

# A Critique of Feuerbach's Anthropological Thought in the German Ideology

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## Abstract

The German Ideology is often seen as a sign of Marx's creation of a new worldview, the so-called new worldview, which is the materialism of practice and history, i.e., the materialist conception of history. In the first chapter "Feuerbach" chapter, Marx criticized against Feuerbach's anthropological thought based on the old materialism. In terms of anthropological thought, Feuerbach understood human beings as abstract beings as "classes", while Marx pointed out that human beings are "real human beings". This critique is not only important for the formation of the materialist conception of history, but also has many guiding values for the path of human emancipation in reality.

**Keywords:** German ideology, Feuerbach, anthropological thought, materialistic view of history

## 1. Introduction

The German Ideology is regarded as the symbol of Marx's creation of a new worldview, the materialist conception of history, in which the basic principles of the materialist conception of history are set forth. The creation of Marx's new worldview was first seen in the Philosophical Manuscripts of Economics of 1844, which is regarded as the period of the humanist "alienated view of history", but in its discussion of private property and labor, the overcoming of the external objecthood of private property and the recognition of the nature of its subject already contains vague signs of a materialist approach that exceeds the intuitive materialism of Feuerbach. Feuerbach's intuitive materialism. In The Holy Family, unlike the Young Hegelians represented by Powell, who believed that the oppression of reality could be eliminated by eliminating ideas from the mind, Marx proposed that history is not the history of ideas, but the history of reality created by the masses. The Outline of Feuerbach was described by Engels as "containing the germ of the genius of a new world-view", the first of which was "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"<sup>1</sup>, clearly shows the difference between Marxist practical materialism and the old materialism.

Feuerbach's understanding of the nature of man is mired in intuition on the one hand and abstraction on the other. On the one hand, he stood on the ground of materialism to understand human beings, but because of the reflection of his object intuition, he only understood human beings as the biological sense of physical existence, and this understanding could not reflect the "essential characteristics" of human beings that distinguish them from animals. So, on the other hand, Feuerbach resorted to "love, reason, and emotion" for the essence of man, so that the provision of the essence of man has returned to the realm of idealism at the level of abstract reason. Marx pointed out that "he regarded man only as a 'sensuous object', not as a 'sensuous activity', for here too he remained in the realm of theory, not looking at the existing social connections of men, at the surrounding conditions of life which make them what they are, and at the social relations which make them what they are,

and at the social relations which make them what they are, what they are now”<sup>2</sup>. From “sensuous objects” to “sensuous activities”, Marx thus develops the argument from “abstract man” to “real man”, from “abstract man” to “real man”.

## 2. People Are Real People

Marx interpreted the real attributes of human beings differently from Feuerbach, not as “abstract human beings” but as “real human beings”. Marx pointed out the limitations of Feuerbach: “Here too he remains in the realm of theory, not observing people in terms of their existing social connections, in terms of the surrounding conditions of life which make them what they are — not to mention the fact that he never sees the reality of the real person, the active person, but remains in the abstract, active man, but remains in the abstract ‘man’, and confines himself to recognizing ‘real, individual, physical’ man within the sphere of feeling, that is to say, he does not know ‘man from man’ except in love and friendship, and idealized love and friendship, what other ‘human relations’ there are ‘between men’”<sup>3</sup>. Feuerbach’s understanding of man is stuck in the theoretical realm; on the one hand, he only sees man in the biological sense, as a physical being, yet how can man be distinguished from animals in terms of this intuitive being alone? On the other hand, in order to distinguish human beings from animals, Feuerbach points out that human beings are love, friendship, and the “class” community that connects the “I” with the “other” through ideal love and friendship. The “class” is the community that connects the “I” with the “other” through ideal love and friendship. However, this kind of “man” is a German philosophy floating in the sky, “Feuerbach sets up ‘man’, not ‘real historical man’”. The ‘man’ is in fact the ‘German’”<sup>4</sup>. What then are the real attributes of man? According to Marx, man is neither a biological man nor a “loving” abstract man, but a real man.

The real man is man in the process of practical development, starting from the premises of reality, which is the method of examination of Marx’s materialist conception of history. “It presupposes man, but not man in some illusory state of dissociation and fixity, but man in a realistic, empirically observable process of development carried out under certain conditions”<sup>5</sup>. The real human being can be understood and grasped from the following aspects: the real human being is a human being in the practice of material production, a human being in social relations, a human being advancing in the long river of history, and finally a human being with the energy of consciousness.

## 3. The Real Person Is the Person in the Practice of Material Production

“The individuals referred to here are not individuals of the kind imagined by themselves or by others, but individuals in reality, that is to say, individuals who are engaged in activity, who carry out material production, and who are therefore active within certain material boundaries, prerequisites, and conditions that are not subject to their arbitrariness”<sup>6</sup>. In the practice of engaging in material production, on the one hand, the purely discursive abstraction of idealism is overcome, and man is grasped not as a person in conception but as a person in objective reality; on the other hand, the defects of empirical materialism’s intuitive reflection of man are overcome, and instead of regarding man as a rigid and immobile “objective reality”, man is brought into full play through the practice of production with his own on the other hand, it overcomes the defects of empirical materialism in its intuitive reflection of man, and instead of regarding him as a rigid and immobile “objective reality,” he exerts his own subjective initiative through the practice of production. Thus, in the practice of material production, man becomes a real person.

Marx argues the first premise of human history, “In order to be able to ‘make history,’ people must be able to live. But in order to live, they first need food, drink, shelter, clothing and a number of other things. The first historical activity is therefore the production of the means to satisfy these needs, i.e., the production of material life itself ... is the basic condition of all history”<sup>7</sup>. On the basis of the first premise, a second condition arises: “The first need itself, which has already been satisfied, the activity which satisfies it, and the instruments which have been acquired for its satisfaction give rise to new needs, and the production of this new need is the first historical activity”<sup>8</sup>. The practice of material production is the prerequisite for the survival of human beings, and only after material needs are satisfied can people engage in other practical activities, such as the production of spiritual wealth, the practice of revolution, etc. In a series of practical activities, the abstraction of human beings is gradually overcome, and the experience of practice makes us own our own history and become a concrete and realistic human being. Therefore, the real human being is first and foremost a human being engaged in the practice of material production.

## 4. Real People Are Social People

In the practice of material production, people are no longer isolated individuals, but they form certain social relations in production. The first expression of this social relationship is the family: “The third relationship that enters into the process of historical development at the outset is that of people who daily reproduce their own lives begin to produce others, i.e., to reproduce. This is the relationship between husband and wife, between

parents and children, that is, the family”<sup>9</sup>. The creation of the family is the result of the development of the practice of material production, with the increase of productive forces, the surplus of material wealth gave rise to private ownership, which led to the creation of the family in order to ensure that the wealth is inherited by the biological children. In the family, each person is not an isolated individual, but a member of the community. From the moment a person is born in a family, he or she has his or her first social relations, first as a child of the parents, and then as a parent of the children when he or she grows up and forms a new family. The human being cannot exist in isolation, not only as a group creature for the physiological need to preserve himself, but also because of the social need to confirm his identity, not as a single individual, but as a collection of social relations. The first of these social relations is the family relation, and implicit in this original relation is the germ of the relations of production in all their forms, the division of labor in the family, and even slavery.

With the further development of productive forces, the scope of interaction began to expand. People’s social relations broke away from the natural economic model based on the family and shifted to relations outside the family. The development of industry and commerce and the progress of the division of labor transformed people’s labor from private labor in the family to social labor in the social division of labor system, and social relations also shifted from family relations to relations in the social division of labor system, so that family relations declined to a secondary position, and a fourth kind of relationship in human history, that is, the relationship between people, was developed as a result. “The family becomes subordinate (except in Germany) when the growth of needs generates new social relations and the increase in population generates new needs”<sup>10</sup>. At this point the relations of production implicit in the family are more prominently manifested, while in society they are expressed as mature relations. Classes were formed according to the possession of the means of production, different positions in the social division of labor system, and so on. By being in different classes in society and engaging in different occupations, people confirm their position in society and develop their own social attributes. Therefore, when describing a person, it is not possible to simply state his name, which is only an abstract symbol, or to describe a person’s external features, which are only his physical characteristics. What makes the person who he is today himself are his social attributes and social connections, his job, his school, his friends, and his family, and it is only by combining these that a person can truly be a real person. Thus, the real person is the social person, and it is the connection of social relations that frees the person from abstraction and gives him reality. As Marx said, “The nature of man is not an abstraction inherent in a single person; in its reality it is the sum of all social relations”<sup>11</sup>.

## 5. Real People Are Historical People

From the four basic elements of human history, it can be learned that real human beings are those who are engaged in the practice of material production and are in certain social relations, which determines that real human beings are necessarily historical human beings. “A certain mode of production or a certain stage of industry is always connected with a certain mode of common activity or a certain stage of society, and this mode of common activity is itself the ‘productive forces’; it follows that the sum total of the productive forces attained by men determines the social condition, and that, consequently, it is necessary always to relate the ‘history of mankind’ studied and explored in connection with the history of industry and exchange”<sup>12</sup>. The degree of development of the practice of material production, that is, of the productive forces, determines the stage of development of human history. With the development of the productive forces in turn changes the form of people’s interactions, that is, their social relations. “There is a material connection between people from the beginning. This connection is determined by needs and modes of production, and it has as long a history as man himself; this connection is constantly taking on new forms and thus manifests itself as ‘history’”<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the whole history of mankind is one in which, with the development of the practice of material production, the subsequent generation, on the basis of the previous generation, on the one hand, inherits the materials, capital, and means of production of its predecessors, and on the other hand, constantly creates new and higher productive forces, so that the history of mankind is constantly alternating and progressing to a higher and higher stage.

The real man is the man of history that moves forward from generation to generation, and is therefore necessarily conditioned by the present conditions of history, and cannot go beyond the present stage of history. “Let us say, for example, that Feuerbach saw only a few mills and machines in Manchester, where a hundred years before he could see only pedal spinning-wheels and looms; or that he found only a few pastures and marshes in Roman Campania, where in the time of Augustus he could find only the vineyards and villas of the Roman tycoons”<sup>14</sup>. Real people are in the development of productive forces of their own time, and their social relations, productive activities, consciousness, etc. are also subject to the constraints of their time and cannot go beyond it. For example, in the feudal era, social relations are mainly hierarchical relations; and in the capitalist era, social relations have got rid of the dependence of the land and the person, and shifted to the form of “free and equal” class relations. Therefore, the development of social history must be a process of cumulative progress along with the development of the productive forces, and cannot go beyond the current level of development of the productive forces, just as Marx put forward the idea of “two never” in the Introduction to the Critique of

Political Economy, and just as the theory of “primary stage of socialism” put forward by our country. It is also like the theory of “primary stage of socialism” put forward by our country. Although human beings are subject to the constraints of society and history, we should also see that human beings are not passively subject to history, but can also exert their own initiative while respecting the laws of history, thus exerting a certain influence on the development of history.

## 6. The Real Person Is a Conscious and Dynamic Person

Marx pointed out that the real man is a conscious man. But this consciousness is different from the consciousness that creates the real world in the Hegelian sense, but is based first and foremost on the real world. “Consciousness can at all times only be conscious existence, and people’s existence is their real life process”<sup>15</sup>. This shows a different way of looking at “ascending from earth to heaven” than the “descending from heaven to earth” of German philosophy. At the same time, it overcomes Feuerbach’s view of consciousness as an intuitive reflection of the real world and denies the subject’s creative agency. “He sees man only as a ‘sensuous object’, not as a ‘sensuous activity’”<sup>16</sup>, and this is where the creativity of Marx’s practical materialism comes into play, with its understanding of this is the creativity of Marx’s practical materialism, which describes “consciousness” not as a reflection of the real world, but as a “sensuous activity” that reveals its dynamic, world-transforming character.

Because Feuerbach regarded human beings only as “sensuous objects” rather than “sensuous activities”, he could not understand that human beings have any real activities other than being subjected to the world, and he separated matter from consciousness, but could not see the intermediary bridge connecting the two “practice.” After seeing the inequality of reality, he turns to “love” and “the equalization of classes” in consciousness, but fails to see that consciousness can be put into practice to change the world. Thus “where the communist materialist sees the necessity and the conditions for the transformation of industry and social structure, he relapses into idealism”<sup>17</sup>. Marxists, on the other hand, see the significance of transforming the world, not as a mere study of explaining the world, but as a guide to action for the working class in transforming the world, “For practical materialism, i.e., for communists, the whole problem consists in revolutionizing the existing world, in actually opposing and transforming the existing world”<sup>18</sup>. The transformation of the world is not a theoretical activity but a practical one, the weapon of criticism can never replace the criticism of the weapon, and the consciousness of man can really change the world only by putting it into practice. It is under the guidance of the advanced theory of Marxism that the working class launched the struggle against the capitalist system, thus transforming socialism from fantasy to science, from theory to reality, and from one country to many. In this process, the working class and the masses have truly exerted their own initiative, demonstrated their needs and pursuits as real human beings, and thus devoted themselves to the struggle to build a “world free of exploitation and oppression”, which is the real way to eliminate the “inequality of class”. This is the true way to eliminate “class inequality”. Therefore, real human beings are also active human beings who transform the world under the guidance of consciousness.

## 7. Conclusion

The pursuit of “human emancipation” is the great cause that Marx pursued all his life, and this value position of “working for mankind” and the scientific worldview of materialistic history are mutually stimulating, jointly depicting the realistic road of human emancipation, and the way to this future should be based on the reality of anthropological thought. Marx’s anthropological thought is not the basis of Feuerstein’s anthropological thought. Marx’s anthropological thought is not an “abstract man” like Feuerbach’s pursuit of “love, friendship, and the equalization of ‘classes,’” but sees man as a “real man,” a “human being”. Instead, it sees human beings as “real human beings”, practical, social, historical, and dynamic human beings, and this idea has a lot of guiding significance for the development and emancipation of real human beings. Real human beings are not abstract terms and concepts, but are interconnected groups based on real material life, not “floating in the sky” but “living on the ground”. Just as the West has always preached “freedom”, “equality”, “democracy” and “human rights” in the abstract sense, the essence is to treat human beings as if they were human beings. In essence, it only treats people as “abstract human beings”, and although people have the status of “legal equality” on the surface, they are experiencing substantive inequality in the social reality where capital is the king and polarization is the norm, and although it seems that they have “electoral democracy” on the electoral level, they are not able to enjoy it in the face of capital and polarization. Although they seem to have “electoral democracy” at the electoral level, they are living in substantive non-democracy under the “revolving door of politics and business” of the capital-power alliance. The politically emancipated state has accomplished religious emancipation, i.e., emancipation from the state of secularism, and has made “freedom and equality” the principles of the state, but has not eliminated the actual unfreedom and inequality, and has not removed human beings from the religion, i.e., from the “other world” and the “this world,” to the “other world.” On the contrary, the ideal principles of religion were given to the political state, and the politically liberated state was the

fulfillment of Christianity. Thus, in the “abstract state” of political emancipation, people continue to live a double life of self-separation, living under the suffering of the world and walking in the heavenly kingdom of freedom and democracy. In the abstract and equal state of capitalism, man is only liberated from the “rule of words” while he has “never been enslaved by these words” and is only caught up in the intoxication of the “critique of the kingdom of heaven”. He has never been “enslaved to these words”, but has been caught up in the intoxication of “heavenly criticism” and has never looked down on “earthly criticism”. The liberation of real human beings is not an intellectual activity but a real historical activity, which must focus on real human beings, and pay real attention to the real material life of the people, the realization of their substantive rights, and the formation of a harmonious community. “Only in the real world and the use of real means can realize the real liberation ... When people can not make their own food, drink, housing and clothing in the quality and quantity of the full guarantee, people can not be emancipated at all”<sup>19</sup>. Only by practicing the path of human emancipation from the “real human being”, from material production, social relations, and human needs, will “emancipation” no longer remain in abstract thinking or words, and people will no longer be “equalized on the other side of the world”. Only then will “emancipation” no longer remain in abstract thought or words, people will no longer be confined by the equality of the “other world” but will devote themselves to the happiness of the “this world”, the inherent power of man will be truly restored to himself, and only along this realistic path will the emancipation of man be finally completed.

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