

The Criticism on Feuerbach's Thoughts Conducted by Marx and Engels

Reflections Through the Text of the "German Ideology"

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Abstract—Feuerbach is one of the representatives of young Hegelians. In the *German Ideology*, Marx made an analysis of the opposition between materialism and idealism and the German ideology at that time, criticized Feuerbach's thoughts from four aspects, namely, "human essence", limitations of materialism, understanding of "reality" and historical relations, based on real people and their production, and constructed Marxist historical materialism.

Keywords—*German Ideology; criticism; human liberation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Plato, the world can be divided into two types: one is real world, and the other is ideal world, or called shadow world. The German classical philosophy has consistently insisted the tradition of Plato's idealistic world, and struggled with other schools in the field of pure logic ponderation without any connection with the real world. The purpose of Marx and Engels in writing the *German Ideology* is to expose these philosophical struggles against the shadow of reality, and to disclose the philosophical struggles for the taste of the German people who indulge themselves in illusion and have low spirits and destroy their credibility". Marx and Engels think that this can only make the German people indulge themselves in illusion and become languished. Therefore, we must be brave enough to expose their true colors and bring the German people back to reality.

II. RESEARCH PROCESS

A. *The Opposition Between Materialism and Idealism*

Through the chapter of Feuerbach in the *German Ideology* written by Marx and Engels, we can see the writing thoughts of "Feuerbach→ opposition between materialism and idealism→ [I] →Feuerbach→A. general ideology, the *German Ideology*--general ideology, especially German philosophy-A. — [II] — [III] —". Although Chapter 1 of Volume 1 (that is the chapter of Feuerbach) is an unfinished manuscript, it shows clear writing thoughts of Marx and Engels, huge theoretical system of historical materialism, and thoroughness of their criticism on the German ideology

represented by young Hegelians. In view of this, they can extend their own logical ideas layer by layer, and rebut at different levels. In Part I, Marx and Engels wrote: "as German ideologists have declared, Germany has undergone an unprecedented change in recent years, developing from the disintegration process of Hegelian system initiated by Strauss to a worldwide turmoil that has swept all the 'powers of the past'" to introduce the evolution process of Hegelian system. Since Hegel, and starting from Strauss, Hegelian system has collapsed, and is gradually split into the young Hegelians and the old Hegelians. The young Hegelians stick to Hegel's dialectical viewpoints and strive to draw revolutionary and atheistic conclusions from dialectical approach. Feuerbach was one of the main representatives, but he later turned to materialism. Marx and Engels were also members of the young Hegelians, afterwards, they completely broke with the young Hegelians, which also happened during this period. The young Hegelians and the old Hegelians once had a long-term and fierce debate. Marx and Engels describe this scene in the *German Ideology* as follows: "in the general chaos, some powerful kingdoms emerge and also disappear in a hurry. There exist many heroes in a flash, but they also disappear immediately because more brave and stronger opponents appear and replace them"; "some principles are superseded by others, and some ideological warriors are annihilated by others, with an unheard-of speed"; Marx and Engels call it "a revolution", but "it is said that all this happen in the purely ideological field." It can be seen that Marx and Engels mostly give a negative attitude to the meaning of this "revolution", which is mainly because it's only an "ideological revolution", attempting to "liberate people from the slavery of words and sentences, while people had never been enslaved by words and sentences". Therefore, it is not a revolution in the true sense. In any case, however, a meaningful event is involved: the disintegration of the absolute spirit. After the last spark of life is extinguished, all components of this wreck are broken down, and they recombine to form a new substance". In fact, Marx and Engels pointed out that no matter how heated the debate between the young Hegelians and the old Hegelians was, the fact of absolute spirit disintegration could not be concealed. Hegel's absolute spirit was no longer

complete and torn apart, and “everyone spared no effort to peddle the one he got”, but they were always within the framework of the Hegelian system and offered another’s ideas as one’s own. They all “boast and conceive their thoughts into a revolution with world-wide significance as well as a factor that produce significant results and achievements”, and actually fail to surpass Hegel. This is Marx’s overall evaluation of the youth Hegel movement.

B. The German Ideology

“Although the criticism of Germany has made various efforts recently, it still cannot be separated from the base of philosophy. Although such criticism has not studied its own general philosophic premise, all the problems it has involved in are eventually produced within the certain framework of philosophy system, that is, the base of Hegelian philosophy system”. Obviously, the “the criticism of Germany” refers to the critical movements conducted by young Hegelians represented by Feuerbach, Bu Powell and Stiner, and these movements are produced on the basis of Hegelian philosophy system. Although they have criticized the Hegelian philosophy system from various aspects, they still have not “studied their own general philosophic premise”. The philosophic premise of Marx and Engels made for young Hegelians “not only answers this question, but also the questions themselves contain mysticism”, and the criticism made by Marx and Engels for young Hegelians directly reveals the deficiencies of Hegelianism, that is, mysticism. However, the young Hegelians still inherited the mysticism of Hegelianism and had not broken the limitations. Marx and Engels think that “this kind of dependency relationship for Hegelianism just shows that why these new critics and even one of them do not try to fully criticize the Hegelian system though each of them have claimed that they have surpassed the Hegelianism”. But, the fact is that their debates with Hegel and the debates among themselves are just limited in such situation that one of them only takes one aspect of Hegelian system to oppose the whole system of Hegelianism and also oppose that other people to study other aspects”. Firstly, Marx and Engels pointed that the whole German philosophical criticisms made by young Hegelians, from Straus to Stirner, were limited in the criticisms on religious views”. On the country, Marx and Engels looked for the causes from the roots to criticize the young Hegelians, therefore, they doubtlessly broke the limitation of idealism of young Hegelians and started from the “premise” and “starting point” to point out the key causes. Secondly, Marx and Engels analyzed the mistaken views of old Hegelians that “only all the things are included into the logical category of Hegelianism can people understand all the things”, used the principle of “absolute spirit” to explain all the things. They thought that absolute spirit was the initial cause and inner essence of all things and the eternal existence appearing before nature and human society.

Marx and Engels respectively criticized the thoughts of young Hegelians and old Hegelians and compared the differences and similarities for the above two schools. They thought that both young Hegelians and old Hegelians believed that some visional things, such as “religion”,

“concept” and “universal thing”, dominated the existing world, therefore, their viewpoints were idealistic primarily. The difference relies on that the young Hegelians believed that such governance was illegal and they were object to this statement and the old Hegelians thought that such governance was legal and they advocated maintaining the existing system and the status of religion.

This shows that the whole thought circle of Germany still remained Hegelianism at that time. They believed that “religion, concept and universal thing dominated the existing world”, and people were dominated and bounded by consciousness and concept in reality. Therefore, human emancipation meant that people were emancipated from the domination of consciousness, concept and words and sentences. So, “we should fully and logically present a moral requirement to people to replace their current consciousness with human, critical or self-interested consciousness, thereby eliminating the restrictions that bind them.” Feuerbach is committed to attribute the religious world to its secular foundation, and proposes famous propositions that “man is the highest essence of man” and “god is you”, thus unraveling the mysterious cloak of religion. However, he does not grasp the significance of revolutionary practice and does not propose to revolutionize the secular foundation itself through revolutionary practice, so as to fundamentally eliminate the task of religion. Marx and Engels regard them as the biggest conservatives. In the manuscripts of *Theses on Feuerbach* in the spring of 1845, Marx showed that “the philosophers in the past only explained the world in different ways, while the problem is to change the world”, which was the best portrayal of the young Hegelian movement. The young Hegelians are only content to explain the world in one way instead of another. But no matter how people explain the world, the world is still the world and doesn’t change because of the explanations they make. Marx pointed out “the most important thing was to transform the world”, while the activities of the young Hegelian ideologicalists did not have this. Similarly, in the book *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels evaluate Feuerbach and think that “he is a theorist and philosopher”, which is completely consistent with the above statement. Feuerbach is nothing more than a theorist. Marx and Engels criticize the young Hegelians with great irony: “they just use words and phrases to oppose these words and phrases; since they are only against the words and phrase of this world, they are definitely not against the existing world of reality.” The only result that this philosophical criticism can achieve is to make some explanations on Christianity from the history of religion, and it is also a one-sided explanation”. “As for all their other assertions, they are only to further modify their requirements: want to use such insignificant explanations to make world-wide discoveries.” Marx and Engels use the “one-sided” and “insignificant” words to ironically illustrate the “the world-wide discoveries” advocated by the young Hegelians.”

C. Criticism on Feuerbach’s “Human Essence” by Marx and Engels

Before the basic principles of historical materialism of Marx and Engels burst out, Marx and Engels once again

explained the premise of historical materialism. They stressed that “observation of experience” and “individual in reality” were the premise of historical materialism as well as a starting point of social science research methods. The scientificity of this research method lies in that it not only distinguishes from the researches of idealists including Hegel and turns the perspective of research from the “absolute spirit” to “social subject”, that is, actual individual, but it also varies from Feuerbach’s humanistic materialism, because Feuerbach studied “class of human” and “human beings”. Feuerbach believes that the difference between human beings and animals is that people are conscious and can be aware of the “class”. The essence of this “class” is the reason, will and heart that Feuerbach said. Therefore, Feuerbach studies from the perspective of human beings, while Marx and Engels studies from the individuals. Marx believes that “human beings include all kinds of social relationships in reality”. It can be seen that Marx never considers that the essence of human is a “class essence”, and what kind of individuals in reality is consistent with their production”. Therefore, the statements made by Marx and Engels for the “practical individual” belong to the research method of historical materialism.

Proceeding from the “realistic premise” of social historical phenomena, Marx and Engels elaborate the origin, development and essence of social consciousness, and clearly and systematically put forward and expound the principle that “the consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness”, revealing the essence of historical materialism. First, consciousness is the product of people’s social material life. “The generation of thoughts, concepts and consciousness is directly interwoven with people’s material activities, people’s material interaction, and the language of real life. People’s imagination, thinking and spiritual interaction are the direct products of people’s material actions. The same is true of spiritual production in a certain nation’s language of politics, law, morality, religion and metaphysics”. Social consciousness consists of two parts, namely, ideology and non-ideology. “People’s imagination, thinking and spiritual interaction” belong to the category of non-ideology, and “politics, law, morality, religion and metaphysics” belong to the category of ideology. Both the categories of ideology and non-ideology are the products of social being. People have to carry out production activities to make a living, and production activities require social interaction, and social interaction requires language and consciousness as a means or tool. We can see that the language and consciousness are produced due to the urgent needs to interact with others. Therefore, social consciousness is closely related to people’s social life. Second, social being is the content of social consciousness. “Consciousness can only be the existence that is realized at any time, and people’s existence is their real life process”. Marx and Engels make a very vivid analogy that just like in the camera: the original image of people’s ideology is their real life, which is similar to the principle that the reflection of an object on the retina is directly generated from the physiological processes of people’s lives”. In this way, the relationship between consciousness and existence, and between thought and reality reversed by idealism is turned,

which not only conforms to the general empirical facts, but also makes a more accurate understanding of human society and its consciousness. Therefore, “German philosophy declines from heaven to the world; on the contrary, here we will ascend from the world to heaven”. It shows that the historical materialism of Marx and Engels is based on social existence and then become social consciousness. They stress that social consciousness is not independent, and are rooted in social being. Third, social consciousness constantly varies with real life. Social being is concrete, historical, and constantly evolving, so social consciousness should also change with social being. It first reveals the basic law of the formation and development of human’s ideology in a scientific way. People’s conditions of social material life and its development and change determine the people’s thought state and its development and change. To accurately grasp the people’s ideological outlook and the trend of development and change, we should thoroughly investigate people’s conditions of social material life and clues of its development and change; to fundamentally solve people’s ideological problems, we should explore the material roots of ideological problems in people’s social material life and eliminate it by changing people’s conditions of social material life. In a word, the principle that consciousness does not determine life but life actually determines the consciousness seems very simple, but its initial application is a head-on blow to all idealism and even the most insidious idealism. This is because all the traditional views on all history are completely overthrown by this principle. This is the significance of the revolutionary change achieved by historical materialism.

D. Criticism on Limitations of Feuerbach’s Materialism

The limitations of Feuerbach’s materialism are gradually eliminated by Marx’s major ideas such as “human liberation”, “practice” and “communism”. On the issues of “human liberation”, Marx and Engels show: “of course, we don’t want to spend our energy to inspire our intelligent philosophers to make them understand that if they integrate the philosophy, theology, entity and all waste into ‘self-consciousness’ and if they emancipate “human” from the rule of these words and phrases while human beings have never been enslaved by these words and phrases, the emancipation of human beings has not gone any further. Real emancipation can be achieved only in the real world through realistic means”. One is the liberation of philosophy realized in theoretical philosophy, which is completed in the perspective of human’s subjective thoughts; the other is the liberation of reality realized in practical philosophy, that is to say, the liberation is completed by using realistic means in the real world. Therefore, the liberation of “realistic person” can only use “realistic means” instead of the so-called “word revolution”.

The degree of human liberation is not freewheeling, but is related to the conditions of reality. ‘Liberation’ is a kind of historical activity, not an ideological activity. The ‘liberation’ is completed by the history, industrial conditions, business conditions, agricultural conditions, and communication conditions. Human liberation is by no means

an ideological activity, and must be a historical activity promoted by industry, commerce, agriculture and related communication conditions. People's liberation depends on the development extent of these practical activities. "Practice" is the theoretical cornerstone of Marxist historical materialism. The "practical materialists" called by Marx and Engels refer to actually these persons who revolutionize the existing world and actually oppose and change the existing things based on the actual historical process, namely, communists. They sometimes refer to such people as "communist materialists", which refers to the connotation in "the practice" of "practical materialists".

"If similar opinions are sometimes encountered in Feuerbach thoughts, they are always sporadic speculations and have little impact on Feuerbach's overall views, so they can only be regarded as the sprout of thoughts with development ability". The "similar opinions" refer to "requirements of the revolution". Feuerbach also wants to start a revolution, but just cannot understand the importance of this practical character of practical materialists. He stops at theoreticism, and believes that the real world of life will be changed and monarchy will be transformed into republicanism as long as theology is turned into anthropology. The reason why Feuerbach does not have the practical character of practical materialist and are unwilling to touch the real world has much to do with Feuerbach's "intuitive materialism". Feuerbach's intuitive materialism is "limited to the simple intuition of the world and a pure feeling". The "simple intuition" is to open your eyes and see the world, and the world is just what you have seen. In the following, Marx and Engels point out that Feuerbach's "simple intuition" refers to the poor who have scrofula and phthisis diseases and fall sick from overwork rather than healthy people", which is what Feuerbach's "simple intuition" has observed. "Pure feeling" is a higher state than simple intuition. It has a meaning of understanding the essence of things, and is a thing that feels the essence. The pure feeling is groundless, and even we cannot say the reasons for the wrong feeling. Like Feuerbach's understanding of the perceptual world, he just feels that people should not be like that, and the relationship between people also should not be like that. So, Feuerbach is not satisfied with the reality, but his criticism on reality is only an ethical moral critique. For Feuerbach, it is impossible for him to do such things, and he is unwilling to do such things. Whether in the object or in the method of research, its views are deeply imprinted with the image of "intuitive materialism".

E. Understanding the Criticism on Feuerbach Based on the "Realistic" Problems

Marx and Engels elaborate on the issue of "premise of human history", state the three provisions for "premise of human history" from a positive perspective, and repeatedly emphasize the "premise and starting point of reality". First, Marx and Engels criticize the young Hegelians from the opposite side and pointed out that the wrong roots of their thoughts lie in the fact that they declared "people" as religious people and "consider the rule of religion as a

premise". Second, from the "premise of reality", human beings transform the natural world so that the natural world is marked by human activities, and then nature becomes the nature of history and history becomes the history of nature. The relationship between man and nature creates productivity, and the relationship between men, and between man and society forms a production relationship. The total production relations formed on the basis of certain productive forces constitute the economic foundation of society, and the economic foundation determines the superstructure of society. Third, "the actual individual demonstrates the humanistic care of Marxist philosophy". This kind of humanistic concern is the ideal of life, but not a fantasy. It is the transcendence of real life, but not belongs to metaphysics. It is the "realistic concern" for the reality of the "actual individual". It is a deep concern for the existence, development and destiny of the entire human race, as well as an unremitting exploration of the path of human society development and a yearning for the ideal society in the future. Marx and Engels point out that "what individuals behave depends on the way they present their life. What they are is consistent with their production, which includes their production contents and production modes. Therefore, what the individual is depends on the material conditions for their production", which indicates that "individual" and "production" are closely connected. "Production" is an essential material production activity for individuals to maintain their own life activities, as well as the birthplace of the entire social relationship of an individual. At this point, Marx and Engels actually have formed a thinking line that regards the activity of material production as the foothold of the whole process of social development and runs through the whole materialism. "Production itself is based on the interaction between individuals, and this form of interaction is determined by production".

Division of labor is a manifestation of the development of productivity, while the form of ownership is determined by the division of labor. The ownership they called refers to the relationship between people related to labor materials, tools and products. This is actually the content of the productive relations, but Marx and Engels do not fully explain this content at that time. The history of development and change of division of labor and ownership said by Marx and Engels at that time should actually be the history of development and change of productive forces and production relations. Marx and Engels indicate that "the mutual relations among nations depend on the productive forces, division of labor and the development extent of internal communication of each nation. This principle is generally accepted. Both the relationship between a nation and other nations and the entire internal structure of the nation itself depend on its own production and development of its internal and external exchanges". Marx and Engels actually agree that the development extent of division of labor is the objective criterion of the level of productivity development.

F. Criticism on Feuerbach Based on Four Aspects of Historical Relations

Marx and Engels inspect the four factors of the original historical relationship, namely, production of material life, satisfaction of needs and generation of new needs, family and social relations, and production methods. The young Hegelians “merely pay attention to” the history of consciousness or concept, and are not interested in real history. To criticize their views, Marx and Engels not only stress the objective premise of historical materialism and the decisive role of social existence on social consciousness, but also expound the specific content of the realistic historical process, so as to thoroughly demolish their historical idealism. Marx and Engels believe that the first type of production is to meet people’s needs for food, clothing and shelter, that is, production of material life itself. Although this kind of material production process is a basic fact in the historical process, Marx and Engels still consider that this basic fact is of great significance to the construction of the conception of history. The second type of production is to meet the new needs, that is, the reproduction process of material. After the end of the first type of production mentioned above, the first need that has been met, activities that meet this need, and tools that have been acquired to meet the needs will create new demands. In order to meet this need, people will constantly enhance their ability to live in material life. The third type of production is social relations. Human beings produce other people through reproduction, and the resulting relationship is family relationship. This kind of family relationship was the only social relationship at that time. Later, the growth of new needs brought new social relationships, which transformed family relationships into subordinate relations in social life. This developing social relationship is also produced by people themselves.

After analyzing the four aspects of the realistic historical process in detail, the historical materialism of Marx and Engels has been deeply entrenched in the soil of the real world. On the basis of this solid historical materialism, Marx and Engels put forward that people are still conscious, but it is not the “pure consciousness”. The so-called “pure consciousness” refers to speculative consciousness. The young Hegelians believe that consciousness is “pure”, independent, and external. According to Marx and Engels, “‘spirit’ is unlucky to be ‘obsessed’ by the materialism from the beginning”. It can be seen that consciousness is not independent from the beginning, and it depends on material. The so-called “pure consciousness” does not exist in reality. “Consciousness is the product of society from the start”. With the development of society, the form of consciousness is changing constantly.

III. CONCLUSION

Proceeding from the “realistic person” and his production, Marx and Engels thoroughly cleared up Feuerbach’s thoughts, and drew a conclusion that in terms of the above three factors; namely, productivity, social conditions and consciousness, there may and must be contradictions between them. This is because the division of labor makes it possible and true for different individuals to share the mental

and material activities, enjoyment and labor, production and consumption. The only way to keep these three factors from contradicting each other is to eliminate the division of labor”. However, there will be contradictory movements between productive forces and productive relations, and between economic base and superstructure, which will result in the replacement and change of social form and eventually lead to the entry of human society into Communist society. This is the basic idea of historical materialism, and the logical premise of this huge historical materialism is “the premise of history”. Only proceeding from this premise can the theoretical mansion of historical materialism be established. Without this foundation, historical materialism will inevitably lead to historical idealism.

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