
Seeking One's Own Philosophical Value from Rational Criticism—Thoughts on “On Feuerbach”

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Abstract: “The Outline” is Marx’s exploration of the new materialist historical view, and it is also a self-revolution based on the inheritance of the criticism of German, French, and British philosophy. It broke free from the constraints of previous concepts such as idealism, religious beliefs, and empiricism. Marx based his philosophy on “practice” and continuously radiated its exploration fields from this central point, gradually moving from error to truth.

Keywords: theoretical foundation; research paradigm; materialism

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1. Introduction

In the 17th century, European people broke free from the constraints of theology and gradually began to pay attention to human existence. Of course, at this time, people’s attention to human existence was still influenced by theology. In the 18th century, with the rapid development of industry, commerce, and capitalism, the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat became increasingly prominent. The essence and value of human beings were increasingly the focus of philosophers. While paying attention to the essence of human beings, one would analyze its root - “social relations”. In the generation and development of social relations, “practice” emerged. The two major values of Marx’s philosophy, historical materialism, emerged in this exploration and criticism. The essence behind the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was also revealed - the theory of surplus value. However, here we are going to discuss more about the first issue, and the relatively simple explanation of the first issue.

2. From the Historical Roots of Marx’s Theory

Hegel and Feuerbach were indeed important sources of Marx’s philosophy, but the importance and influence time of the two were not equal. Hegel’s influence was much greater than Feuerbach’s. In fact, after 1846, Feuerbach’s influence on Marx was weakening, while Hegel’s influence was expanding. This was not only because “Hegel’s system” represented the achievements of German classical philosophy, but also because Hegel was the synthesizer of Western philosophy. He established the largest philosophical system in the history of Western philosophy, which contained the critical inheritance

of all previous philosophies. Marx inherited the essence of Western philosophy including Feuerbach and founded a revolutionary philosophy.

3. From the Research Paradigm of Marx's Theory

(1) Soviet research paradigm. The first textbook-style research paradigm, Plekhanov, Lenin, Stalin, and traditional textbooks interpreted "The Outline" with dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Especially the publication of the second chapter and the second section of the Party History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union marked the establishment of the textbook system. The second research paradigm is the materialist research paradigm. During the Second International period, different from the traditional textbook paradigm, Plekhanov and other theoretical experts understood "The Outline" from the materialist position of Feuerbach, believing that Marx's historical materialism was the extension of Feuerbach's natural materialism to the field of social history, and understanding Marxism from this natural materialism had certain defects^[1]. The third research paradigm is the document research paradigm. With the development of MEGA2, a large number of Marx's notes and manuscripts began to expand the researchers' horizons and further conduct detailed research on "The Outline".

(2) Western research paradigm. In the 1930s, Western Marxism emerged, and began to reflect on traditional Marxism and the "orthodox Marxism" research paradigm of the Second International. They returned to the text and focused on Marx's early works, shouting "Return to Marx". Through the interpretation of Marx's text, they grasped Marx's true thoughts. Lukács believed that Marx required us to understand "sensation", "object", and "reality" as human sensory activities. In "History and Class Consciousness", Lukács mentioned, "This means that man should be aware that he is an existence in society and at the same time the subject and object of the social historical process."^[2] Schmidt pointed out where Marx's new materialism is "new", "Marxist materialism teaches people not to merely examine the reality of nature from the 'form of the object', neither should nature be examined as a dead mechanical physical world, but also teaches people to examine it from the subjective form, that is, from the perspective of practice, which goes beyond all previous materialism."^[3] Western scholars' research paradigm emphasizes the grasp of the text, interpreting Marx's thoughts by returning to the text, but there are also phenomena of misinterpretation.

(3) The research paradigm in China. The research paradigm of Chinese scholars is more diversified compared to those in the Soviet Union and other countries. It roughly divides into several stages:

First, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the research paradigm of China was always in line with the orthodox Soviet textbook system.

Second, by the end of the 1970s, "reflective philosophy" emerged in China, reinterpreting Marxist philosophy.

Third, from the end of the 1970s to the early 1980s, scholars devoted themselves to text research, conducting a relatively comprehensive and in-depth study of "The Preface".

Fourth, after the 1990s, the "humanitarian trend" emerged, and scholars' attention shifted from "The Preface" to "Manuscripts", entering the 21st century, research entered a more open perspective, and the research results were also very fruitful.

4. From the Focus Issues to Marx's Theory (Differences from Feuerbach)

4.1. The Core Issue of "practice" in "The Preface"

In Marx's criticism of Feuerbach, the most core content is the understanding of "practice", which is the foundation of new materialism. In the tenth point, it is pointed out: "The task of philosophers is to explain the world, not to change the world"^[4] and in the context at that time, philosophers were more focused on explaining the world, the German Young Hegelian School, they essentially only explained the world in different ways, but did not dare to use the revolutionary

practical way to change the German real world.

4.2. The Criticism of Classical Philosophy in “The Preface”

The reason Marx wrote “The Preface” was to Feuerbach’s representative old materialism, clearing the way for the establishment of new materialism. The establishment of Marx’s new materialism necessarily means the complete transcendence of German classical philosophy written by Hegel and Feuerbach, and the reason why “The Preface” criticized Feuerbach was that with the in-depth thinking of negating dialectics and alienated labor in 1844-1845 and the comprehensive understanding of the conditions of the working class in Britain, France, and Germany, Marx realized that Feuerbach’s intuitive materialism was not a materialism that understands sensibility as practical activity, and both in theory and in practice, it was an obstacle to the revolutionary practice of the working class. It is believed that Marx’s new philosophy is a limitation transcendence of old materialism and idealism, a transcendence of the abstract ontological nature of traditional philosophy, and a transformation and conversion of ontology. In “The Preface”, Marx initially achieved the liquidation Feuerbach from three aspects: the liquidation of the concept of “abstract man”, the liquidation of the concept of “truth of thought”, and the liquidation of the relationship between man and nature, and connecting these is the “practical” activity.

4.3. The Issue of Human Essence

In Marx’s criticism of Feuerbach, the dominant position is Feuerbach’s view on “abstract man”. Referring to the text of “The Preface”, the first, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth points are the criticism of “abstract man”, and by combining these contents, it can be seen that the research on the definition of human essence in “The Preface” must be “real man”, and analyzed in a certain social relationship, being a person in society, rather than “conceptual man”. Marx’s theory on the essence of human beings was the inevitable outcome of the deepening of his thoughts in 1844. During this exploration process, he gradually overcame the influence of Feuerbach’s “abstract human being”, and the concept of the essence of human beings ultimately belongs to social relations. These social relations ultimately boil down to production relations. (—“Das Kapital”) The first sentence of the “Outline” clearly states that the old materialism lacks a “subjective dimension”, and the “subjective dimension” is “the activity of the sensible human being”, and this activity is the practical activity of a real human being. At the same time, idealism saw practice, but this practice was an abstract practice within the realm of the spirit, that is, their abstract development of initiative. While criticizing the shortcomings of idealism, Marx also proposed a criticism of Feuerbach. Feuerbach studied human beings but did not understand human activities as object-oriented. Marx in the second sentence of the “Outline”: “Whether human thinking has objective truth is not a theoretical question, but a practical one. Man should prove the truth of his thinking in practice, that is, the reality and power of his thinking, and the presentness of his thinking. Man is a person in society, and human activities are a practical activity of the interaction between subject and object, and is dynamic, acting on the real society^[5].”

4.4. The Truth of Thought

In the second sentence of the “Outline”, Marx said: “Whether human thinking has objective truth is not a theoretical question, but a practical question. Man should prove the truth of his thinking in practice, that is, the reality and power of his thinking, and the presentness of his thinking^[6].”

Since the 1990s, the academic community in China has no longer been satisfied with merely understanding this passage by establishing the criteria for verifying truth. They have begun to redefine Marx’s problem domain, namely, one is the issue of epistemology. This view holds that “it is a summary of the entire development history of epistemology, a revelation of the fundamental flaws of the old philosophical epistemology, a scientific answer to the major theoretical issue of ‘how can knowledge be possible’ from the perspective of practice as a new viewpoint, and a revolutionary change in epistemology.” The second is the issue of historical perspective. In this passage, Marx actually, from a special perspective, that is, the perspective that practice is the sole criterion for verifying the truth of knowledge, made a powerful argument on

the rationality and necessity of transforming the world and changing society.

4.5. The Issue of Human and Environment

In the “Outline”, Marx cleared up the issues of human nature and the truth of thinking in Feuerbach’s thought. In the third point of the “Outline”, he continued to clear up the issue of human and environment. One view holds that Marx regarded this kind of free and conscious activity as the essence of human beings, and practice is first and foremost the relationship between human beings and nature. Examining the essence of human beings from this relationship, it does not only define the essence of human beings from their natural nature, but rather refers to how human beings treat nature and the actual environment within it. Another view holds that the practical relationship is the basic relationship between human beings and nature. It requires us to grasp the relationship between human beings and nature from the fundamental relationship between human beings and society, and also points out the ways and methods to solve the problems of the natural economy society from the philosophical standpoint and the mission of philosophy.

First, the environment created human beings. The relationship between human beings and the environment is actually the relationship between the subject and the object. As the subject, human beings have a cognitive relationship of reflection and being reflected with the object.

Second, human beings also created the environment. In the process of transforming the environment, through the exertion of human’s subjective initiative, the essence power of the subject is externalized in the object, making the originally external environment also condense the purpose will and essence power of the subject, thereby creating a brand-new human world belonging to human beings, embodying the purpose of human beings to transform the objective world.

Third, the relationship between human beings and the environment is a relationship of mutual interaction and coordination. Marx here used the word “consistency”, profoundly revealing the interactive relationship between human beings and the environment. While human beings change and influence the environment, the environment also changes and shapes human beings. Marx’s proposition of the “consistency” between human beings and the environment here is the theoretical basis for guiding us to correctly understand and grasp the relationship between human beings and the environment. Today, we propose the philosophical concept that human beings and nature should live in harmony.

Fourth, practical activities are the foundation for achieving the coordination of human and environment. It is through human practical activities that the environment is transformed, and through human practical activities, the environment shapes human beings. Human activities and the changes of the environment are dialectically unified in practice. In the process of mutual creation between human beings and the environment, both are in a state of continuous change.

4.6. The Issue of Civil Society

In the ninth and tenth points of the “Outline”, Marx sought this answer. “Civil society” is what enlightenment era thinkers called the society as the “collective of individuals”, which is a superficial phenomenon of the early bourgeois society as described by enlightenment social thinkers. Because Feuerbach failed to see the real human society constituted by material economic relations, what he saw was only the mission society composed of these isolated individuals, which served as the theoretical basis.

For the study of Marx’s theory and his works, it is necessary to base it on China’s national conditions, have a broad perspective, and form continuity in the research process, rather than reading a certain type or a single work in a general way, and with the development of the times, one’s understanding of it should also be more profound.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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