

Theses on Feuerbach

I

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *The Essence of Christianity*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical”, activity.

II

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

III

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

IV

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance,

after the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice.

V

Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity.

VI

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is consequently compelled:

1. To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract – isolated – human individual.
2. Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as “genus”, as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals.

VII

Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the “religious sentiment” is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs to a particular form of society.

VIII

All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

IX

The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is contemplation of single individuals and of civil society.

X

The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.

XI

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

Ludwig Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) sat through Hegel's summer semester lectures of 1824 in Logic and Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Religion and this experience, he wrote later, became the turning point of his life.

The publication in 1841 of *The Essence of Christianity* established him in the minds of his contemporaries as an intellectual leader of the Left Hegelians. He had, to paraphrase the words of Engels, "exploded the [Hegelian] System and broken its spell." The book is still regarded as the precursor of all projection theories of religion [i.e. theories of religion as a projection onto imaginary beings, gods, etc. of conflicts in real human life].

Feuerbach then wrote two philosophical manifestos, Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy (1842) and Principles of the Philosophy of the Future (1843). The manifestoes were filled with bold and radical ideas but Feuerbach never systematically developed them.

In 1848 and at the height of his influence, he became enthusiastic about the revolutions in France and its inevitable impact on Europe... [But by 1860] in poverty and forced to move to Rechenberg near Nürnberg, he was financially supported by friends and by donations from the Social Democratic Workers' Party (of which he had become a member).

By the end of his career in 1871, he regarded himself as an atheist, materialist, and communist.

The difficulty with Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach argued, is that everything in nature and history is seen from the standpoint of development and in such a way that the last stage of this development is regarded as a totality that includes in itself all the previous stages. The result is a not only a complete misrepresentation of nature but of culture and religion, because it ignores all their variety and particularities. It is in this way, for example, that Christianity is determined as the Absolute religion.

The same error is made in philosophy. Hegel's own philosophy is exempt from the assumption that governs the treatment of others; namely, as the perspective of one philosopher whose problems are cast up by his immediate predecessors and, hence, has its own presuppositions and problems. Rather, Hegel, by virtue his claim of beginning only with the structure of Reason itself as manifested in his Logic, regards himself as the "speculative Dalai Lama," the incarnation of Geist itself. But just as Strauss has shown that there can be no incarnation in history so there can be no perfect manifestation of the universal in one philosophy. Indeed, "incarnation and history are absolutely incompatible".

Another difficulty inherent in Hegel's philosophy is that because his Logic is thought both to describe the structures of reality itself as well as to govern the dialectical form which the philosopher uses to explicate it, Hegel confuses the demonstration of his ideas with the substance of philosophy.

Then there is Hegel's unremitting concern with abstractions which ignore the concreteness of sensuous reality.

All these problems in Hegel, Feuerbach concluded, are rooted in his assumption of Absolute identity, an assumption which is beyond criticism and which he had made from the very beginnings of his philosophical career. Idealism is committed to the unity of subject and object, spirit and nature, thought and being. And the way idealists handle the problem of the objectivity of nature is to appeal to an Absolute subject in which the predicates "nature" and "spirit" are simply attributes of the same thing, the Absolute. Hegelian philosophy is really a "rational mysticism", which both attracts and repels us.

The entire enterprise completely ignores the system of secondary causes that constitutes what we call nature and which can only be grasped empirically. Nature is the proper concern of human knowledge and all speculation that seeks to go beyond nature is futile.

The criticism of Hegel has been embodied in a manifesto, Principles of the Philosophy of the Future, which was aimed at nothing less than the overthrow of speculative philosophy and the establishment of a "new philosophy" based on empiricism and "sensuousness".

Feuerbach is best known for his book *The Essence of Christianity* which burst like a bombshell on the German intellectual scene in the early Forties and was soon translated into English by the English novelist, George Eliot. It quickly became like a Bible to an entire generation of intellectuals who thought of themselves as reformers and revolutionaries, including Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Richard Wagner, and David F. Strauss, who wrote that the book was the "truth for our times."

Superficially, the central thesis is deceptively simple... Man—this is the mystery of religion—objectifies his being and then again makes himself an object to the objectified image of himself thus converted into a subject

The argument is an example of Feuerbach's "transformative method," which Karl Marx thought was Feuerbach's contribution to philosophy. The method states that Hegel's philosophy is based on the reification of abstract predicates like "thought" which are then treated as agents. Since this is the clue to understanding Hegel, it follows that what is valid in Hegel can be appropriated by inverting the subject and predicate and restoring them to their proper relationship. For example, instead of construing the predicate "thinking" as an agent, one transforms the equation and asserts that thinking is the activity of existing individuals. Thought comes out of being, not being out of thought.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach>

Background notes on the Theses on Feuerbach

The "Theses on Feuerbach" mark Marx's transition from being a radical-democratic philosopher to being a militant communist and a historical materialist.

Marx entered adult life as a student in Bonn (from 1835) and then Berlin (from 1836) of law and philosophy. As a student he moved in a milieu of post-Hegelian philosophers who were radicals in the sense that generally had at the time, i.e. atheists and democratic-minded. In Germany there were no political parties, no labour movement, few political freedoms.

He wrote a Ph D thesis on Greek philosophy (1838-41), hoping to get an academic job. By this time he was, as he would continue until early 1845, a follower of Feuerbach.

Feuerbach, a former student of Hegel's and once seen as likely to be Hegel's most brilliant successor, produced a sweeping critique of Hegel's dialectics between 1839 and 1843. He also declared himself a communist (and would later join the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Bebel and Liebknecht) though Marx and Engels would later comment that Feuerbach had never really understood what that meant. However, after 1843 Feuerbach wrote little and lived effectively in retirement.

Failing to get an academic job, Marx became a journalist on a liberal newspaper (1842-3). Drifting leftwards, he moved to Paris, the centre of left-wing politics at that time.

In Paris (late 1843 to early 1845) he met organised socialist workers for the first time. Their mode of organisation was not what we would recognise today. There were no trade unions, and most socialists considered workers' economic struggles irrelevant. The socialist groups were mostly, in effect discussion circles.

But they won Marx over. He became a communist, though still philosophically a follower of Feuerbach. He also (August 1844) established his working relationship with Engels, who had moved ahead politically faster than Marx. Arguably Engels was a "Marxist" some time before Marx became one. He generally thought quicker and more clearly than Marx, though it seems doubtful that he could ever have had the fanatical will to unravel complexities and worry out problems that enabled Marx to write "Capital".

They wrote a Feuerbachian communist critique of the left-wing German philosophers, "The Holy Family"; on that, Marx later commented that "we do not need to be ashamed of [it], although the cult of Feuerbach produces a very humorous effect upon one now".

Marx was expelled from Paris in early 1845, and moved to Brussels. There he and Engels first wrote a further, vast and unfinished, critique of the German philosophers ("The German Ideology", of which Marx and Engels were later very dismissive), and then set to political organising.

Once they set to political organising, the subject-matter of Marx's writing changed abruptly ("Wage Labour and Capital", "On the Question of Free Trade", "Communist Manifesto"), and so even did his style of writing, previously ornate and full of constructed contrasts and puns.

Unfortunately for later generations, Marx never wrote a crisp, clear summing-up of his conclusions from his ten years (1835 to 1845-6) of preoccupation with philosophy

The "Theses on Feuerbach" signal Marx moving on from Feuerbach's philosophical communism to Engels' working-class communism.

They can be better understood by reading them together with two other texts. The first is a section on Feuerbach from "The German Ideology". In contrast to "The Holy Family", which was Feuerbachian, "The German Ideology" included a critique of Feuerbach.

Or, at least, it was intended to. The section of the manuscript on Feuerbach mostly does not refer to Feuerbach at all, but is an attempt by Marx and Engels to summarise their own developing new outlook (an attempt on which Engels later curtly commented that it showed only how defective their knowledge of economic history then was). Only a few paragraphs explicitly discussed Feuerbach.

The second text is extracts from Engels' "theses on Feuerbach", an unpublished note written, like Marx's theses, in 1845. In some ways Engels' theses are clearer and sharper than Marx's, and more obviously inform what Marx and Engels, together, later produced.

From "The German Ideology"

Feuerbach's conception of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it, and on the other to mere feeling; he says "Man" instead of "real historical man"... In the first case, the contemplation of the sensuous world, he necessarily lights on things which contradict his consciousness and feeling, which disturb the harmony he presupposes, the harmony of all parts

of the sensuous world and especially of man and nature.

To remove this disturbance, he must take refuge in a double perception, a profane one which only perceives the "flatly obvious" and a higher, philosophical, one which perceives the "true essence" of things. He does not see how the

sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to the changed needs.

Even the objects of the simplest "sensuous certainty" are only given him through social development, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become "sensuous certainty" for Feuerbach.

Incidentally, when we conceive things thus, as they really are and happened, every profound philosophical problem is resolved... quite simply into an empirical fact. For instance, the important question of the relation of man to nature... out of which all the "unfathomably lofty works" on "substance" and "self-consciousness" were born, crumbles of itself when we understand that the celebrated "unity of man with nature" has always existed in industry and has existed in varying forms in every epoch according to the lesser or greater development of industry, just like the "struggle" of man with nature, right up to the development of his productive powers on a corresponding basis.

Industry and commerce, production and the exchange of the necessities of life, themselves determine distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it as to the mode in which they are carried on; and so it happens that in Manchester, for instance, Feuerbach sees only factories and machines, where a hundred years ago only spinning-wheels and weaving-rooms were to be seen, or in the Campagna of Rome he finds only pasture lands and swamps, where in the time of Augustus he would have found nothing but the vineyards and villas of Roman capitalists.

Feuerbach speaks in particular of the perception of natural science; he mentions secrets which are disclosed only to the eye of the physicist and chemist; but where would natural science be without industry and commerce? Even this pure natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the

sensuous activity of men. So much is this activity, this unceasing sensuous labour and creation, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists, that, were it interrupted only for a year, Feuerbach would not only find an enormous change in the natural world, but would very soon find that the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, were missing.

Of course, in all this the priority of external nature remains unassailed... [but] nature, the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin) and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach.

Certainly Feuerbach has a great advantage over the "pure" materialists in that he realises how man too is an "object of the senses." But apart from the fact that he only conceives him as an "object of the senses, not as sensuous activity," because he still remains in the realm of theory and conceives of men not in their given social connection, not under their existing conditions of life, which have made them what they are, he never arrives at the really existing active men, but stops at the abstraction "man," and gets no further than recognising "the true, individual, corporeal man," emotionally, i.e. he knows no other "human relationships" "of man to man" than love and friendship, and even then idealised. He gives no criticism of the present conditions of life.

Thus he never manages to conceive the sensuous world as the total living sensuous activity of the individuals composing it; and therefore when, for example, he sees instead of healthy men a crowd of scrofulous, overworked and consumptive starvelings, he is compelled to take refuge in the "higher perception" and in the ideal "compensation in the species," and thus to relapse into idealism at the very point where the communist materialist sees the necessity, and at the same time the condition, of a transformation both of industry and of the social structure.

As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist. With him materialism and history diverge completely, a fact which incidentally is already obvious from what has been said.

Engels' "theses on Feuerbach"

The entire philosophy of Feuerbach amounts to

1. philosophy of nature - passive adoration of nature and enraptured kneeling down before its splendour and omnipotence.

2. Anthropology, namely [a] physiology, where nothing new is added to what the materialists have already said about the unity of body and soul, but it is said less mechanically and with rather more

exuberance, [b] psychology, which amounts to dithyrambs glorifying love, analogous to the cult of nature...

3. Morality, the demand to live up to the concept of "man"...

The fact that at the present stage of development men can satisfy their needs only within society, that in general from the very start, as soon as they came

into existence, men needed one another and could only develop their needs and abilities, etc., by entering into intercourse with other men, this fact is expressed by Feuerbach in the following way:

"Isolated man by himself has not the essence of man in himself"; "the essence of man is contained only in the community, in the unity of man and man, a unity, however, which depends only on the reality of the difference between I and you. — Man by himself is man (in the ordinary sense), man and man, the unity of I and you, is God" (i.e., man in the supra-ordinary sense).

Philosophy has reached a point when the trivial fact of the necessity of intercourse between human beings — a fact without a knowledge of which the second generation that ever existed would never have been produced, a fact already involved in the sexual difference — is presented by philosophy at the end of its entire development as the greatest result. And presented, moreover, in the mysterious form of "the unity of I and you"...

The beginning of the Philosophie der Zukunft immediately shows the difference between us and him:

§ 1: "The task of modern times was the realisation and humanisation of God, the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology." Cf. "The negation of theology is the essence of modern times".

[Feuerbach:] "Being is not a general concept which can be separated from things. It is identical with the things that exist.... Being is posited by essence... all things — apart from abnormal cases — like to be in the place where they are, and like to be what they are".

A fine panegyric upon the existing state of things! Apart from abnormal cases, a few exceptional cases, you like to work from your seventh year as a door-keeper in a coal-mine, remaining alone in the dark for fourteen hours a day, and because it is your being therefore it is also your essence. The same applies to a piecer at a self-actor. It is your "essence" to be subservient to a branch of labour...