

Social being and production of consciousness: The formation of economists

Juan Iñigo Carrera¹

Summary

The debates about the education of economists focus on the curriculum, particularly on its level of pluralism. However, the question about the social being of economics students, which determines their need to develop their scientific consciousness with a certain content, has been disregarded. Apparently, economics students are free individuals pursuing objective knowledge. Underlying this appearance, they are workers developing their labour power as a commodity. As such members of the working class, their concrete labour involves the direct management of society's total capital. Thus, their field of work is that of political relations, of the class struggle. Economics students unavoidably produce themselves as subjects of political action; consequently, their teachers operate as political subjects. Only if both political subjectivities recognise themselves as such, can the formation of economists have an objective, hence scientific, character. Plurality is not a matter of abstract universality, but about economics students discovering their social being.

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Social being and production of consciousness: The formation of economists²

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The general crisis of overproduction resulting from the global accumulation of capital presents a peculiar expression concerning the production of knowledge about economic relations: the evidence of an overproduction of neoclassical economists, who lack utility to account for actual social processes. Thus the crisis has triggered intense debates about the way economists are trained, that is about the way in which the specificity of their consciousness as social subjects is produced. Some of the actions taken by critical economics students to confront the situation are widely known: the movement for Post-Autistic Economics (now Real-World Economics) that emerged in 2000 at Paris, the claim in 2001 for Opening Up Economics at Cambridge, the walkout in 2011 at Harvard, etc. Nevertheless, there was an earlier less known, and rather successful experience, led by economics students and the union of teachers at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. In 1997, a completely neoclassical programme was implemented by the university authorities. The counteraction consisted in a struggle for the opening, for each compulsory subject in the degree, of at least one course convened by a professor and assistants who profess a critical perspective, so as to offer the students the possibility to achieve an alternative formation without nominally changing the programme of study. What follows is based on my experience as an actor of this process.

The debates on how economists are trained focus on the question of the academic structure underpinning this training, that is, on the content of economics programmes of study. It might seem, then, that the question boils down to fostering a greater or lesser pluralism in response to the desire of economics students to define their own theoretical consciousness. Now this same issue confronts us with an underlying question which seems, remarkably, to have been entirely relegated in the debate: insofar as it is the social being of economics students that makes them bearers of the necessity to develop their scientific consciousness with this or that content, how is this social being determined? This is the specific subject of this article.

It goes without saying that, with variations allowed for the particularities of each case, the discussion below applies equally to the social being and training processes of students from the other branches into which the unity of social science is currently fragmented. Indeed, although the purpose of this fragmentation is to generate the ideological appearance that the field of inquiry of economists is demarcated by the economic base while that of other social scientists is confined to the legal and political superstructure, the fact is that the specific object of their labours is the same. However, I have focused my development on economics students for two reasons. Firstly, because of the existence of an explicit debate on their training as noted above. Secondly, because economists possess a specific feature which sets them apart from other social scientists, namely: the idea that the mere fact of formulating "economic development plans" can turn them into the subjects of social transformation with absolutely no regard to any determination of their own concrete subjectivity.

² This article elaborates on texts that I originally published in journals of the student movement at the UBA Economics and Social Sciences Schools and was subsequently debated at the Second Conference of Latin American Critical Thinking REDEM-SEPLA 2013 (II Jornadas de Pensamiento Crítico Latinoamericano REDEM-SEPLA 2013).

- Economics students as abstractly free subjects

Above all, students of economics appear to us as human subjects who intend to develop scientific knowledge of the determinations of the object of their future action, and, therefore, of their own subjectivity. In other words, they appear to us as human subjects who intend to organize their future action endowed with all the freedom that derives from the fullest possible objective knowledge of its cause, that is, of its reason to be. Studying thus immediately appears as an action inherent to a free consciousness specifically aiming at advancing in the development of its own freedom.

However, let us examine the specific conditions under which such educational process unfolds at any university. It becomes apparent that, despite the condition of students as subjects of those processes, far from affirming themselves immediately as the free subjects they are, the exercise of their subjectivity requires the coercive mediation of their teachers (in the form of procedures ranging from the control of their attendance, to the grading system). Moreover, that coercion operates as a condition for the study of not only those topics repudiated by students as something alien to them, but even also of those topics which students perceive as being of genuine interest to them.

It would seem that there was no choice but to state, in a conformist manner and to paraphrase an old apothegm, that students are free individuals who aim to develop their freedom, but if coerced, they become freer.

But, no, this contradiction must be explained if we do not want to turn our starting point into an abstraction that mutilates the power of our action based on it.

- The economics students in their condition as members of the working class

Let us go back to the point of departure, but now looking at students in their simplest determination as concrete historical subjects. From this perspective, the first thing that becomes apparent about the economists' training is that this is the process of developing a labour power with certain skills. The need to produce these skills seems to spring from the consciousness and will of the subjects of this process, who have decided, as free individuals, to develop them. But consciousness and will are the forms in which human subjects manage their individual actions as organs of the social life-process, that is, consciousness and will are the forms in which the social being of individuals is realized. So we need to search for the necessity of the economists' training in the determinations of their social being. And the key here is the way in which this subjectivity will take part in the organization of social labour process and, hence, in the process of social consumption.

Let us thus focus on this specific concrete under consideration, that is, on students whose education revolves around the study of economic relations prevailing in our society. Obviously, this concrete does not correspond to any particular individual, but to the general rule of the students involved. What are these students? These are not precisely individuals who are studying in order to manage their own company, nor even to set up their own consultancy firm. On the contrary, these are individuals who are for the most part developing their skills to be able to work as members of a collective of wage-workers. They are producing their future labour power in order to be able to sell it as their only commodity. Leaving aside the fact that some of them are already selling their labour

power during their degrees, the determination of the product of their activity -as students-as a labour power for hire, shows that the generality of economics students are members of the working class. And not just in the future, but already in their present existence as students. Even as bearers of the very possibility to develop their productive attributes to perform complex labour, these students are the outcome of the action of the working class in the class struggle. Hereafter, whenever we refer to economics students, we will be referring to these concrete students.

- The concrete labour of economists as an expression of the absolute specific contradiction inherent in the working class

Studying implies an expenditure of labour power whose immediate purpose is not the production of use values for others, but the production of the individual's own labour power. Consequently, its determinations fall within the realm of individual consumption through which the workers produce and reproduce themselves. And as corresponds to its determination, the individual consumption of workers is at the same time the production process of their own commodity, namely, labour power. Therefore, students are faced with the contradiction inherent to all producers of commodities: the product of their own labour is a non-use-value for themselves, and yet must be a use-value for its potential buyer. And in the case of labour power, the buyer is capital (either individual capital or the political representative of the total capital of society, that is, the state). As Marx succinctly puts it, even in the process of individual consumption the working class is an appendage of capital.³ Therefore, students are always faced with the contradiction that, even as they develop their freedom as human beings by developing the knowledge of their own determinations, the material product of this process confronts them as a social power that is alien to them and to which they are subordinated, in other words, as capital.

Regarding this determination which is common to any of the workers developing their labour power, economics students present a peculiar trait. Their object of study is the very historically-specific form taken by the general social relation which constitutes the capitalist mode of production. The object of their study is the movement of capital as a whole, the movement of their own alienated general social relation in its unity. As in any process of cognition, its purpose is not an abstract knowing, but determining the individual who is undertaking the process of cognition as a subject capable of organizing the action that will operate upon that object. Economics students are not developing their labour power to apply it in the management of some individual capital, as happens with those pursuing an accountancy or business degree. They are social subjects who are developing a labour power whose concrete object will be the direct management of society's total capital in its unity, as concerns economists in general. This means that they will exercise their specific skills as sellers of labour power in the sphere where the general social relation takes the form of political relations, that is to say, in the proper field of the class struggle.

Thus, the generality of economists are members of the working class whose social labour has the organization of the movement of their own objectified social relation that at the same time confronts them as a social power they cannot control, namely capital, as its immediate purpose. It could arguably be said that they synthesize in their concrete labour the absolute contradiction of the working class as a historical subject; a subject which, by virtue of its own alienation in capital, is determined as the bearer of the

³ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1965, p. 573

supersession of capital itself into the conscious, thus fully free, organization of the social life-process.

- Class determination and concrete form of consciousness

What happens when the very same students of economics are asked if they recognize themselves in their determination as members of a social class? I ask this question systematically in writing as a starting point for each of my university courses. And the dominant response lies between the denial of membership of a social class and, if affirmative, membership of a "middle class" or the petty bourgeoisie. Only marginally does the response ever acknowledge membership of the working class.

The specific object of study of economics students, and hence the specific content of the formation of their scientific consciousness, is the movement of the total capital of society, that is, the organization of the unity of the social production and consumption process in the capitalist mode of production. Yet, the concrete students in question are unable to recognize their own determination as active participants in this organization in their condition as individuals lacking any commodity to sell other than their own labour power. In other words, they cannot recognize themselves in their own concrete determinations as members of the working class. This unfortunate experience is repeated even when the question is asked to those who, in their condition as students, see themselves as subjects of a political action aimed at overcoming the capitalist mode of production. This denial of their own social being is expressed in the conception of the necessary unity of action between "workers" and "students", as if it were about the convergence of the latter with the former from the externality of their own class determination. From the point of view of the students, the issue is posed as if it were a matter of doing something for an "other" rather than the realization of their own social being for themselves. In other words the call is made as if students were not themselves members of the working class whose specificity is limited to the fact that they are in the process of developing their labour power and to the concrete object of their future work.

Such is the crudest expression, in the consciousness of economists, of the contradiction between the development of the capacity of the working class to consciously organize social labour in the process of socialization of private labour, vis-à-vis the ideological necessity of facing that same capacity as an alien power that capital imposes on the working class.

Let us then consider the cultivation of two appearances which constitute the fundamental specific pillars for the production of the consciousness of economists as a scientific awareness which at the same time is unable to objectively recognize itself in its own class determinations. The first of these pillars points directly to the materiality of their labour.

- Economists as a specific personification of capital

All relations between workers and capital, and therefore, between workers and those who personify capital, have an antagonistic character. This means that, in the capitalist mode of production, any individual whose concrete labour plays any role in the organization of social labour, is necessarily placed in an antagonistic relationship with those workers whose labour he/she must coordinate as a representative of the power of capital and, therefore, as an agent of their exploitation. Furthermore, when the individual

in question is a wage labourer, and in order to sell his/her own labour power, he/she must achieve from the other workers under his/her command the greatest possible valorisation for the respective individual capital or for the whole of them. This places him/her in an antagonistic relationship with his/her subordinates inasmuch as they are simple sellers of labour power. How does this determination specifically extend to economists? To say it again, the economists' concrete labour is, par excellence, to operate in the organization of the unity of the process of social production and consumption in the capitalist mode of production. So, whether they like it or not, the economists' work as wage labourers aims specifically at the exercise of a kind of knowledge which is applied to the organization of the domination of capital over the working class. If they sell their labour power to an individual capital or an association of them, it is obvious that their job involves the exercise of coercion over other wage workers in the name of those capitals. If they sell their labour power to the state, as intellectual workers their job is to work in the organization of social labour on behalf of the total capital of society. And this means that their involvement in the exercise of coercion in the name of the power of capital extends its reach over the entire working class. But even if they sold their labour power to a trade union, the concrete content of their labour could not transcend its determination as the exercise of a knowledge which specifically operates in the organization of the reproduction of labour power as an attribute of the capital that exploits it. In this sense, the work of economists would still have the organization of the rule of capital over living labour as its specific purpose. This determination, which springs from the same material form of his/her labour as wage worker, reaches the economist even regardless of whether he/she intervenes in the process of organization of the unity of the process of social production and consumption as a mere producer of information or as the head of the respective bureaucratic army.

The key political issue at stake here is the following. With the development of the production of relative surplus value through the system of machinery, and the subsequent transformation of the materiality of the worker's labour in his/her role as executor of the development of the ability to both control natural forces and organize private labour in the process of its increasing socialization, the antagonistic relationship between buyer and seller of labour power, that is, between those who personify capital and those who personify wage labour, spreads into the collective worker subsumed under capital and, hence, into the working class itself.

Just as the development of relative surplus value determines the working class as the overall agent of the process of social production, it also reproduces this agency as an alienated power in the eyes of the working class itself. And a specific form of this reproduction is capital's need to erode the solidarity among sellers of labour power which constitutes them as working class, pitting them against each other by cultivating the ideological appearance that their membership in the same class depends on the concrete materiality of each one's labour.

Hence, it is no accident that the ideologues of capital try to create the illusion that economics students are members of any class -even of those social groupings such as 'the intelligentsia' or 'scientists', which appear as abstracted from any determination by the same general social relation- but working class. This same illusion -usually coupled with another that conceives of these students as future free intellectuals and scientists- is the image about themselves and their role as social subjects that, as the ideological organ of capital, the academic structure itself aims to feed into economics students (and of course, the students in general). And thus this illusion materializes in university programs of study, which leads to the second pillar supporting the production of the consciousness of

economists as a scientific consciousness which is, at the same time, unable to objectively recognize itself in its own class determinations.

- Critical political economy or critique of political economy?

This concerns the form taken by the production process of the labour power of economists, that is, the structure of their degree. First, as mentioned before, unlike accountants or business managers, the economists' specific object is not the movement of an individual capital, but the movement of the total capital of society, which is the movement of the general social relation in its unity. This movement appears today primarily as the mere reproduction of capital in its process of accumulation; a process whose unity needs to be borne in a consciousness which is blind to the evidence that capital itself develops the necessity for its own supersession. Thus, the training of economists needs to give course to the same contradiction we have been facing so far: just as it is a necessity of the total capital of society to train them so that they can personify its movement in a conscious manner, it also needs to educate them in such a way that they conceive of this movement of capitalist economic relations as if they were natural relations, that is, ahistorical and able to regulate themselves automatically. The development of their objective knowledge of the total capital of society, which allows them to act as a personification of its movement, must also be the negation of that objective knowledge. In other words, it must involve the development of an ideological consciousness. For the accountant or business manager, the practical necessity of managing an individual capital, which we could roughly term a technical necessity, takes precedence over ideological necessity. And this means that the ideological necessity comes across in the learning process as a barrier which undermines the potentiality of the technical necessity (for example, the fundamentals of accounting cannot be clearly learned if one is not familiar with what the turnover circuit of capital is, but neoclassical economics begins by denying the existence of the latter). But in the case of economists, since their immediate object is the unity of the movement of the general social relation, the ideological necessity takes precedence over any technical need. Such is the essence of economics.

Neoclassical economics, in considering value as a natural intrapersonal relationship enjoyed by the individual with the useful things that the same theory defines as scarce by nature, starts out by denying the very basis of the general social relation. Thus, it becomes the fullest expression of how capital's ideological necessity prevails over the operational need, which we earlier called technical. A few examples should suffice to make the point. As neoclassical theory is unable to explain why certain things which, according to its own definition of useful and scarce, nevertheless do not have a price, the technique of national accounting is unable to take the qualitative definition of its object as point of departure. As a consequence, it ends up defining it in an arbitrary manner (starting with Pigou and his paradox about the housewife vis-à-vis the housekeeper). As neoclassical theory denies that the valorisation of industrial capital arises in the course of its turnover circuit, the measurement of the rate of profit is reduced to that of the internal rate of return (if not directly to net present value), which yields results which are devoid of their purported content, and which differ quantitatively from the latter. Alternatively, the valorisation of capital is also reduced to calculating the margin over costs, which, from being an operational tool for business management, it is presented as the organic determinant of the course of the valorisation of the total capital of society. But as seen in the above examples, it is not only neoclassical economics whose

function is to empty the knowledge of economic forms of their real content. The neo-Ricardian schools, including the Marxist currents influenced by them, start out by overlooking that the very specific historical determination of social labour in the capitalist mode of production is the private form in which it is performed (from which springs the contradiction, noted at the outset, consisting in the development of the ability to consciously organize social labour while at the same time negating this capacity through the alienation of consciousness). Neo-Ricardians thus obliterate the private character of labour by assuming an immediate unity between social production and social consumption as the normal condition for the determination of prices, an ideological inversion which hides behind the appearance of rigor presented by its matrix-like constructions. Thus, for these approaches value has no form other than its content. And since the scope of the organization of the action that overcomes the capitalist mode of production becomes thereby confined to the sphere of distribution, its transformative powers become concomitantly curtailed.

In turn, the prevailing current of thought in present-day Marxist political economy, which derives from Rubin, intends to explain the capitalist mode of production, i.e., the objectified general social relation, through the existence of a fetishistic consciousness which is imposed upon the *naturally* free consciousness of individuals. That is, instead of departing from social being to explain consciousness, it seeks to explain social being departing from consciousness; instead of explaining the existence of exchange from the value of commodities, it tries to explain the value of commodities from the existence of exchange. This is why, for this conception, value has no content other than its form.

And what can we say about the theory of monopoly capital, which is usually presented as an irreducible critique of the course of the accumulation of capital, but which starts out from the individual free will of the monopolist to explain the unity of the movement of social production and consumption, instead of recognizing that the will of the monopolist is but the form in which the aforementioned unity is achieved when it is established through private labour? This is exactly the same inversion glorified by the neoclassical theory of imperfect competition with its game theory.

Classical political economy and neoclassical economics are premised on the naturalization of commodities and, as a consequence, they also naturalize the free consciousness of the commodity producer. Conversely, critical political economy starts out by naturalizing the free consciousness of the commodity producer and consequently relapses on the naturalization of commodities. However opposite they may seem, they are two ways of placing at the origin of human history what is in fact the result of its present-day development. Freedom is not a natural attribute but a historically specific social relation, which corresponds to the development of the capitalist mode of production. And what place is left for critique? In the process of development of working class consciousness, does critique come down to the critique of neoclassical economics, or is it about the critique of political economy as such?

The different currents of economics and political economy are determined as the necessary forms, not only of the reproduction of the economists' consciousness as one that stops short at appearances of its social being, but also of the systematic production of that consciousness by the generation of *ad hoc* appearances. By contrast, the critique of political economy is the necessary form of development of a working class consciousness which is able to overcome all these appearances. And the reason for this lies in its very point of departure, which is the discovery that free consciousness is the form taken by the alienated consciousness in the reified social relation. The need for a plurality of approaches in the education of economists does not respond to a need for an

abstract universality, but is the necessary concrete form in which economics students can manage to recognize themselves in their own social being. Hence, the ideologues of capital fight it tooth and nail.

- The education of economists, or the question of studying and teaching economics as a political action of the working class

The process of human knowledge is the process in which the individual produces his/her consciousness, which is the ability to regulate his/her individual action as an organ of social labour. The question of the specific production of the consciousness of economists under examination takes as its point of departure the recognition of the determinations of capital accumulation which take concrete form by prompting a portion of the working class to develop the skills required by this accumulation through a process of higher education.

The production of one's own consciousness is primarily an individual action: no one can produce someone else's consciousness. Nevertheless, the production of consciousness is the fullest expression of the productive forces of social labour: each individual acts in the process in which other individuals produce their own conscience. For teachers, this action is the very object of their concrete labour. In turn, economics students are producing their specific consciousness with the purpose of applying their labour power to the direct management of the movement of society's total capital. And precisely for taking part in the direct management of society's total capital, that is, of the unity of the process of social production and consumption, the concrete labour of economists necessarily operates in the field of political relations. Or, to put it in a non-external manner, the concrete labour of economists is a necessary form of political action.

The process of education of economists is in itself the process of producing a political subjectivity. Therefore, the actions performed by teachers as part of this training are, in themselves, actions of a political subjectivity. And only if both political subjectivities are able to recognize themselves as such from the outset, can the process of producing the former have an objective, that is scientific, character. Otherwise, the content of the process will be purely ideological in character, however scientific it may seem in terms of form.

We said earlier that economists synthesize in their work the most absolute specific contradiction of the working class as an alienated historical subject bearing the necessity to overcome the capitalist mode of production. But so far it would seem that we have only touched upon the materiality of their labour inasmuch as it is a concrete way of reproducing the accumulation of society's total capital in its unity and, therefore, as a concrete form of the unconscious organization of the social life-process. However, this reproduction is, in itself, the development of the productive forces of labour through the socialization of private labour. In turn, the socialization of private labour takes shape through the expansion of the capacity to consciously organize social labour as an attribute of the very alienated subject performing it, that is, as an attribute of the working class. And the full development of this capacity is the negation of alienation itself and, hence, the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production by the action of the working class which operates directly by organizing the unity of the movement of the social life-process.⁴

⁴ For a further development of this determination, see my *Capital: historical reason, revolutionary subject and consciousness* (*El capital: razón histórica, sujeto revolucionario y conciencia*). The central issue of that work is precisely the concrete forms taken by that determination in the process of concentration

The mutilation of the ability to recognize themselves as members of the working class by the very members of this class whose concrete object of labour will be the management of the unity of movement of society's total capital by means of the exercise of a scientific consciousness, is a specific negation of the powers of the political organization of the working class. And it negates these political powers both in terms of the immediate conditions of the sale of labour power, and as regards the development of the action that overcomes the capitalist mode of production.

The development of working class consciousness of its own alienation and the historical powers embodied therein is therefore a necessary form of working class political action. The point of departure of this development lies in the recognition of the specific historical character of commodities, which also bears an acknowledgement of free consciousness as a historical form of social relation, as opposed to the ideological naturalizations characteristic of political economy. Therefore, this is the starting point of the action of the critique of political economy in the process in which economists produce their consciousness as members of the working class.

In my capacity as a member of the working class I pursue an immediate political goal at the university. This goal is to take part in the process in which other members of the same class produce their own consciousness as a scientific one aimed at operating in the organization of social labour within the sphere which is proper to political action. And the starting point for the political action which I attempt lies in getting the students in question to face their own determinations as members of the working class and the political powers invested in them as a consequence. I subordinate the concrete conditions in which I sell my labour power to the university to this political objective. This is what I make explicit in each of my courses. Such is my determination as a concrete political subject in this area.

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and centralization of capital, that is, the full development of the alienation of the working class as an attribute of its own social relation reified through the socialization of private labour and, consequently, the full development of the determination of the working class as a revolutionary subject.