

Origins of Marxism: The Critique of Feuerbach and Hegel (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Origins of Marxism: The Critique of Feuerbach and Hegel

Marxism qua immanent dialectical critique of reality can be understood as a dialectical overcoming of the thought of Hegel and Feuerbach. Hegel is undeniably the more important influence of the two; Marx borrows immanent dialectical critique from Hegel. Feuerbach's materialism is important insofar it impressed upon Marx the primacy of material reality over thought or consciousness. However, unlike Feuerbach, Marx grasped material reality as the social product of human productive activity, i.e. as something historical and subject to change by us. Marx's simultaneous critique of Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian materialism is immanently dialectical, in the sense that it grasps the two philosophies as the antinomic poles constituting philosophy's self-contradiction at the time. Both poles contain a one-sided truth about the world: Feuerbach the truth of the importance of material reality and Hegel the truth of the historicity of humanity. Marx seeks to derive social truth and social tasks by working through these two poles. In other words, Marx is not rejecting Feuerbach and Hegel, but attempting to go beyond them by drawing social and political conclusions from their insights.

1. Feuerbach

In the 4th Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx proceeds from Feuerbach's insight that religion is a reflection of the secular world to the conclusion that religion is an expression of the general self-contradiction of society – this is religion's social truth. (144)[1] The Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and the *Manuscripts* make clear[2] what he means. Religion expresses the self-contradiction of society in the following way. One pole of the contradiction, humanity's need and aspiration for happiness, is expressed in the protest against the suffering of Christ and in the hope for an afterlife: “Religious suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering.” (54) The other pole of the contradiction, humanity's self-alienation in the service of something inhuman, is expressed in the fact of religion's very existence. Religion is an instance of human alienation, specifically, the turning of human social conditions into divine products with whom we then relate as something alien and outside our control. In religion humanity understands itself to be the product of God and in the service of God, but God is humanity's own alienated product. (72)

Marx's next step is to proceed from the identification of the social truth of religion to the tasks that the discovery of this truth points towards. Marx argues that Feuerbach's criticism of religion as self-alienation unconsciously implies a criticism of society itself as alienating. (53) Marx makes this implication conscious. The realization that God is a human product frees humanity from the service of

God and implies that humanity should concentrate on its own earthly affairs and finally put itself in the service of itself: "The criticism of religion disillusiones man [...] so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun." (54) To make this implication a reality, humanity has to realize, confront and overcome the alienating social conditions which cause its self-alienation in religious consciousness. (54, 60, 144) This is the social and political task Marx derives from Feuerbach's criticism of religion. Feuerbach himself fails to derive this task because his philosophy precludes grasping material reality as a social product subject to transformation from human practice.

Marx's critique of Feuerbach in the famous Theses is a critique of the latter's philosophy precisely as an inadequate consciousness of the nature of social reality, as an example of the "mystical consciousness" that Marx in the letter to Ruge positions himself against. Marx argues that Feuerbach views reality as a mere object to contemplate and comprehend passively, failing to understand that reality is also an object in the sense that it is constantly acted upon and shaped by sensuous human activity: "the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as human *sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively." (143) Feuerbach views humanity's relationship to its environment as a one-way street: humans are determined by their environment but they do not determine it in turn. (144) The human environment, and by extension, human nature itself, are thus naturalized instead of viewed as social and historical. (144-5) The most important consequence of Feuerbach's failure to grasp the practical link between human activity and its social environment is that his philosophy precludes the possibility of revolutionary transformative practice. (143) It is thus bound to remain in the realm of theory and is of little political use; for example, it can overcome religion in theory but not in practice as the social root of religion is beyond its grasp. This is not good enough for Marx, whose objective is the social realization of philosophy's rational oughts.

2. Hegel's Idealist Dialectic

Hegel's thought, unlike Feuerbach's, is historical. Its great insight is that it conceives of reality as the history of the self-production and reproduction of humanity or "man". Before Hegel, philosophers tended to understand human history as the unintended and accidental net result of the sum of individual egotistic activity. History appeared as a meaningless conglomeration of individual human actions which were often immoral and destructive. Hegel instead grasped human history as the coherent process of the evolution and transformation of humanity through its own productive action. He understood that the way men think and act, i.e. human nature, is the product of this self-driven history, and not an eternal fact of nature. Hegel thus places human production or labor as the driving force of human history and reality. As Marx puts it in the *Manuscripts*, "The outstanding thing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* [...] is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process [...]; that he thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's own *labour*." (112) Or, as Lukacs puts it: "To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself – that is reality." (15)

This self-positing, self-production and reproduction exhibits a dialectical logic or structure for Hegel. Humanity can only develop by positing itself in external objects, the products of labor. These products constitute the externalization and objectification of human nature and its capacities. This is most obvious when we consider an artistic product as the self-expression of the artist, but for Hegel it applies to production in general. These capacities can only acquire reality and develop by being objectified; otherwise, they remain mere potentialities. (Marx 112, 120-1) We manifest and thus prove ourselves in practice: this idea is still dominant today, with human worth being measured by the achievements and productive capacity we list in our CVs. By externalizing himself in an object, man initially is alienating himself from himself, or, in dialectical terms, he is negating himself. However, he then recognizes himself in the product, thus transcending his alienation or negating his negation. This recognition happens gradually, over time. Humanity progresses through various stages of

consciousness of the world it creates: it repeatedly finds its conception of the world to contradict its object, and thus repeatedly reconfigures this conception until it comes to correspond to its object. In this way, humanity gradually achieves self-knowledge of itself by recognizing itself in the world it produces. (109-10, 112-3)

As becomes clear from this short summary of Hegel's understanding of history, for Hegel what develops in history is humanity's self-understanding, humanity's understanding of its actions.[3] Human history thus essentially becomes the history of the development of human reason in the form of thought. While Hegel indeed understands history as the history of human self-production and labor in society, this human self-production and labor remains unconscious and is only grasped as what it is retrospectively in philosophy, i.e., it is grasped after the fact of its occurrence. (Lukacs 16) Human reason is therefore only manifested in humanity's mental production, culminating in philosophy. (Marx 109-10) Humanity's material production of industry, civil society and its institutions remains without direction, and is in fact viewed by Hegel as emanating from a quasi-mystical principle of reason that acts behind the backs of humanity. (Marx 111) A dichotomy of thought and being, theory and practice, and subject and object thus remains in Hegel. Like in Feuerbach, human thought or understanding is reduced to passively comprehending reality instead of consciously shaping it.

Marx's critique of Hegel is the critique of this dichotomy of thought and being in Hegel as a form of human estrangement or alienation. According to Marx, philosophical consciousness, i.e. consciousness which understands itself as essentially mental, is consciousness estranged of itself. This is because human beings are not defined by their capacity for thought, but by their capacity for productive activity that is not limited to merely mental activity, but includes material activity too. Consequently, to the extent that Hegel's philosophy presents thinking as the essence of man, and conceives the history of humanity to be the history of philosophy, it remains thinking that is alienated from human nature. Hegel thinks that humanity transcends its self-alienation by comprehending the world, but it can only transcend it by actually coming to direct its material or sensuous productive activity. (110-1) The difference of Hegel's and Marx's conception of alienation can be summed thus: Hegel conceives of alienation as the alienation of consciousness from knowing itself in the world, while Marx conceives this alienation of consciousness as the expression of the alienation of man from his productive activity in the material world. (113) Because it is only a "dialectic of pure thought" (112), the Hegelian dialectic of history has the following important shortcoming: it fails to change the world and merely comprehends it as the product of humanity: "in the *actual world* private right, morality, the family, civil society, the state, etc., remain in existence, only they have become *moments* of man" (119). In other words, the Hegelian dialectic is affirmative of the status quo. It is a stationary dialectic, a contradiction in terms, as dialectic entails movement. Essentially then, it is only an illusory dialectic.

Marx adopts and radicalizes the emancipatory aspect of the Hegelian dialectic, dropping its alienated aspect. The emancipatory aspect is its historical nature, i.e. that it is the presentation of human history and reality, of human nature and the human forms of life, as the social product of humanity's collective productive activity. Its alienated aspect is that it unfolds in the realm of thought. By transposing the dialectic from the realm of thought to the realm of material production, Marx comes to understand history as the succession of specific ways of social organization based on specific modes of production (172). The significance of this transposition is that Marx not only retrospectively grasps human history as dependent on human activity, but as changeable by collective human subjectivity. He arrives at the social truth that humanity has the capacity and is already unconsciously struggling to direct history towards the end of a free, rationally-governed society. From this truth, Marx derives the social and political task of realizing said end. History is not only the development of human understanding, but potentially the development of human rational control over history and

reality. Alienation is humanity's alienation from the control and direction of this productive activity, a phenomenon to be addressed and overcome in practice.

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From the collection of articles "[What is Marxism?](#)"

[1] All page numbers are from *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

[2] Following Marx, I use alienation and estrangement interchangeably to mean the process by which human beings become alienated from the world in which they live and from their very own social relations. The phenomenon of alienation will be examined in more detail in a later article in the series.

[3] To be fair, my reconstruction of Hegel's philosophy here is only a reconstruction of Marx's understanding of this philosophy. I do not think Marx is entirely fair to Hegel.

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