

Editorial

Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Economics: An Anthropological Remark

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Abstract

The basic economic notion of marginal utility is revised in the light of certain well-known Marxian ideas, supported by some new interpretations of psychoanalytic notions, to try to clarify which is the position of human being in the world, within the context of economic anthropology.

Editorial

Materialism is a philosophical trend considering matter as the primary principle of reality, hence the originary substance, in its own right; everything is, in its widest sense, a manifestation of matter. Atomism was one of the first theories of materialism that date back to ancient Greece. However, it has accompanied human being along all her or his historical route, with different degree and weight of influence on her or his life in dependence on the technological development degree [1,2].

In contemporary age, dialectic and historical materialism is an economic-philosophical theory due to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, according to which production modes of material life influence deeply the social, political and spiritual processes of life. So, the early roots of human life rely upon the production modes of economic assets and their next distribution, that is, economic activity is the main aspect of human life upon which then all the other ones (said to be, superstructures) build up. Thus, economic structure of a society gives rise the real nature of human being [1,2].

In Marx's Human Alienation, individuals become estranged to themselves in the quest to stay alive, where "they lose their true existence in the struggle for subsistence" [3]. Marx focuses on two main aspects of human nature which he calls "historical conditions": the first aspect refers to the necessity of food, clothes, shelter, and more, that is, primary needs; secondly, Marx believes that after satisfying these basic needs, people have the tendency to develop more "needs" or desires that they shall try to incessantly satisfy, whence humans fall trapped into a never ending cycle of wishes, which makes them strangers to each other (alienation) [2,3].

In economics, what rules price and exchange of assets, goods or needs is the so-called marginal utility, a crucial notion for economic sciences. It belongs to the theory of utility, as introduced by the utilitarianism, a philosophical trend of 18th-century that identifies the good with the useful, whose main exponent was the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Under the influences of Adam Smith (1723-1790), he basically considered an utilitarian view of human ethic and moral, based on a materialistic conception of human life. Then, William S. Jevons (1835-1882) introduced the notion of marginal utility, putting it at the basis of economic theory of consumption, as well as considering it as a measurable psychic function. However, it was shown that it could not measure directly

but only indirectly estimated, as argued by Paul Samuelson [4].

Utility, in economics, refers to the degree of satisfaction provided by the consumption of a certain quantity of a given good. Introduced by utilitarianism in the 19th-century, at first it was thought as a quantitative parameter liable to be estimated numerically (cardinal utility), but later it was laid out at the ordinal scale level of the Stanley S. Stevens [5] classification of measurement scales of experimental variables, that is to say, utility was considered as an ordinal variable in that consumer ordines her or his own preferences of choice rather than attributing numbers to these. Anyway, the notion of marginal utility has maintained its own importance, relevance and initial definition, as the utility provided by the last available supplementary quote of a certain good. The main property of the marginal utility is expressed by the so-called law of decreasing of marginal utility (due to HH Gossen and WS Jevons) for which marginal utility decreases with the increasing of the availability of a certain good [2,4].

Marx himself said that investigation of the notion of utility of a good - by him defined as the value it may have - lies outside political economy. In agreement with him, we shall try to give a possible explanation of the above cycle of wishes mentioned by Marx, on the basis of the notion of marginal utility and through some new possible psychoanalytic interpretations. In fact, in [6] it has been proposed that unconscious mainly runs analogically according to the physical phenomenology of hysteresis. Thus, desires and wishes, which mainly come from the unconscious, undergo to a hysteresis process, so these spring out only when their intensity is higher than a certain threshold limit of saturation related to previous satisfaction experiences [6].

Therefore, the more humans consume, the higher will be such a threshold limit of saturation upon which desires start to be felt, but, at the same time, to satisfy such an increasing of consumption, the availability of the related goods or services should increase, whence the connected marginal utility decreases, for the above mentioned Gossen-Jevons law (while total utility increases); but this latter decreasing, in turn, entails an increasing of the demand, hence an increasing of consumption, so we return back, and the cycle is therefore closed. Such an interdisciplinary explanation of the cycle of human desire and wish makes clear that human being may reach a certain degree of satisfaction of own desires and wishes only with an ever more increasing consumption, whose trend therefore will have a monotone increasing course with a not finite upper bound, with the obvious anthropological consequences which may derive.

In conclusion, the lacking of such an upper bound implies unavoidable consequences for humans and their lives that, in particular, endorses a (Marxian) historical materialism perspective of history as the most realistic one.

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