14</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

It is on the basis of a re-examination of these assumptions that Rockmore's non-Marxist reading of Marx proceeds – a reading that also questions a further typically Marxist assumption, namely the idea that in Marx there was «a so-called epistemological break between the early philosophical position and the later supposedly extraphilosophical scientific or at least more scientific position»<sup>18</sup>. Against this presumption, Rockmore argues that there is fundamental theoretical continuity between the philosophical and humanistic motives of the young Marx and his more mature writings, specifically those dedicated to the critique of political economy and up to *Das Kapital*. Thus, at least from *Marx e il costruttivismo* to *Marx's Dream*, Rockmore seeks to show that Marx looked primarily to Hegel, and even more so to Fichte, when developing his theory of the subject, which he articulated from an essentially anthropological and constructivist perspective. It was this very perspective that would go on to shape even the later Marxian (non-Marxist) theory of historical materialism<sup>19</sup>.

What support is there for this anthropological – and, epistemologically, essentially constructivist – reading of Marx? Rockmore starts from a clear assumption, explicitly formulated in the introduction to *Marx's Dream*: «Karl Marx was trained in classical German philosophy. Though he later became a political economist, in some respects he always remained a German idealist philosopher»<sup>20</sup>. The young Marx's philosophical training – marked by German idealism and, in particular, by Fichte and Hegel – would continue to have a decisive influence on his thought, which remained squarely grounded in what Rockmore calls «philosophical anthropology, i.e. on a conception of the human being as the root of human reality»<sup>21</sup>. As Rockmore argues, «the simplest way to describe the fundamental idea behind Marx's entire position is in terms of his theory of the finiteness of human beings»<sup>22</sup> – essential elements of which, even before Feuerbach, Marx borrowed from Fichte. Rockmore seeks to establish this hypothesis on both historical and theoretical grounds. At the level of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, he argues, it is well known that the young Marx of the 1840s – like «other young Hegelians» of the time, such as «Feuerbach, for example» – «went in Fichte's direction» in order to counter the assumptions of Hegel's «idealistic» system<sup>23</sup>. This was a direction that would have also indirectly influenced Engels, who participated in seminars held by Schelling (himself greatly influenced by Fichte) in Berlin in 1841<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, on Rockmore's view, the conceptual tools used by the young Marx, Feuerbach and then Engels to critique Hegelian idealism had in fact been provided by these Fichtean lectures<sup>25</sup>.

On the theoretical level, for Rockmore this influence is apparent from the thesis, held by both Marx and Fichte, that finite human beings «must be understood as fundamentally active beings, that is, with respect to their activity»<sup>26</sup>. This means that it is «activity» – «not labour», as a generic and abstract form of *Arbeit* – that serves as «Marx's fundamental interpretative category», especially insofar as «his entire position can be delineated in terms of his “Fichtean” theory of human activity»<sup>27</sup>. This means that, «like Fichte, and like

<sup>18</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 3. Among the contemporary Marxist philosophers who have most insisted on this alleged “epistemological rupture” in Marx is undoubtedly Louis Althusser, cited several times in this regard in *ivi*, pp. 48 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 78 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See Rockmore (2008), pp. 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> See Rockmore (2018), pp. 84-85.

<sup>25</sup> As for the “practical” interests of the young Hegelians, who fuelled the polemic against idealism and theoretical philosophy, Rockmore also points to the possible influence of Moses Hess (one of the first socialists of the time and a friend of both Marx and Engels), who published his *Philosophie der That* in 1843. Cfr. *ivi*, p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*. As Rockmore points out: «Marx's whole position tends to make a distinction between two types of activity, which are related to the stages of development of society. Labour (*Arbeit*) is the form of activity made manifest by a person within the production process, characteristic of modern industrial capitalism; it requires

Aristotle, Marx thinks of the human being through human activity»<sup>28</sup>. It is no coincidence that Rockmore here refers to the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, also known as the *Paris Manuscripts*, which were first published in 1932, i.e. at a time long after Marxist ideology was beginning to take shape via Engels<sup>29</sup>. Thus, Rockmore continues: «Already in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx asks himself: “What else is life if not activity?” and answers his rhetorical question with these words: “My whole existence is a social activity”»<sup>30</sup>.

While for Rockmore the influence of the Fichtean theory of man as an essentially finite and acting being is clearly traceable in Marx, things are more complicated when it comes to understanding the nature of the relationship between Marx and Hegel. Even on this point, however, Rockmore is clear. In the introduction to *Marx’s Dream*, he clarifies: «I will be arguing that Marx does not break with but rather builds on his philosophical background in formulating his own distinctive position, initially through his dialogue with G. W. F. Hegel»<sup>31</sup> – a constant dialogue, we might say, made up of fruitful misunderstandings. It is true that the young Marx, both in the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law [Elements of the Philosophy of Right]* (1843) and in the *Paris Manuscripts*, criticises the supposedly idealistic and abstract conception of Hegelian subjectivity: «Marx objects to Hegel’s supposedly abstract conception of the historical subject. He points out that the logical, hence abstract supersession of alienation is not the same as the supersession of the real human alienation in practice»<sup>32</sup>. However, Marx, «who either does not grasp or overlooks Hegel’s important distinction between the abstract and the concrete»<sup>33</sup>, does not realise that it was Hegel himself, in showing the effectual reality (*Wirklichkeit*) of the modern state in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, who used «a quasi-Fichtean conception of the finite human subject as basically active from the related perspectives of property, morality, and ethics»<sup>34</sup>. That is to say, according to Rockmore’s reading, Hegel himself made this Fichtean anthropological, “concrete” conception of the modern subject his own, a conception that Marx and the young Hegelians (including Feuerbach) would later use, paradoxically, to attack precisely the Hegelian system, which they erroneously accused of suffering from logical and mystical abstractness.

In any case, it was in the *Paris Manuscripts* that the young Marx acknowledged the importance of Hegel’s philosophy and the fundamental structure of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It was precisely this work that allowed Marx to identify the centrality of the concepts of “objectification” and “alienation”, of which he himself would make extensive use (a use, once again, that was essentially dialectical) up to *Das Kapital*. On the one hand, it is clear that

In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx provides a slightly more nuanced but still sharply critical reading of the Hegelian view of subjectivity. Marx objects to Hegel’s supposedly abstract

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the use of pre-existing materials, which are processed and transformed by finished human beings as part of the economic process. Productive labour is opposed to creative labour, quasi-physical labour is opposed to mental labour, and fundamentally active labour is opposed to passive labour. Activity is only passive in capitalism, a form of society that is not under the control of the worker» (*ibidem*).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> See Marx (1964); Marx (1968), pp. 465-588.

<sup>30</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 36; cf. Marx (1964), p. 126; Marx (1968), p. 515: «Denn was ist Leben [anderer] als Tätigkeit [...]». It is noteworthy that in this instance (unlike in other texts, including *Das Kapital*), Marx refers to vital human activity not with the term *Arbeit* (denoting the abstract, generically human labour characteristic of the capitalist mode of production), but with *Tätigkeit*, confirming the clear distinction he draws between different ways of understanding “labour”. This distinction, as we have seen, is also highlighted by Rockmore, who invokes Fichte’s influence on Marx precisely in relation to the problem of labour as *concrete* human praxis. Following Rockmore’s reading to the end, then, it was above all Fichte’s influence that led Marx to frame this conceptual and terminological distinction in such terms.

<sup>31</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 8.

conception of the historical subject. He points out that the logical, hence abstract supersession of alienation is not the same as the supersession of the real human alienation in practice. He concedes no more than that «within the sphere of abstraction, Hegel conceives labour as man's act of self-genesis – conceives man's relation to himself as an alien being and the manifestation of himself as an alien being to be the emergence of species-consciousness and species-life»<sup>35</sup>.

On the other, it is also true that Marx

endorses Hegel's view of objectification within the historical process of economic production. «[...] Hegel has conceived the negation of the negation, from the point of view of the positive relation inherent in it, as the true and only positive, and from the point of view of the negative relation inherent in it as the only true act and spontaneous activity of all being [...]»<sup>36</sup>.

For Rockmore, that such a movement remains placed on a purely logical and wholly abstract plane in Hegel – as we read in the sequel to the *Manuscripts* – represents a fatal (yet profitable) misunderstanding of Marx's reading of Hegel, which mistakenly conceives of Hegel's logic from a non-speculative point of view, thus failing to grasp «Hegel's important distinction between the abstract and the concrete». Thanks to his Fichtean background, though (a background shared, paradoxically, with Hegel himself), Marx succeeded in his true intent: to propose a new theory of concrete man as an essentially finite and acting being, the continuous *result* of a structurally dialectical historical process which is *constructed* by historical subjectivities that at first objectify and alienate themselves in the products of their own labour (*Arbeit*). For Rockmore, this Marxian attempt to “de-formalise” the Hegelian subject from a Fichtean perspective, “concretising” and “demystifying” the leading concepts of Hegel's dialectics, would become decisive as early as the *Theses on Feuerbach*, i.e. just one year after the writing of the *Manuscripts*, in which Marx unreservedly praised the Feuerbachian approach<sup>37</sup>. In the *Theses*, however, Marx's criticism of Feuerbach is made explicit: in his critique of Christianity, Feuerbach ultimately abstracts the human being (just as Hegel and the “naive” idealists had done before him), failing to understand that even human religious sentiment cannot but remain «a “social product”, which is not universal but rather arises in a particular way in a particular type of society». For Rockmore, what is here «at stake is the difference between Marx's historical point of view, which understands the social context as evolving through a series of stages, and Feuerbach's static, ahistorical approach»<sup>38</sup>. In essence, as Marx himself writes, Feuerbach's materialism can be reduced to a «contemplative materialism», i.e. a «materialism that does not conceive of the real as a practical activity» and thus remains typical of «bourgeois society»<sup>39</sup>. For Rockmore, it is thus clear that it was not Feuerbach but rather Fichte who inspired the Marxian theory of the subject – a theory that, through its concept of the “dialecticalisation” of the finite and acting subjectivity placed firmly within the process of history, has the capacity to explain how to *transform* capitalist society. Such a subjectivity has the ability to *construct*, through its own practical activity (*praktische Tätigkeit*), a new history, founded on the perspective afforded by a «new materialism», i.e. the perspective of «human society» or «socialised humanity»<sup>40</sup>. Moreover,

<sup>35</sup> Rockmore (2018), pp. 42-43; cf. CW, 3, p. 342; Marx (1968), p. 584.

<sup>36</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 43; cfr. CW, 3, p. 329; Marx (1968), p. 570.

<sup>37</sup> See Marx (1968), pp. 569-571.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Rockmore (2018), p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> «Das Höchste, wozu der anschauende Materialismus kommt, d. h. der Materialismus, der die Sinnlichkeit nicht als praktische Tätigkeit begreift, ist die Anschauung der einzelnen Individuen und der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft». Cf. Marx (2022) p. 30, Thesis 9. Note Marx's explicit use of the word *Tätigkeit* (again, not *Arbeit*) to refer to man's practical activity.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, Thesis 10 («Der Standpunkt des alten Materialismus ist die bürgerliche Gesellschaft, der Standpunkt des neuen die menschliche Gesellschaft oder die gesellschaftliche Menschheit»).

as Marx acknowledges, to the extent that Feuerbach's materialism is ultimately purely «contemplative», the Feuerbachian subject cannot but remain an equally static, passive entity. Against this picture, however, Marx affirms that «social life is essentially practical»<sup>41</sup>, active in the Fichtean sense. It is precisely this point that Rockmore emphasises. On the other hand, through a direct analysis of Marx's texts (particularly the 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach*), it is clear that, far from simply wanting to “improve” Feuerbachian materialism (as argued, for example, by Engels), Marx sought to literally do away with it. Moreover, as a lay reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* reveals, Marx «consistently suggests a distinction between kinds of materialism and, since “materialism” refers here to an anthropological approach to human being in the social context, to a specific way of grasping finite human being»<sup>42</sup>. According to Rockmore, this view of the human being as an essentially finite and acting being – i.e. one capable of dialectically constructing his own history – had already been anticipated by Hegel, who was likewise inspired by Fichte: «Like Marx, Hegel's view of human being is based on the reformulation of the basic Fichtean conception of the active human subject. It follows that in attacking Feuerbach, Marx, who vastly underestimates Hegel, also vastly overestimates the novelty of his own conception of human being in a social context»<sup>43</sup>.

In any case, it is clear that «Marx arbitrates between views of materialism as an object of contemplation, in short as a pure given, or as “human sensuous activity, [or] practice”, that is, as constructed by finite human beings»<sup>44</sup>. If the main aim of philosophy, as the last Thesis on Feuerbach implies, can no longer be merely to interpret the world – if it is «now a matter of *transforming* it»<sup>45</sup> – there would seem to be no doubt that, by the mid-1840s, Marx had matured the dialectical-anthropological-constructivist view of man and history that Rockmore identifies in his work. Although Rockmore's interpretative orientation is highly problematic (a fact that he himself acknowledges, given that other Marxian texts of the same period seem to point in a completely different direction)<sup>46</sup>, we can provisionally state that this “anthropological-constructivist” approach, grounded in human *praxis*, prevailed (although not without further complications) until at least the first book of *Das Kapital*. The extent to which this anthropological/constructivist strand runs throughout Marx's work is a fundamental question that inevitably touches on Rockmore's rereading of epistemology, the nature of man and “historical materialism” in Marx.

## 2. The making of human history: Marx, Vico, Croce and the materialist question

At this point, it will be helpful to further clarify what Rockmore means by “constructivism” on a properly epistemological level, on the assumption that «freeing Marx from the well-known Marxist interpretation allows us to identify the authentically philosophical assumption of a constructivist perspective»<sup>47</sup>. By “constructivism” Rockmore means «any approach to knowledge founded on the assumption that we can only reliably claim to know what, in an indefinite sense, which varies greatly according to different positions, we can say we have “constructed”»<sup>48</sup>. In general, for Rockmore, this constructivist approach (whichever version one wishes to follow) contrasts with “realist” epistemological models. In this sense, «common realism is the position of the common, philosophically naive person

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, Thesis 8 («Alles gesellschaftliche Leben ist wesentlich praktisch»).

<sup>42</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, p. 105. Cf. Marx (2022), p. 24, Thesis 1: «Der Hauptmangel alles bisherigen Materialismus (den Feuerbachschen mit eingerechnet) ist, daß der Gegenstand, die Wirklichkeit, Sinnlichkeit nur unter der Form des *Objekts oder der Anschauung* gefaßt wird; nicht aber als *sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*; nicht subjektiv». It is clear that *praxis* here also explicitly coincides with *Tätigkeit*, not *Arbeit*.

<sup>45</sup> Ivi, p. 30, Thesis 11 («Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*, es kömmt drauf an, sie zu *verändern*»).

<sup>46</sup> In this regard, see Rockmore (2018), esp. pp. 96-102 on «Materialism, Idealism, and *The German Ideology*».

<sup>47</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

who believes he knows the world as it really is»<sup>49</sup> – a viewpoint that ultimately leads to «metaphysical realism, the position of the philosophically sophisticated person who believes, instead, that there are bold philosophical arguments that lead more or less to the same conclusion, expressed in more technical language»<sup>50</sup>. At the core of realism lies the conviction that one can know the world «independently of the mind»<sup>51</sup>, that is, irrespective of the actions of the knowing subject, because of how that world «presents itself beyond mere appearance»<sup>52</sup>. As Rockmore notes, this perspective can be further subdivided into: 1) «scientific» realism (i.e. «scientism»), which holds that «science is the main and perhaps only source of knowledge, which is often defined according to the model of metaphysical realism»; 2) «empirical» realism, whereby «we can never claim to be able to go beyond experience and know the world as it really is»; and 3) «aesthetic» realism, which Marxist writers on aesthetics often consider «preferable from a cognitive point of view»<sup>53</sup>.

Of interest here is precisely this reference to Marxism, according to which Marx, following his Feuerbachian materialist “turn”, founded his critique of political economy on an essentially “realist” and “scientist” epistemological model – as represented, for example, by the Marxist approach to the theory of knowledge (a view that, for Rockmore, had initially been fuelled by Engels). Engels, «in his study of Feuerbach, [...] describes “dialectical philosophy”, in establishing a spurious link to the reflection theory of knowledge, as “nothing more than the mere reflection of this [natural] process in the thinking brain”»<sup>54</sup>. For Rockmore, the idea that knowing the world correctly means passively “reflecting” or “registering” the structural and objective dialectical processes of reality – within our consciousness or our «thinking brain» – is in tension with the anthropological-Marxian conception of the human subject as a fundamentally active being<sup>55</sup>. No wonder, then, that Rockmore underscores the fact that «Marx never directly discusses an approach to knowledge as a reflection of the real. But after he died, a link to this view was established by Engels and confirmed by Lenin and a number of subsequent Marxists»<sup>56</sup>.

By contrast, the constructivist approach presupposes what Kant’s Copernican Revolution definitively revealed as the principle of the modern worldview, namely that every scientific cognitive experience possible for us is inseparable from our own actions as finite subjects. Notwithstanding the internal problems of Kant’s epistemological system, which was marked by a complex blend of “realism” and “representationalism”<sup>57</sup>, «Kant, like other ‘anti-Cartesians’ such as Hobbes and Vico, maintains in effect that knowledge is possible if and only if it can be affirmed that the subject can in a certain sense construct what he knows as the very condition of knowing»<sup>58</sup> – a construction which is only possible by virtue of «a priori» forms<sup>59</sup> and which, if it is to lay claim to being truly scientific and meaningful, must remain within the *bounds* of experience as it is possible *for us*.

From this point of view, it becomes clear that «the tradition of German idealism can be understood as a continuous attempt by several subjects to elaborate a constructivist solution to the problem of knowledge, according to the formulation that was initially

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

<sup>54</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 126. Here, Rockmore quotes from Engels (1895 [1886]), in CW, 26, p. 360.

<sup>55</sup> We might say that, from Rockmore’s critical perspective, such a theory of “reflection of the real” paradoxically takes us back to an ancient and medieval gnoseology, according to which «to know is to restore to reality, of which knowledge is but a mirror, those images of itself that it [reality] produces and that should therefore simply be received and rendered less partial and superficial than the various limited lenses that serve as mirrors destined to be». Barale (2007), pp. 53-72, here p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> Rockmore (2018), p. 126. In this regard, see first Sayers (1985), cited in ivi, p. 126, n. 151.

<sup>57</sup> In this regard see Rockmore (2008), esp. pp. 30-31.

<sup>58</sup> Ivi, p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*.

elaborated in German idealism by Kant [...]»<sup>60</sup>. Passing through the decisive Fichtean and Hegelian junction, this attempt would progressively strive to “anthropologise” this very “construct” in an ever more radical way, given that, according to Rockmore, «the idealistic theory of knowledge elaborated by Kant crumbles in the face of its inability to explain the activity through which the subject constructs the object of knowledge»<sup>61</sup>.

It is in this context that we encounter Gian Battista Vico, who is said to have laid the foundations for this constructivist approach, also adopted by the German idealists, which was evidently incompatible with radical forms of metaphysical or scientific (scientistic) “realism”, particularly when understood in a strictly Marxist sense<sup>62</sup>. Yet Vico, unlike Kant, grasped that constructivism could be used to explain not only how *a priori* knowledge is possible in a purely epistemological sense but also, from an *a posteriori* perspective, the broader phenomenon of history as a human construction and, for that very reason, as essentially *distinct* from a natural and given reality<sup>63</sup>. For Rockmore, this decisive point is reaffirmed by Marx in the first book of *Das Kapital*, in the context of an explicit and “surprising” reference to Vico’s philosophy in a note to the thirteenth chapter: «In *Capital*, Marx refers to Vico’s conviction that human history differs from nature insofar as we have made the former but not the latter»<sup>64</sup>. In *Marx, Vico e il costruttivismo storico*, Rockmore returns to this crucial aspect in greater detail, directly quoting Vico, who in 1710 wrote that «the criterion and rule of truth consists in having made it»<sup>65</sup>. Corroborating Rockmore’s position even more explicitly, however, is Marx’s further observation in the abovementioned note: «The defects of abstract scientific materialism, which excludes the *historical process*, can be seen from the abstract and ideological ideas of its proponents as soon as they venture beyond their speciality»<sup>66</sup>. Scientific materialism – understood in an *abstract* or *contemplative* sense (*à la* Feuerbach, as essentially «bourgeois»), thereby excluding the *geschichtlichen Prozeß* – rests on an epistemological model founded precisely on metaphysical or scientistic realism: a stance that is typical, as Marx writes in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, of an «alten Materialismus». As Rockmore observes:

The reference to Vico provides an important indication of how Marx situates his own position with respect to philosophy and natural science. He apparently sees the position that he advances in *Capital*, and by extension elsewhere, not, as Engels argues, as a form

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<sup>60</sup> Ivi, p. 29. For more on why Rockmore regarded Kant as belonging to the tradition of German idealism, see Rockmore (2007).

<sup>61</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 33. Here, Rockmore is evidently referring to the (at least problematic) outcomes of the transcendental deduction of the categories attempted in Kant (1919), pp. 145 ff. It is no coincidence, then, that in *Marx’s Dream* Rockmore also refers to Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel: «The difficulty of Marx’s anti-anthropological reading of Hegel has been seen, for instance by Kojève, whose rereading of the *Phenomenology* from a resolutely anthropological point of view obviously counters Marx’s anti-anthropological reading of Hegel». However, «Kojève further suggests that Hegel, who features a realist approach, rejects Fichte’s idealism or anti-realism». Rockmore (2018), p. 34, n. 124. Cf. Kojève (1980).

<sup>62</sup> On the mainly theoretical relationship between Vichian thought and German idealism, see Rockmore (2018), pp. 114-119, esp. p. 115.

<sup>63</sup> In the more recent *Marx, Vico e il costruttivismo storico*, Rockmore clarifies that from his perspective «constructivism takes different forms: *a priori*, *a posteriori*, social, historical and so on». In this sense, considering the *Critique of Pure Reason alone*, Rockmore arrives at the conclusion that «Kant is an *a priori* thinker, hence an ahistorical thinker». By contrast, «Vico is a very deeply historical thinker, hence a *historical constructivist*». Rockmore (2020), pp. 221-222 (italics mine).

<sup>64</sup> Rockmore (2008), p. 44. Cf. Marx (1951), p. 389 n. 89: «*Darwin* hat das Interesse auf die Geschichte der natürlichen Technologie gelenkt, d.h. auf die Bildung der Pflanzen – und Tierorgane als Produktionsinstrumente für das Leben der Pflanzen und Tiere. Verdient die Bildungsgeschichte der produktiven Organe des Gesellschaftsmenschen, der materiellen Basis jeder besondern Gesellschaftsorganisation, nicht gleiche Aufmerksamkeit? Und wäre sie nicht leichter zu liefern, da, wie Vico sagt, die Menschengeschichte sich dadurch von der Naturgeschichte unterscheidet, daß wir die eine gemacht und die andre nicht gemacht haben?» See Vico (1971), p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*; cf. Rockmore (2020), p. 220.

<sup>66</sup> Marx (1951), p. 389, n. 89 («Die Mängel des abstrakt naturwissenschaftlichen Materialismus, der den *geschichtlichen Prozeß* ausschließt, ersieht man schon aus den abstrakten und ideologischen Vorstellungen seiner Wortführer, sobald sie sich über ihre Spezialität hinauswagen»).



of natural science, but rather as a kind of philosophical theory that stands on the furrow opened by Vico's constructivist science of society. The obvious difference lies in Marx's revolutionary concern not only to interpret, but also to change the world. This footnote also shows continuity with Marx's earlier attempts to position his "materialism" neither as a philosophical statement, nor as an abstract conception of the isolated individual, but rather as a historical, hence concrete, approach. In his insistence on the concrete versus the abstract, Marx sets limits to his conception of science, which, as historical, is rigorous, but different from natural science, as he explicitly notes»<sup>67</sup>.

In essence, viewed through the lens of Rockmore's epistemological-anthropological reading, Marx can be regarded as mainly targeting a form of "realism", and thus materialism, that is still profoundly *metaphysical* – a materialism according to which, in its consequent scientific-abstract meaning, it is possible to know the world «independently of the mind», i.e. to do without the historical praxis of concrete human beings.

At this point, the similarities between Rockmore's interpretative position and that put forward by the young Benedetto Croce, a «Marxist theorist» from 1896 to 1897, become clear<sup>68</sup>. While we cannot explore the many historical and theoretical vicissitudes and influences that led the young Croce, at the time in close contact with Antonio Labriola, to propose his (then) heterodox interpretation of Marx's thought here, it is clear that Croce viewed his task as «a matter of answering a question that, at the end of the 19th century, was circulating overbearingly among scholars of the social sciences: is the *surplus* labour to which the worker is forced in capitalist society, the surplus labour-plus-value of which Marx speaks, a "fact" or a "reverie"?»<sup>69</sup>. Starting from the assumption that surplus value is a «fact», Croce was well aware that a rigorously Marxist interpretation of historical materialism merely gave fuel to its opponents, presenting surplus labour-plus-value precisely as a "reverie", i.e. a metaphysical object. This derived from the fact that, as Croce wrote in his first memoir in May 1896, *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia*, the Marxist and orthodox way of understanding historical materialism claims to have unveiled – like theology, metaphysics and the positivist approach – *the* law of history as the positive and general law «of the development and evolution» of all things, whether "material" or "spiritual"<sup>70</sup>. Croce thus maintained that among the various currents of Marxism, surely one «could be called monism or abstract materialism», an approach that «introduces metaphysical materialism into the conception of history»<sup>71</sup>.

In his 1896 essay, Croce counts among the most significant exponents of metaphysical materialism the Russian Marxist Plechanov, who, not by chance, «rail[ed] against metaphysical dualism and pluralism, stating that "the most remarkable philosophical systems were always *monistic*, i.e. they understood matter and spirit to be only two classes

<sup>67</sup> Rockmore (2020), p. 226. And again: «According to classical Marxism, Marx's position is in every respect equivalent to a natural science, differing only in its scope, namely, the science of society. However, the reference to Vico suggests that Marx's position is not a science, from which it further differs in its inherently historical character, for example, in the thesis put forward in *The German Ideology* that: "We know only one science, the science of history"» (*ibidem*). On this see also Rockmore (2018), p. 119; *CW*, 5.28.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. on this Rockmore (2016; 2022). On the «Marxist theorist» Croce, see Tuozzolo's thorough historical and philosophical study (2008).

<sup>69</sup> Tuozzolo (2008), p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Cfr. Croce (1896), p. 5. Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 19; Eng. trans. (1914), p. 4. On the editorial vicissitudes of this and other of Croce's essays on Marx from the late nineteenth century, see Tuozzolo (2008), pp. 21 ff. The first essay on Marx dedicated to the scientific form of historical materialism (1896) would be republished, between 1900 and 1951, «no less than nine times (in the collection *Materialismo storico ed economia materialistica*), always with the title: *Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico*, modifying the original title from May 1896, the more "neutral" *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia* (and the title adopted in June 1896 in Turati's "Critica sociale": *Il materialismo storico*). Ivi, pp. 35-36. As Tuozzolo observes, «there is no doubt that with this Croce wanted, starting in 1900, to emphasise what is in fact the main conceptual core around which his memoirs revolve: the relationship between historical materialism and scientific knowledge». Ivi, p. 36. On this essay, see also the further analysis in Tuozzolo (2024), esp. pp. 9-180.

<sup>71</sup> Croce (1896), p. 6. Cfr. Croce (2001 [1900]) p. 20; Eng. trans. (1914), p. 6.

of phenomena of which the cause is one and inseparable”<sup>72</sup>. Immediately following this remark, Croce adds sarcastically: «Not a few will be astounded at this unexpected leap from the consideration of history into the arms of monism, in which they did not know they should have so much faith!»<sup>73</sup>. Adopting Labriola’s position in this case – in contrast to «the *naturalists*, who pretend to reduce human history to natural history» – Croce states that it is precisely Labriola who is «carefully guarded against falling into such confusions», as it is true that «society is a given» and that «history is nothing but the history of society»<sup>74</sup>. Only by rejecting metaphysical materialism, which is founded on an equally abstract monism, is it therefore possible to secure Marx against such misunderstandings, so as not to plunge his thought into the abstractions of a realism, as Rockmore puts it, that is conceptually sympathetic to metaphysical or scientistic materialism – a materialism animated by the claim to have discovered the universal laws of history just as «naturalists» had discovered the universal laws of nature, thus *neutralising* concrete historical-human praxis<sup>75</sup>. The Marx who had discovered surplus value – the Marx of *Das Kapital* – elaborated his economic theories based on a purely *sociological* and *comparative* method, one capable of capturing the *particularity* of historical facts, without in any way claiming a) to have discovered the universal or general laws of some necessary, ineluctable, “naturalistic” historical evolution or b) to have achieved, as Rockmore puts it, a purely absolute and definitive form of “reflection” connecting thought, concept and the totality of reality<sup>76</sup>. All this, however, is not firmly tenable unless we start from the (we might say Vichian, and at least partly Kantian) assumption that «human history differs from nature insofar as we have made the former but not the latter»<sup>77</sup>.

<sup>72</sup> Ivi, p. 7. Cf. Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 22; Eng. trans. (1914), p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*. Cfr. Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 22; Eng. trans. (1914), pp. 8-9.

<sup>74</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem*; Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 22; Eng. trans. (1914), p. 9.

<sup>75</sup> See, in this regard, another essay by Croce, again from 1896 (in polemic with the economist Achille Loria), titled *Le teorie storiche del prof. Loria*: in Croce (2001 [1900]), pp. 35-66, esp. pp. 50-51.

<sup>76</sup> Again in the essay on *Loria*, Croce argues that the Marxian reduction of «value to labour», «proposed by Ricardo and perfected by Marx [...] is not a *general* theory of value, that is, it is not properly a theory of value». Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 45, n. 17 (italics mine). «What, then, is the conception of value in Marx’s *Capital*? It is the determination of that particular formation of value, which takes place in a given (capitalistic) society *insofar as it diverges* from that which would take place in a hypothetical and typical society. It is, in short, the *comparison between two particular values*. This *elliptical comparison* forms one of the main difficulties in understanding Marx’s work». *Ibidem*. On this, see Tuozzolo (2008), pp. 87-139, in which the second part of the volume, *The Concept of Labour-Value as an Instrument of Concrete Sociology*, is developed; Rockmore (2022), esp. p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> The influence exerted on the young Croce by the neo-Kantian currents of the time is well known. On this, see again Tuozzolo (2008), p. 14 ff. In this sense, it is interesting to note that it was precisely the young Croce who, at the end of the May 1896 memoir *Sulla concezione materialistica della storia* (then, *Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico*), referred to a purely Vichian concept, which Rockmore would go on to define as *historical constructivism*. In reference to the definition of “historical materialism” espoused by Labriola, Croce writes: «And in concluding, I return to the lament I have already made against this denomination of “materialism”, which has no reason to exist in the present case, and gives rise to so many misunderstandings and serves the game of the adversaries. As far as history is concerned, I would gladly stop at the denomination “realistic conception of history”, which marks the opposition to all theologies and metaphysics in the field of history, and is such as to embrace in itself the contribution that socialism has made to historical consciousness, as well as those that can be made to it, in the future, from every other direction. Because my friend Labriola must not give too much importance to the adjectives “ultimate” and “definitive”, which escaped from his pen. Did he not himself once tell me that Engels was still waiting for other discoveries that would help us to understand *this mystery that we ourselves make, and which is history?*». Croce (1896), pp. 17-18; cfr. Croce (2001 [1900]), p. 34; Eng. trans. (1914), p. 26 (last italics mine. Note also Croce’s use of the expression “realistic conception of history”, clearly preferred to “real conception of history”). In the 1897 essay *Per la interpretazione e la critica di alcuni concetti del marxismo*, the young Croce would finally make explicit reference to Vico’s *Scienza nuova*, again in contrast to Loria, this time on the formal characteristics of *Il Capitale*. Contra Loria, the young Croce maintained that, far from being «one of the “most beautiful and most symmetrical” books in existence», *Il Capitale* «is truly asymmetrical, disordered, disproportionate, and clashing against all the laws of aesthetics: something similar, in some respects, to Vico’s *Scienza nuova*». Croce (2001 [1900]), pp. 67-118, here pp. 67-68. Cfr. Eng. trans. (1914), p. 49.

Reiterating the ambiguous authorship of the expression “historical materialism”<sup>78</sup>, Rockmore thus observes that,

In his writing on Marx, Croce is primarily concerned with the scientific *status* of historical materialism. He replies to Labriola in the chapter entitled *Sulla forma scientifica del materialismo storico*. Croce rejects the basic Marxist view that Marx inverts Hegel, or that historical materialism is either a philosophy of history or a new method. Following Croce, historical materialism synthesises different factors into a single process with an economic basis. He also suggests, but does not develop, the need to pay attention to the moral dimension of Marx’s position<sup>79</sup>.

In this sense, Croce, «unlike Engels, accepts the perspective that historical materialism is not a science of society» in a naturalistic or scientific sense but «rather a set of abstractions whose precise *status* must be defined»<sup>80</sup>. Ultimately, «according to Croce, “historical materialism” is a model or “canon of historical interpretation”, or even a method of interpretation and, adding a further dimension, a conception of life and the world»<sup>81</sup>. In 1897, Croce clearly stated that «Marx’s labour-value is not only a logical generality but is also a *concept conceived and assumed as a type*, that is, something more or different from a mere logical concept. It does not already have the inertia of abstraction, but the force of something determined and particular, which fulfils with respect to capitalistic society, in Marx’s investigation, the function of term of comparison, of a standard, of a type»<sup>82</sup>. This «type» or «canon of interpretation»<sup>83</sup>, defined by the formula “value = labour” (and thus “surplus value = surplus labour”), was the actual, purely interpretative tool used by Marx to *realistically* investigate the dominant mechanisms of capitalist society. Although Rockmore does not go further (at least on these crucial aspects of Croce’s reading of Marx), on a purely epistemological level this implies that these “typical” concepts – these Marxian (not Marxist) “canons of historical interpretation” – must necessarily be assumed in the manner of *heuristic* concepts usable by the *concrete* knowing subject (the scholar-observer, always already the child of a given historical situation), who can only verify their empirical validity in the course of investigation, i.e. only *a posteriori*. It is precisely for this reason that these “typical concepts”, of which Marx made use, cannot “reflect” or “copy”, in a clear and absolutely “objective” manner, the “true reality” of the empirical world, in its historical and human formation<sup>84</sup>.

In short, although Rockmore does not explicitly trace the critical interpretation of “historical materialism” proposed by the young Croce back to a “dialectical-anthropological-constructivist” paradigm, the above passages suggest that a stronger connection between Croce’s Marxian interpretation and Rockmore’s own approach can nevertheless be established, above all by virtue of the common idea (found in Vico, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx) that historical reality – and its inevitably moral or *practical* dimension – is never ontologically and epistemologically assimilable to that of a natural and given reality. By contrast, advocating this total assimilation, as orthodox Marxists (and thus as realists and metaphysical monists) do, would ultimately mean negating the historical function of concrete human praxis. It would mean affirming that Marx, paradoxically, denied the possibility of new and different humanly definable courses of history, the possibility of radically new human constructs – always already constructions

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<sup>78</sup> See Rockmore (2016), pp. 160-161.

<sup>79</sup> Ivi, p. 161.

<sup>80</sup> Ivi, p. 162.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>82</sup> Croce (2001 [1900]), pp. 72-73; cfr. Eng. trans. (1914), p. 56.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Croce (2001 [1900]), pp. 88 ff; Eng. trans. (1914), pp. 77 ff.

<sup>84</sup> On the historical and theoretical link between the notion of “type” elaborated by the young Croce as a “Marxist theorist” and Max Weber’s later work (also and above all with reference to Marx’s epistemology and the theory of “ideal types”), see Tuozzolo (2016), pp. 197-242, esp. pp. 200 ff.

of the historical subjects – towards directions that can never be exhausted or entirely foreseen<sup>85</sup>.

Yet it is precisely at this level that, in the light of Marx's own writings, problems arise. Rockmore is aware of this. Consider, for example, Marx's observation in the 1859 preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), where he declares himself to be in full agreement with Engels regarding the method and merit of their analysis: «We decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience»<sup>86</sup>. Nevertheless, Marx's assertion in the postscript to the second edition of *Capital* (1873), in which he refers to himself as «the pupil of that mighty thinker» Hegel<sup>87</sup> – together with the fact that, «in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*», Marx «outlines a categorial approach to knowledge very similar to, or even the same as Hegel's, but that very obviously conflicts with the kind of empiricism Engels clearly favours»<sup>88</sup> – leads Rockmore to conclude that Marx's affirmations of his theoretical and methodological alignment with Engels were, for the most part, motivated by “external” considerations, that is, by reasons of a purely political nature<sup>89</sup>.

Hence the further thesis in support of this historical, anthropological, dialectical Marxian constructivism, according to which it is only via this route that Marx can speak of a true «*social ontology*» which, like the constructivist «Marxian theory of knowledge», is based on a «Fichtean approach, which sees human beings as fundamentally active beings»<sup>90</sup>. Such a Marxian social ontology can only be justified from the perspective of a «new materialism», which Marx, as we have seen, thematises in *Theses on Feuerbach*. This materialism can be defined as truly “historical” if and only if it is conceived *dynamically*, i.e. as the *realistic structure of human societies as resulting from the internal construction of the concrete history of man, who makes and is made through his own praxis*.

We cannot pursue these intricate issues further here and can only express the hope that they will be developed elsewhere. What is clear, however, is that Rockmore's interpretation of Marxian “materialism” – understood as *intrinsically* historical and dialectical – compels us to acknowledge that the concept of “materialism” Marx had in mind may be seen as an alternative, albeit unorthodox and decidedly problematic, use of the core insights of Fichte, Hegel and German idealism. This conception was shaped, to varying degrees, by Vico's historical constructivism and Kantian epistemology. The issues it raises are intimately linked to Marxist hermeneutics and – beginning with the young Benedetto Croce – would re-emerge in various forms throughout twentieth-century European and Western thought, with far-reaching political and social implications.

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<sup>85</sup> On the extent to which this “constructing” of history is always already a “constructing” of oneself, in a dialectical and (in the first instance) Hegelian sense, see Raimondi (2024).

<sup>86</sup> CW, 29:264. See Marx (1903), p. XIII; Rockmore (2018), p. 99.

<sup>87</sup> See Rockmore (2018), pp. 120 and 102; CW, 35, p. 19. Cf. Marx (1951), p. 18.

<sup>88</sup> See Rockmore (2018), pp. 95-96; CW, 38, pp. 37-45.

<sup>89</sup> See Rockmore (2018), pp. 99 ff.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Rockmore (2008), pp. 37 ff. On the relationship between Fichte, Marx and German idealism, see also Rockmore (1980). Here, Rockmore clearly accepts a thesis proposed by Lukács, who, «in a huge, scattered and unfinished work entitled *For an ontology of social being* [...] followed Marx in elaborating an ontology based on history». Cf. *Ibidem*; Lukács (1978). Here, Rockmore recovers fruitful and less “orthodox” aspects of Lukács' reading of Marx, as did another protagonist of the French *Hegel renaissance*: Eric Weil. In this regard, see Raimondi (2022), pp. 52-63, esp. pp. 61-63.

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