

## **Philosophical contributions from the South: Concept of Praxis**

### *Philosophical bases for a Critical Theory from the Americas*

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In the following pages, we will examine the approach to the concept of praxis from the important Spain-born Mexican philosopher Sánchez Vázquez (Algeciras, Spain 1915 - Mexico City 2011). After all, in the contemporary praxis of social emancipation, there exist contradictions, flaws, and aberrations, which indicate that an immediatist and spontaneous ‘just do it’ approach hostile to theory will not suffice. At the same time, contemporary Western theoretical debate regarding social relations has moved away from all serious, practical (and radical) attempts at intervention to such a point that, also for this reason, it seems necessary again to deal with a theorist who is interested in understanding the relationship between theory and praxis – including transformative and emancipatory praxis – and, in so doing, to develop a critique of both social actions divorced from theory as well as theory divorced from political and social praxis. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez begins his research in his first principal book, *Philosophy of Praxis*<sup>1</sup>, with a first definition of praxis and this definition, in turn, sets out from the position occupied by the corresponding terms in various European languages, as well as their history. Alongside the word ‘praxis’, a transliteration of the Greek word  $\pi\rho\alpha\gamma\mu\alpha$ , which means ‘action’ in the most immediate sense, Sánchez Vázquez’s language also makes use of the parallel expression ‘práctica’. In Spanish, both terms (‘praxis’ and ‘práctica’) can be used synonymously, but the latter is common in colloquial and literary language, whereas the former ‘resides only – and not even always – in a philosophical vocabulary’<sup>2</sup>. Italian similarly possesses two terms: ‘prassi’ and ‘practica’; in French the term ‘pratique’ is used almost exclusively<sup>3</sup>, and in everyday’s life Russian and English only  $\text{п}\acute{\text{p}}\text{a}\text{K}\text{t}\text{i}\text{K}\text{a}$  (práctica) and ‘practice’ are used, respectively. German, according to Sánchez Vázquez, is an exception, since it knows only the transcription of the Greek word, that is, ‘Praxis’, and unlike the other languages mentioned lacks its own linguistic development in this regard.

On this point, of course, we cannot simply agree with the author, since in today’s German the term ‘Praktik’ exists in expressions like ‘Sexualpraktiken’ [sexual practices] or ‘Verhörpraktik’ [interrogation practice]. We can, therefore, wonder how he comes to make such a claim. In the Spanish-German dictionaries consulted, ‘Praktik’ is

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<sup>1</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1980 (first edition 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that in French the term ‘praxis’ is also used by authors referring back to philosophical texts written in the German language.

not mentioned as possible translation for ‘práctica’, but rather, for example, ‘Übung, Gebrauch, Praxis’ [exercise, use, practice]<sup>4</sup>. But in the German retranslation, ‘Praktik’ is mentioned and ‘práctica’ is given as a Spanish translation<sup>5</sup>. German dictionaries mention the word ‘Praktik’ and its orthography as originating in the early high modern German, ‘practic, practick’, and, among other things, provide the following descriptions: ‘Art der Ausübung (einer Tätigkeit), Verfahrensweise, Handhabung’<sup>6</sup> [mode of exercising (an activity), manner of proceeding, handling]. Regarding the plural ‘Praktiken’ it suggests that it is used pejoratively and indicates the influence of the medieval French and French expression ‘pratiques “Ränke, Umtriebe”’ [machinations, intrigues].<sup>7</sup> Either Sánchez Vázquez errs in stating that German only knows the word ‘Praxis’ and lacks its own linguistic development in this respect, or else he is referring to the fact that in the sphere of social debates in Germany the word ‘Praktik’ is not commonly used<sup>8</sup>.

Regarding the etymology of the word ‘praxis’, Sánchez Vázquez makes the following observation: ‘praxis’ in ancient Greek denotes an action aimed toward achieving something, but an action which has its objective within itself and does not allow anything outside the agent or his activity to emerge. Here, Sánchez Vázquez refers to Aristotle and his concept of ‘moral action’, which is for him ‘praxis’, as is all action that does not have effects outside itself.

This is why, for example, the activity of the artist (which certainly produces something outside him or herself) is not praxis, but is instead designated as ποιησις (poiesis), something which literally means both making and doing. ‘In this sense, the artisan’s work is poetic rather than practical’<sup>9</sup>. In this respect, Sánchez Vázquez observes that, in strict consonance with the original meaning of these words, philosophy, whose fundamental concepts he seeks to clarify, should be called ‘Philosophy of poiesis’. But, given the fact that in Spanish (as in German) this Greek word continues to exist in expressions like ‘poetry’, ‘poet’, and ‘poetic’ (which, while referring to productions, is nevertheless a very limited meaning), this word is of no use to Sánchez Vázquez, since the object of his research is much broader. He thus selects praxis as the central concept of his analysis, in order to designate ‘conscious objective activity’ in its broadest sense<sup>10</sup>.

Sánchez Vázquez’s concept of praxis thus shows, even in his very justification for choosing the term, a simultaneous desire for exactness and generalisation. This points toward a double demarcation, vis-à-vis both the implications of the contemporary restriction of the word ‘poiesis’ to the poetic and literary, and the reduction of ‘the term practice’ to its everyday and utilitarian sense<sup>11</sup>.

Before continuing with Sánchez Vázquez’s argumentation in *The Philosophy of Praxis*, we are going to sketch out in advance the conception of praxis that he formulates. In so doing, we will follow the previously mentioned article,

<sup>4</sup> Cited according to Langenscheidts Taschenwörterbuch der spanischen und deutschen Sprache. I: ‘Spanisch- Deutsch’ 1985, p. 401. In *Wörterbuch der spanischen und deutschen Sprache* 1975, we find the following proposed translations for ‘práctica’: ‘Anwendung, Praxis, (Aus) Übung, Erfahrung, erlernte Fertigkeit, Ausführung, Gewohnheit, Gebrauch, Kniff, Kunstgriff, Verfahren, Methode, Manier’ (see *Wörterbuch der spanischen und deutschen Sprache* 1975, p. 859).

<sup>5</sup> See Langenscheidts Taschenwörterbuch der spanischen und deutschen Sprache. II: ‘Deutsch-Spanisch’ 1985, p. 841.

<sup>6</sup> See *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen* 1989, Vol. 2, p. 1309.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Note, moreover, ‘The word [*Praktik*] tends to be used pejoratively and in the plural: commercial practices, economic practices, ‘tricks, deals’; to not shrink from certain practices’: *Wörterbuch der Sprachwierigkeiten* 1989, p. 383. And, moreover, ‘The commissioner knows the practice of interrogation’ (ibid.). He who pilots boats into port is called a ‘práctico’ in Spanish and in German ‘*Praktik*’ also means ‘permission granted a boat to enter port for commercial ends’. *Meyers Kleines Konversationslexicon* 1908, Vol. 5, p. 423.

<sup>8</sup> The author, in any case, does not find ‘Politische Praktik’ (‘political practice’) to be a normal formulation. Here, we could add the question: why has praxis, as a political term, remained foreign to Germany?

<sup>9</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, ‘Introduction. From ordinary consciousness to the philosophical consciousness of praxis’, pp. 1–38, and here p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. At this point, we are not looking for a critical reflection on Sánchez Vázquez’s reception of Aristotle; rather, on the basis of this reception, we attempt to proceed by giving priority focus to the development of his theory. [Note to the edition in English: This quotation is translated directly from the original edition in Spanish of the book *The Philosophy of Praxis*, because the published English translation is not correct: ‘la actividad consciente objetiva’ appears incorrectly in that translation as ‘that human activity which produces objects’. See Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 20 and Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 2 (S.G.)]

<sup>11</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977.

‘La filosofía de la praxis como nueva práctica de la filosofía [The philosophy of praxis as a new philosophical practice]’<sup>12</sup>, in which Sánchez Vázquez, however provisionally, attempts explicitly to define the concept of praxis.

To do so, he refers to Karl Marx’s first Thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx criticizes the anthropological materialist in the following terms: ‘he does not conceive human activity itself as objective [gegenständliche] activity ... he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical”, activity’<sup>13</sup>. Sánchez Vázquez cites this affirmatively as a definition of ‘praxis’ and speaks of ‘human activity as objective activity’ and ‘critical practical ... revolutionary activity’<sup>14</sup>.

The author – in the first interpretation of Marx’s concept of praxis in the Theses on Feuerbach – grants a special value to the two moments of praxis: on the one hand, following its objective side, praxis consists of the true transformation of the world as it exists now (and which often presents itself to us as overwhelming); in this sense the concept of praxis refers just as much to palpable things, to nature, as to the relations which exist between humans and nature and also between humans and humans, whose totality constitute society. On the other hand, the subjective side of praxis constitutes the active moment, initiative, the aspect of the human being as an actor in history, who focuses consciously on objectives and attempts to realise them. In this sense, Sánchez Vázquez understands praxis as ‘activity ... oriented toward the end of transforming an object (nature or society), devised by the conscious and active subjectivity of men’<sup>15</sup>. The activity that he understands as praxis is, ‘consequently, activity – in indissoluble unity – objective and subjective at the same time’<sup>16</sup>. He understands the particularity of Marx’s concept of praxis as that of the unity of those two moments. ‘What is determinant in this practical process is neither objective transformation (separated from subjectivity) nor subjective activity (separated from objectivity), but rather the unity of both moments’<sup>17</sup>.

Marx formulates this unity through his double critique of two different unilateralising philosophies: ‘hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included’ which only grasped the objective side in the form of contemplation, and idealism, which of course reflects the side of human activity neglected by ‘hitherto existing materialism’, but which could only arrive at a concept of praxis as ideal, intellectual, and not ‘real, sensuous’<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, in Marx’s concept of praxis the immense achievements on the theoretical terrain of both previous materialism and idealism find their place; following Sánchez Vázquez, we could boldly ask if this concept does not simultaneously transcend, maintain, and suspend (in the Hegelian sense of ‘aufheben’) the entire dichotomy between materialism and idealism. Understood in this way, the seriousness of the second part of the eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach begins to take shape: ‘the point is to change it [the world]’, which, pronounced too quickly on more than one occasion, only serves to ‘justify’ our own distress in observing the philosophical giants upon whose shoulders we all stand.

In his investigation of the development of the concept of praxis in the history of thought, which he presents through an analysis of some of its ‘fundamental milestones’<sup>19</sup>. Sánchez Vázquez turns his gaze toward the philosophical traditions that Karl Marx also had before him: namely, those predominant in the West<sup>20</sup>. He sets out, then, from ancient Greek sources (Plato and Aristotle)<sup>21</sup>, advances onward to the Renaissance (for example, Leonardo da Vinci and his opinions with regard to the theory of art, León Bautista Alberti, Giordano Bruno, Niccolò Machiavelli, as well as two utopians of renaissance humanism, Tomasso Campanella and Thomas More)<sup>22</sup>; he then moves on to

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<sup>12</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Marx 1978, p. 143

<sup>14</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1983, p. 36. Sánchez Vázquez does not note the precise citation, here, but we could assume that he is referring to the same Spanish translation of the Theses on Feuerbach that he cites in Philosophy of Praxis (namely, that of Wenceslao Roces). See Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 22. Omissions belong to Sánchez Vázquez. The quotation marks in the Marx’s original text do not appear in Sánchez Vázquez).

<sup>15</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1983, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Marx 1978, p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 10–17.

<sup>22</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977 pp. 17–21.

bourgeois ‘consciousness of productive praxis’<sup>23</sup> (Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and the Encyclopedists) and touches upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s negative consciousness of praxis, to finally arrive – through a triple path that passes through classical English political economy to Adam Smith and David Ricardo; on the philosophical terrain by German idealism (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and, in passing, also Johann Gottlieb Fichte) and anthropological materialism (Ludwig Feuerbach), as well as briefly referring to the influences of early French sociology (Claude Henri Saint-Simon) – to the classics of the ‘philosophy of praxis’, Marx and Engels<sup>24</sup>.

As for Marxism, Sánchez Vázquez’s historical sketch covers Nikolai Bukharin, Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Adam Schaff, Karel Kosík, Mikhail N. Rutkevich, Gaidukov, G. A. Davydova, and F. Eles, as well as the Yugoslavian ‘Praxis’ group<sup>25</sup>. He discusses Lenin<sup>26</sup>, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser in more detail. After completing this brief introductory tour of the history of the theory, Sánchez Vázquez enters into more detail in the first part of his book – entitled ‘Fundamental philosophical sources for the study of praxis’ – into analysis of the concept of praxis in Hegel<sup>27</sup>, Feuerbach<sup>28</sup>, Marx<sup>29</sup>, and Lenin<sup>30</sup>.

In our study, we will follow Sánchez Vázquez’s introductory sketch of the history of the philosophical concept of praxis, taking only as examples his explanations concerning Greek antiquity in order then to turn in more depth to his analysis of the Marxian concept of praxis through the relationship between praxis and knowledge, especially in the *Theses on Feuerbach*.

In relation to the philosophical concept of praxis in Antiquity, Sánchez Vázquez traces the following sketch of the philosophical concept of praxis: in ancient Greece, prevailing philosophy ‘ignored ... the practical world’<sup>31</sup> or avoided a more detailed discussion as well as the contact with praxis, precisely because it did not perceive in it anything more than the everyday consciousness that we just subjected to critique, but rather only its ‘practical utilitarian character’<sup>32</sup>. Practical activity, and above all productive praxis<sup>33</sup> – that is, labour – is considered by the predominant thought of ancient Greece to be something unworthy of free men [freie Menschen]<sup>34</sup> and as the

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<sup>23</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977 pp. 22ff.

<sup>24</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 23–30.

<sup>25</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 30–3, above all p. 30, notes 42–4. The following people belonged to this ‘Praxis’ group: Gajo Petrović, Mihailo Marčević, Predrag Vranicki, Rudi Supek, Danko Grlić, and Milan Kangrga. Sánchez Vázquez, whose work has been translated several times in Yugoslavia and who participated in a wide range of theoretical debates there, mentions, on this topic, Karel Kosík’s *Dialéctica de lo concreto*, prologue by Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (Kosík 1967). The English translation appeared as *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World* (Kosík 1976). Sánchez Vázquez also mentions another book, in its German version: *Revolutionäre Praxis. Jugoslawischer Marxismus der Gegenwart* – Gajo Petrović (ed.) 1969.

<sup>26</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 28–9.

<sup>27</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 40–69.

<sup>28</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 70–91.

<sup>29</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 92–147.

<sup>30</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1980, pp. 193–242.

<sup>31</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 11. It is not entirely correct to say that the practical world was ‘ignored’ in ancient Greek philosophy. Despite later clarifications made by Sánchez Vázquez, it is worth recalling, for example, Plato’s manifestations in the *Politeia* regarding administration and life in a large city. See Plato, *Politeia*, 372c–373d.

<sup>32</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> In his analysis of the consciousness of praxis in ancient Greece (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, pp. 10–17), Sánchez Vázquez uses the term ‘praxis’ according to its meaning *today*, despite its partial deviation from the meaning of the terms ‘*praxis*’ and ‘*poiesis*’ in ancient Greece, which we mentioned previously; this could have led him into some difficulties.

<sup>34</sup> The formulation ‘hombres libres’ [‘free men’] in Sánchez Vázquez’s discussion of the strict division of labour in ancient Greece, could also be translated [into German] as ‘freie Männer’ [‘free male persons’], since Spanish, like other Romance languages, does not distinguish between ‘Mensch’ and ‘Mann’ (aside from auxiliary constructions like ‘human beings’ [‘seres humanos’]), which are occasionally used to make this distinction clear in certain cases). In any case, the German formulation ‘freie Männer’ would suggest, here, that Sánchez Vázquez also includes the topic of gender among the relations of oppression and exploitation in ancient Greece. But since he does not do so in the text even when discussing later social formations, the formulation ‘freie Männer’ [free men] would surreptitiously make the text appear to be more critical and perspicacious than it really is.

In any case, allow us to suggest for the disappointed reader that while Sánchez Vázquez, as far as we know, certainly does not take up this relationship in a more profound manner, both in the aforementioned Seminar on Marxism and the State Question

innate destiny of slaves<sup>35</sup>. What is of paramount interest is ‘the transformation of social matter, of man’, in order to create with it a decisive ‘innovation’ of antiquity, the polis<sup>36</sup>. Its development, the conscious transformation of the human as a social being, as a *Zoon politikon*, is especially important for the predominant form of thought in antiquity. The transformation of things and of nature, which is to say, ‘productive material praxis’, is granted a secondary position<sup>37</sup>. In this way, what is not seen is the combination of the transformation of the human being as a social being, of society, and the transformation of things<sup>38</sup>.

The idea of the human who ‘elevates himself ... liberating him from all practical, material activity, from practice, and isolating him in the realm of theory’, finds its most marked expression in Plato and Aristotle<sup>39</sup>. In Plato, the *bíos theoretikós*, or ‘theoretical life’<sup>40</sup>, acquires an outstanding significance that it never had before. The observation of pure, immutable, and eternal ideas can only become contaminated by contact with the material world. ‘Life, properly speaking, was contemplation’<sup>41</sup>. Sensuality, corporeality, these are not vital expressions of the human being in the strict sense. Therefore, Plutarch says that for Plato, the practical application of theoretical distinctions debases the latter, as occurred for example in the practical application of geometry. Art, for example sculpture and painting, in crafts and manual labour, has a suspiciously intimate level of contact with imperfect matter<sup>42</sup>. How, then, to bring together the human being with the perfection of the idea?

For Aristotle, practical material activity, productive praxis, is considered to be below the dignity of the free – and thus true – human being, and what is necessary is to establish a distance between the two<sup>43</sup>. In this regard, Sánchez Vázquez cites the following passage from Aristotle’s *Politics*: ‘A state equipped with an ideal constitution ... cannot have its citizens living the life of mechanics or shopkeepers, which is ignoble and inimical to goodness. Nor can it have them engaged in farming; leisure is a necessity, both for growth in goodness and for the pursuit of political activities’<sup>44</sup>.

In Aristotle, however, just as in Plato, political praxis (which in this passage obviously has a higher value than productive praxis, and is even compared to the achievement of virtue) remains subordinated to the contemplation, observation, and conception of theory. Sánchez Vázquez notes that: ‘In the ancient world, theory never lost its supremacy, however important a role political activity might fulfill’<sup>45</sup>.

Faced with political praxis and above all the relationship between politics and theory, the Spanish-Mexican philosopher mentions a notable difference between Aristotle and Plato: ‘Plato did recognize, however, that theory

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in 1989 and in later texts he recognised the importance of the feminist movement, which, as is well-known, is not free of controversy even among self-defined leftist academics and political actors. Note, for example: ‘Just as we cannot ignore the pre-Marxist (principally anarchist) contribution to the image of a new society and the awakening and mobilisation of consciousness in favor of it, nor can we similarly ignore that today we must take into account social movements (environmental, feminist, and pacifist ones in the West and Christian movements in Latin America) which even if they do not all claim socialism as their own, and even less Marxism, nevertheless act and struggle objectively toward its realisation’ (‘Reexamen de la idea del socialismo’, in Sánchez Vázquez 1987, pp. 163–82, here: p. 164).

<sup>35</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Notice: Sánchez Vázquez has already transformed his original formulation about ignoring the practical world into another regarding the underestimation of *productive praxis* in thought.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The idea that man makes and elevates himself as a human being as a direct result of his practical activity, his labour, which transforms the material world is one that was alien to the Greek world’ (*ibid.*).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VII, 1328b–1329a. We quote here according to the translation used by Sánchez Vázquez 1980, p. 32). In other translations, we find the term ‘tasks of government’ instead of ‘political activities’. The formulation employed by Sánchez Vázquez, by contrast, does not canonise the state in advance as the only sphere for organisation and discussion of the social. See, for example, Rolfes’s translation: Aristotle 1948, p. 255.

<sup>45</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977.

had to be practical, that thought and action would have to maintain a unity which was located on the realm of politics'<sup>46</sup>.

That unity of theory and praxis in politics is, according to Plato, however, extraordinarily difficult to establish and is unilateral. Political praxis scarcely has its own foundation, and should be based entirely on theory; or put more precisely: 'That unity is maintained by allowing ideas to become practical in themselves'<sup>47</sup>. The chasm that Plato opens between theory and praxis is bridged in the relationship between philosophy and politics by a person who unites both aspects in himself: the philosopher king. 'Theory and practice, philosophy and politics merge in the person of the philosopher king'<sup>48</sup>.

But even in this 'solution' of the theory-praxis problem on the political terrain, there persists the aforementioned unilateral relationship: 'Plato's attitude ... simply prefigures future Utopian conceptions of the transformation and organisation of society. He admits that theory can become practice, and even accepts the possibility of political praxis, but only to the extent that this implies the application of the absolute principles set out in his theory'<sup>49</sup>.

But how is this relationship developed in Aristotle? His marked sense of reality leads him to consider the unity of theory and political praxis – which Plato clearly recognised as a necessity, but presented only in an idealist and unilateral form – to be impossible. As a result, he must also reject the direct influence of theory over praxis. The separation of theoretical life from practical life, praised by Plato, cannot simply be overcome on the terrain of politics through the construction of a philosopher king. Sánchez Vázquez interprets Aristotle as follows: 'The philosophers could not be kings, nor the kings philosophers'<sup>50</sup>.

The suspension of the direct subordination of praxis to theory does not mean that theoretical and practical life have nothing to do with one another, but that both 'merge and complement one another once their differences and hierarchies have been recognised'<sup>51</sup>. Thus political activity in Aristotle is not essentially irrational, but is, instead, guided by another sort of reason, 'the reason that inspires it, which is practical reason, has as its object not pure essence but human acts'<sup>52</sup>.

In this sense, we find in Aristotle a 'theory of praxis' on the plane of practical public affairs, in the sense of an 'art of directing public affairs in practice'<sup>53</sup>. Therefore, while political praxis is still granted some theoretical recognition by Aristotle and his teacher Plato (in different ways, as we have seen), such recognition is completely denied to productive praxis.

Before leaving the introduction that Sánchez Vázquez provides to the concept of praxis in Plato and Aristotle, we will lastly return to that contempt for productive praxis that he attempts to clarify from a different angle with the help of Marx, and above all with his analysis of value and reference to the 'giant thinker ... Aristotle' in *Das Kapital*<sup>54</sup>. The predominant form of thinking in ancient Greece featured this contempt for productive praxis. This attitude is understandable in relation to the low level of development of the mode of production in slave society and the sufficient availability of slave labour to satisfy practical necessities<sup>55</sup>. In considering the labour process, what was of interest was only the slave's (final) product, and not its active subject, the producer.

Sánchez Vázquez expresses this by way of Marx's economic conceptualisations, and ventures to claim that in ancient Greece 'use-value [and not exchange-value] was the only criterion of value'<sup>56</sup>. This would mean that ancient society was based upon a purely subsistence economy, without exchange of commodities or extensive foreign trade,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. The text cited continues: 'Praxis, therefore, must be philosophical; its value derives from its rational theoretical content. So the Platonic unity of theory and practice simply represents the dissolution of practice in theory'.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Marx 1976, p. 175 n35.

<sup>55</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



commercial capital, and such like. Evidently, this lapsus has to do with Sánchez Vázquez's presentation of ancient Greece, which divides the latter simply into 'free' and 'slaves', leaving out completely, for example, the day labourers or craftspeople who were neither 'free' nor 'slaves' and who were forced to freely sell their capacity to labour<sup>57</sup>. His lack of precision with regard to exchange-value in ancient Greece is explained when we continue to read this chapter of *The Philosophy of Praxis*. The circumstance we refer to is that the concept of value as the value of labour (in the Marxian sense) was still not known in antiquity; what was already known, conversely, was the value-form, which Sánchez Vázquez here erroneously equates with it<sup>58</sup>. This slippage, which is more than terminological, refers back to the lack of precision in the presentation of ancient society, and is corrected without comment by Sánchez Vázquez himself when he goes on to speak of Aristotle's reflections on value and Marx's observations in this respect:

Aristotle, who Karl Marx describes as 'the great investigator who was the first to analyse the value-form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature'<sup>59</sup>, 'did ... perceive', in the words of Sánchez Vázquez, 'the need to stabilize commodity production in order that they could be exchanged, but as Marx points out, he could never discover how these relations of equality might be assessed'<sup>60</sup>. But what is common, what is shared among all human products, is precisely the fact that the human labour employed in their production is objectified in them. Aristotle's difficulty in discovering the concept of value must be considered as at one with his contempt for human labour, for productive praxis.

But while Karl Marx, in *Capital*, 'only' sees this weakness of 'Aristotle's genius' as based on 'the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived' and which prevented him from 'finding out what "in reality" this relation of equality consisted of'<sup>61</sup>, Sánchez Vázquez speaks in simpler and sharper terms: the concept of praxis in ancient Greece (including that of Aristotle) 'was central to the ruling ideology'<sup>62</sup> that 'corresponded ... to the

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<sup>57</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics II*, Book III, 1278a.

<sup>58</sup> The formulation in question is the following: 'In Greece, work was seen as a function of the product, and the product in its turn as a function of its utility or capacity to satisfy a concrete human need. *Exchange value*, or the value of a commodity in relation to other commodities where all are regarded as equivalent expressions of general human labour, *is of no interest*' (Sánchez Vázquez 1977, italics by S.G.). It is true that value and exchange-value are used synonymously in *Capital*, but not knowing the *concept of value* does not automatically mean that human beings do not know and do not apply *exchange-value as a form*. Thus, exchange-value 'counts' without having been penetrated intellectually, or as Marx says in *Capital*: *they do not know it, but they are doing it*.

One possible explanation for this difficulty with the concept of value can be extracted from Melvin Cantarell Gamboa's review of the original Spanish-language edition of *The Philosophy of Praxis*: 'the book ... suffers from forgetting, not ignoring, works as fundamental as Marx's *Capital*, ... where there exist rich references to praxis and from which we believe he did not squeeze enough juice, in contrast to the exaggerated emphasis on the works of Marx's youth'. See Cantarell Gamboa 1967, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> Marx 1976, Chapter One, Section Three 'The Value-Form or Exchange-Value, III: The equivalent form', p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 15. He refers here to the following passage in the Spanish-language edition of *Capital*: Marx 1964, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Marx 1976 p. 152ff. The cited passage from Marx says in its entirety: 'However, Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labour is expressed as equal human labour and therefore as labour of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labour-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour because and in so far as they are human labour in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities. Aristotle's genius is displayed precisely by his discovery of a relation of equality in the value-expression of commodities. Only the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived prevented him from finding out what "in reality" this relation of equality consisted of' (pp. 151f.)

In this passage, Marx refers to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. See, for example: 'In all friendships between dissimilar people, as we have said, it is proportion that produces equality and preserves the friendship; for example in political friendship the shoemaker receives in return for his shoes what they are worth, and so do the weaver and the rest. In these cases, a common measure is provided in the form of money, and so everything is referred to this and measured by it' (Aristotle 2000, p. 164). See Marx 1975, p. 848, editorial note 24.

<sup>62</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 14.

interest of the ruling class<sup>63</sup>. But at the same time, in discussing these thinkers, Sánchez Vázquez uses a more circumspect formulation, one which recalls Marx's discussion of Aristotle: 'the impotence of the mode of production based on slavery coupled with the capacity of a servile labour force to satisfy all the practical needs ... led to a debasement of the value of human labour, which appeared as a routine and demeaning activity whose product alone was of importance'<sup>64</sup>.

Sánchez Vázquez concludes his presentation of the concept of praxis in Greek antiquity by turning to some voices 'who disagreed with this disdainful attitude'<sup>65</sup>. He cites as an example Hesiod, who in his text *Works and Days* attributes to human labour a greater importance than the veneration of the gods and the possibility of achieving riches, independence, and glory<sup>66</sup>. The Sophists, who came out against slavery, similarly had a dissenting concept of productive praxis; in this regard, he cites Antiphon<sup>67</sup> and Prodicus of Ceo<sup>68</sup>. Moreover, he mentions the 'cynic Antisthenes', who also attributes great significance to human labour<sup>69</sup>.

To conclude, Sánchez Vázquez suggests that in the 'industrial and commercial cities of Ionia ... the mechanical arts did undergo some development' and that another attitude toward the unity of science and technology (in this case, an approving one) prevailed at the time, in contrast with Athens and other Greek cities of the same period<sup>70</sup>. In sum, Sánchez Vázquez affirms with respect to the predominant tendencies of ancient Greece: 'It was the material conditions of life in Ancient Greece which was characterised by a slave-holding mode of production, which determined the rupture between theory and practice, held back technical progress and "blocked" that progress both socially and ideologically, in part as a result of its negative attitude towards productive physical labour'<sup>71</sup>.

Discussions surrounding the concept of praxis in ancient Greece cast an initial light on the winding paths that the development of this concept had to take in the history of philosophy. The force field between Plato and Aristotle – between the view of the need for the unity of theory and praxis, and the recognition of the almost insurmountable obstacles existing to this unity among relations which were up until now antagonistic – already demarcates a significant part of the framework within which it was necessary to struggle theoretically for centuries. The importance, which Sánchez Vázquez highlights, of the material relations underlying these respective formulations (even where there is a concept with higher esteem for praxis), indicates another line of demarcation in the history of thought.

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<sup>63</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 16. Sánchez Vázquez, in relating the predominant philosophy of antiquity to the economic form of slave society and the 'interests of the dominant classes', continues the central tendency of his Philosophy of Praxis, which is characterised precisely by emerging gracefully from situations without comfortable simplifications. In this regard, see Berel Lang's comments in his review of the book: 'Vázquez, who usually avoids clichés, relates this idea of contemplative knowledge to the Greek distaste for manual labour and acceptance of slaveholding; so much, one might say, for the Sparta which proposed no such leisurely view of knowing – which flourished, in fact, without philosophy at all...': Lang 1978, p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 14, italics by S.G. Sánchez Vázquez speaks here of the 'value of human labour' obviously in the normative sense. Seen economically, human labour has no value, but rather creates value. What has value is the human labour-power. (See also Marx 1976, Chapter One, 'The Commodity', pp. 125–77.)

<sup>65</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Antiphon sees productive praxis not as a simple residual of the natural, as if foreign to the 'man as such'. For him, 'fame never arrives by itself, but is instead accompanied by pain and fatigue'. Marx's quoted statement, according to which the concept of human equality is necessary for a developed concept of productive praxis, seems to be completed here. For Antiphon, all human beings are equal 'by nature'. See Antiphon, frag. 44 d D. See also, *Lexicon der alten Welt* 1965, pp. 433ff.

<sup>68</sup> Sánchez Vázquez refers here to Plato's testimony regarding Prodicus and cites, according to Plato 1964a, 163 a d.

<sup>69</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977. Here he cites the compilation of fragments of Antisthenes by Diogenes Laertius, Book VI, 2.

This adversary of Plato's is seen in the literature, of course, as a precursor to the Cynics (through his disciple, Diogenes of Sinope), but he himself is not characterised as a Cynic, but as a Socratic. His philosophy shares with the Cynics the doctrine of the absolute absence of necessity, but not their appreciation for the lack of shame (see, for example, *Lexicon der alten Welt* 1965, pp. 1657ff).

<sup>70</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 17. Sánchez Vázquez mentions in this regard Magalhaes-Vilhena 1962.



In the aftermath of the enormous transformations, expansions, and limitations suffered by the concept of praxis in the course of history, a philosophy appears which grants this concept a completely new weight.

Let us turn, then, to the thinker whose doctrine is understood by our author as a Philosophy of Praxis and who, by virtue of this particularity, deserves his greatest attention: Karl Marx.

Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez defines Marx's concept of praxis as the 'central category of his philosophy', 'which began with the *Theses on Feuerbach*'<sup>72</sup>. What is revolutionary about Marx's work does not lie in some internal theoretical novelty or innovation, and is not a simple shift in paradigms or something of the sort, but, instead, consists in the explicit turn toward praxis as the locus in which true and false are distinguished. Philosophy, which had throughout millennia (as the elevation of the spirit above the vileness of the world) understood praxis as a necessary evil which was more or less avoidable, and centred its efforts on being affected as little as possible by it<sup>73</sup>, receives with Marx the function of making the world accessible to thought, precisely to help human activity, which is practical and transformative, to acquire conscious forms.

Up to this point the objective, contradictory, and imperfect world had been a heavy burden on theory (philosophy), which aspired to full force and perfection, a burden that must be repeatedly shaken off. That objective world is now in question. Its contradictions must no longer be left aside, but must instead explicitly become the principal topic of analysis and the object of real transformation. Thus, the force field between reality and intellectual reflection on that reality cannot simply be 'resolved' through the repeated modulation of reflection, but must instead be transformed through a revolution of reality *itself*.

Therefore, Marxian theory does not come to rest after a process of intellectual maturation, but cannot desist while human society is not emancipated, while the exploitation of human by human persists. Sánchez Vázquez thus approaches this theory not due to the insufficiencies of prevailing philosophy (and its history), but rather on account of the adversities of social relations themselves<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1977, p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> As in the previous section, here we are speaking primarily of productive praxis.

<sup>74</sup> To illustrate this, we will cite as a footnote a small anecdote: when the author of this text asked Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez at the UNAM about his assessment of the development of Marxism in Latin America, he answered that this was above all a question of political praxis and not a scholastic one that could be answered within a merely theoretical framework. The author had a similar experience over and over again in a philosophy seminar (!) at the same institution, in which he was exhorted repeatedly to not make theoretical debates so academic or to consider these in isolation from concrete political praxis. For the author, who had only always heard exactly the opposite at the University of Frankfurt, this was an incredible theoretical-political experience.

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