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MARX' THESES ON FEUERBACH: FROM REAL HUMANISM TO REAL POSSIBILITY

L. BARONOVITCH

INTRODUCTION

Between 1838 and the end of 1841, Marx, then a student at Berlin University, wrote a series of studies on Greek philosophy central to which was his doctoral dissertation which contrasted the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature.¹ Of particular interest to scholars today are the *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* in which Marx assembled materials for his dissertation and the two Notes on Philosophy which he appended to the completed thesis in 1841. In these preparatory Notebooks and in one of the appended Notes, Marx examined the history and development of philosophy in general terms and gave a clear indication that his interest in the position of Greek philosophy after Aristotle was stimulated by his regard for Hegelian philosophy and the position of philosophy in Germany after the death of Hegel.² This question was of particular interest to the radical Young Hegelian school of philosophy many of whose members, Marx included, were active in the Doctors Club at the University. One of the leading figures in this boisterous company of young lecturers and postgraduate students which met regularly at a Berlin cafe was Bruno Bauer, Marx' closest friend and intellectual collaborator at that time. It was Bauer who was primarily responsible for introducing a critical re-assessment of Hegel's theology and thought in general into the Young Hegelian movement between 1838 and the time that Marx left Berlin in 1841.³ Bauer's emphasis on the relationship between philosophy and history and his conception of the role of self-consciousness as an active, critical intellectual force decisively influenced the young Marx in his choice of topic for a doctoral dissertation.⁴

During the years of his Epicurean studies and up until the summer of 1843, Marx, like Bauer, believed that the only viable analysis of religion, politics and life was that afforded by self-conscious criticism. The criticism of worldly conditions was essentially an intellectual affair, through philosophy, all manner of criticism became possible. Marx' belief, however, began a radical transformation from the time he became involved with the journalism of the Cologne *Rheinische Zeitung* in the summer of 1842 until March 1843. While Bauer had associated himself with the violent clamour in the liberal press against the Prussian censorship laws, Marx found a source of income and new friends in an environment which contrasted strongly with that of his Left Hegelian student days in Berlin. In Cologne, he attended the meetings of a group founded by Moses Hess which formed an ad hoc editorial committee of the newspaper and discussed a wide range of social questions. A year earlier in his *European Triarchy*, Hess had asserted the impotence of liberalism to solve what he believed to be the essentially *social* problems of the day. He argued that the task of human emancipation could not result from a simple criticism of reality or otherwise, but only from a social revolution in which mankind attained freedom through self-conscious action.⁵ It was in the spirit of the discussions in the *Cologne Circle* that Marx edited the paper and wrote articles on such diverse subjects as the debates in the Rhineland Parliament relating to the theft of wood and on the Estates Committee in Prussia.⁶ These articles, in fact, the whole of this period of journalism, I maintain, synthesises the perspective of self-conscious criticism that he inherited from Bauer and Hess' call for self-conscious action.⁷ The articles in which Marx attacked the Prussian authorities were, in fact, active products of a critical self-consciousness whereby the criticism of worldly conditions remained an occupation of the intellect. As an intellectual criticism of social conditions, however, Marx' journalism nonetheless diverged from his friends' purely abstract criticism of the world in general. This period of Marx' early political life as a radical journalist marked the beginning of his detachment from the influence of Bauer and growing dissociation from his friend's unworldly self-conscious scholasticism.

In common with Bauer, Marx initially believed that the course of history could only be determined by the elimination of its irrational elements through self-conscious criticism. Unlike Bauer, however, and more true to Hegel's fundamental conception, according to Cornu,⁸ Marx denied that the Spirit had any absolute power to change the world at will. In this respect, Marx introduced one of the Appendices to his Doctoral Dissertation by charging Hegel's critical followers with passing moral judgement on his philosophy while remaining "fervent adherents to all aspects of its one-sidedness".⁹ In 1841, Marx had tried to demonstrate the hollowness of the power of Spirit in the Second Appendix to his Dissertation in which he examined the relationship of man to God.¹⁰ In a comment on Plutarch's theology, Marx attacked the idealist notion of formal possibility, opposing the idea that anything could exist (even God, if a godly existence did not contradict formal logic), with the conditions limiting existence in the real world. By opposing formal possibility with real possibility, i.e. real conditions, he endeavored to link thought to real existence and therefore directed the search for truth to the facts of concrete reality. This being so, it was logical that he should have increasingly denied any intrinsic value to

speculative philosophy beyond purely mental activity. Philosophy had either to end with *mind* or enter the world as *will*, as a practical activity such as the criticism of real conditions..... as with Bauer's theoretical activities. Marx supported this turning of philosophy against the world in his friend's *criticism* and his support for the idea of criticism is clear from the first Note that he appended to his dissertation.¹¹ Yet at the same time, by opposing the formal possibility of the existence of God with real conditions, he proposed that rational truth lay in fact, in *real* rather than in *ideal* existence.

During the period of his association with the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx came to realise that the entry of philosophy into the world as intellectual criticism resulted in activity that either became practical or remained theoretical. From the practice of political journalism and the struggle it entailed in Prussia at that time, *he came to hold the view that critical intellectual activity had of necessity to become practical, political goals could only be achieved through a social intercourse with real conditions, with life. With Bauer, on the other hand, criticism remained limited to an activity of mind, an activity of philosophy, of the Concept, of Spirit; he could go no further than thought.* Marx later expressed this kind of view of Bauer in *The Holy Family*, showing that his early criticism of Hegel was hollow. He accused Bauer of being a representative of Hegelian orthodoxy. The relation between spirit and non-spirit "discovered by Herr Bruno" was simply a caricature by Bauer of Hegel's conception of history.¹² Bauer, he declared, considered himself to be *the* representative of philosophy. Clearly, though, if Bauer, as a leader of *left* Hegelianism — as the personification of philosophy itself — was estranged man, Marx' entry into the practical affairs of political journalism would have led him to abandon Bauer's scholastic philosophy and this was indeed the case.

The above argument is supported by a fact that has failed to receive comment from students of this period of Marx' life. I have suggested that the first sign of Marx' theoretical movement from the position of Bauer appeared in the viewpoint of his Second Appended Note, that on Plutarch, in the idea that rational truth lies in reality rather than in abstraction. It is an interesting fact, however, that Marx *expressed an entirely contrary opinion two years earlier when writing the preliminary Epicurean Notebooks for his Doctoral Dissertation, and moreover, at a time when he was much influenced by the ideas of Bauer.* Discussing the Epicurean notion of the composite world in his First Notebook, he commented that,

"It must be noted that the soul perishes, that it owes its existence only to accidental admixture, expresses in general the accidental nature of all these notions e.g. soul, which not being necessary in ordinary consciousness are accounted for by Epicurus as accidental conditions which are seen as something given, the necessity of which.... is not only not proved, but is even admitted to be not provable, only possible. What persists, on the other hand is the freedom of the imagination."

Thus,

"What is lasting and great in Epicurus is that he gives no preference to conditions over notions and tries just as little to save them. For Epicurus, the task of philosophy is to prove that the world and thought are thinkable and possible. His proof and the principle by which it proceeds and to which it is referred is again possibility existing for itself."¹³

i.e. abstract or formal possibility. Apart from the obvious support that Marx gave to Epicurus in his dissertation and preliminary studies, the above position is the *exact opposite* of the view he expressed in his *Appended Note on Plutarch*. In both his dissertation and its preliminary materials, Marx supported the freedom of Epicurean self-consciousness over real conditions, the *real possibility* of the *material* Democritean atom, giving no preference to conditions over notions and consequently supporting the freedom of mind to speculate and criticise. *This speculative viewpoint I maintain, neatly reflects the philosophical position of Bruno Bauer between 1838 and 1841.* Self-consciousness as the freedom of critical theory, Bauer believed, could change the world at will; the free Spirit of criticism overcame contradiction entirely unhindered by real conditions. By the time that he had added the *Appended Note on Plutarch* to his dissertation at the end of 1841, *Marx had reversed his position*, now attacking the notion of formal or *abstract* possibility and suggesting that rational truth lay in fact rather than in imagination or self-consciousness.

Yet if Marx had shifted his ground from the theory, or abstract possibility of 1839 to a support for *real possibility* i.e. existing conditions, at the end of 1841, his new point of view remained vague. It lacked the backing of a philosophical outlook based on the conditions of real life. Emerging from the narrowness of Bauer's philosophical criticism which he had readily adopted in 1840, Marx came to understand the importance of *real conditions*, but could not yet give support to any philosophy which contradicted the perspective of his close friend. At the end of 1841, Marx held that *activity*, of necessity, had to remain limited to criticism, although a criticism that was no longer an end in itself but could be directed towards real conditions. From the time he began his association with the *Rheinische Zeitung* early in 1842 however, he came to abandon philosophical criticism as an activity for itself and now emphasized that theory had to become *practically* directed against *real* conditions. If a philosophy of real conditions had not been fully spelt out in 1841, its basis was already nascent in the philosophical and religious writing of Feuerbach.¹⁴ On publication in the first half of 1843 in a famous onslaught on Hegel's thought, Feuerbach's positive philosophy of man had a pronounced effect on Marx' thought and finally detached him once and for all from the influence of his first comrade of the intellect, Bruno Bauer.

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As for Bauer, Lobkowitz correctly comments that, "inasmuch as he understood that the world was not willing to change in response to words alone, Bauer was unable to follow Marx who concluded that critical activity had to materialise as political action. Instead he fell back on an ever more radical interpretation of his own endeavour" and, "eventually retired into a splendid isolation of scorn and contempt from which he opposed everybody and everything".¹⁵

By the summer of 1843, Marx had read Feuerbach's *Vorläufige Thesen zur Reform der Philosophie* published in February of that year, and his *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft* which appeared in July. He had also read Feuerbach's critical assessment of Hegel's philosophy which had been published in 1839¹⁶ as well as the by-then famous *Das Wesen des Christentums* and was now strongly influenced by his thought. While Feuerbach's influence on Marx' intellectual development is certainly important, it has often been misunderstood. Even from the time he had first read Feuerbach's seminal *Thesen*, which struck right at the heart of Hegel's metaphysics, the young Marx found him unconcerned with practical questions of social life. His criticism of Feuerbach in a letter he wrote to Arnold Ruge in March 1843 foreshadows the viewpoint of his article, *An Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.¹⁷ While demanding that human beings be the point of departure for philosophy said Marx, pointing to Feuerbach, the practical party forgets that in Germany, real life was only a product of German thought. This thought, this German philosophy could only be transcended through politics, the only practical medium by which the advanced thinking of German philosophy could transform the social conditions of German life. "You cannot transcend philosophy without actualising it", without making it practical, said Marx. Feuerbach, on the other hand, had written to Ruge in 1843, "Quiet influence is the best we have not yet arrived at the point of transition from theory to practice".¹⁸ The view that Marx' comment in this article vis-à-vis the practical party was directed at Feuerbach is itself reinforced by the events of Feuerbach's life, for when Marx said of the practical party that they believed they could negate German philosophy by turning their backs on it who else could he have referred to but Feuerbach Feuerbach who had abandoned the criticism of German philosophy and the practical affairs of German life in order to enjoy quiet scholarship and a simple life on his wife's farm deep in the countryside.¹⁹ Therefore despite the volumes written about a Feuerbachian Marx of 1844, I would argue that Marx had a dual relationship to Feuerbach's thought. Essentially, Feuerbach's transformative criticism of Hegel's philosophy was important to Marx because it laid bare the philosophical process by which Hegel's thought had developed. It was no coincidence that between March and August 1843, Marx devoted much energy to an analysis of paragraphs 261 - 313 of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right and the State* showing how the master's political philosophy inverted Prussian political reality.²⁰ Feuerbach's *Thesen* and *Grundsätze* provided Marx with a way forward for a genuine criticism of German political conditions and a way out of the Young Hegelian *critical* impasse that limited action to the realm of mental gyrations. Secondly, by turning Hegel right side up as it were, Feuerbach directed Marx' attention to the *real* activities of human beings in society. Nonetheless, the theoretical value of Feuerbach to Marx was balanced by his practical value, and Marx, I think, was under no illusion about the practical value of Feuerbach for very long. Evidence shows a divergence in the lives of the two men of a fundamental character; Feuerbach retired to the German countryside while still young; Marx on the other hand, had become an experienced political journalist by the time he was twenty-five. The comments he made in the article he wrote for Ruge in 1843, indicating his attitude towards both Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians still around Bauer provide an excellent insight into the direction in which Marx' thought had developed. Critical of his former colleague Bruno Bauer and his theoretical party, he now supported Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's thought and urged him not to turn his back on German life. When Feuerbach urged in his *Thesen*, "You must go over to life to praxis" and not run to faith, Marx replied by asking him to turn his critique of German philosophy into an active political criticism of German social conditions.

During the time that Marx wrote his critique of Hegel's political philosophy, he also collaborated with Ruge and Hess in planning the setting up of the *Deutsche-französische Jahrbucher*, a review which they hoped would receive support from French radicals and establish an exchange of views on social and political questions. By the end of May 1843, the financial backing for the review had been organized, mostly coming from Ruge,²¹ a well to do political radical and Julius Froebel, a Swiss professor of mineralogy and publisher. Together, they guaranteed Marx a substantial co-editor's salary plus a further income on royalties, so opening the way for his marriage to Jenny von Westphalen in June 1843. In July, Ruge and Hess left Germany for Brussels, moving on to Paris in August, hoping to establish the journal there and full of expectations. Earlier, in March, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, the paper Marx had edited had been suppressed by the Prussian authorities along with all signs of radicalism. At the end of 1843, having no political future in Germany, Marx and his wife left to join Ruge and Hess in Paris, bringing with him a review of Bruno Bauer's study of the Jewish question.²²

Between his mixed feelings for Feuerbach in 1843 to the brief but devastating dissection he made of his thought in the *Theses on Feuerbach* early in 1845, much of Marx' writing in the intervening period reflects the influence of the change of environment from Berlin to Paris and the start of his lifelong intellectual association and friendship with Friedrich Engels. During the first months of his stay in Paris, Marx discovered a politically

conscious proletariat that had not existed in Berlin and attempted to establish contact with the leaders of secret communist societies. The Parisian environment of revolutionary socialist politics I think, breathed life into the conception of the proletariat that Marx had outlined for Ruge in his article, *An Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Added to this, Engels' article, *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*,²³ which Marx had read at the end of January 1844, drew his attention to the economic causes of social antagonism and class conflict. Engels maintained that the categories of political economy only had a value relative to their particular mode of production rather than the eternal value given to them by the political economist. His portrayal of class antagonism as a logical outcome of political economy made a great impression on Marx as did an article written by Moses Hess which described alienation as a product of the universal basis of capitalist production and its social nexus, money.²⁴ By the Spring of 1844, Marx, Cornu has suggested "now appraised Hegelian dialectics and Feuerbach's notion of alienation from an economic and social conception of historical development and communism, not merely from a philosophical and political point of view".²⁵

From April 1844, Marx began working on a series of studies possibly as a draught for a book he had planned to write on political economy. Unlike all his previous writing, these studies, now known as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* critically examined Hegel's dialectic and philosophy in general and expressed Marx' view that political economy was the key for understanding and solving philosophical, political and social problems. Furthermore, they provided a picture of communism, communist man, communist existence and communist labour in a sparkling application of all the categories of Feuerbachian humanism to the empirical conditions of bourgeois political economy. Much of these 1844 manuscripts contain an extensive analysis and critique of the political economy of that time and indicate the strong influence of his observations of French bourgeois society. His association with Engels, whom he met in a Paris cafe during the summer strongly facilitated his turn from the social criticism afforded by political journalism to the essential categories of economic life — labour and production. Having read Engels' essay, Marx now saw Parisian workers, exploited and dehumanised by capitalism, as the connecting link between class struggle and social revolution. For Marx, they supplemented Engels' view that the origin of communism lay more in economic and social life than in the political character of the state. In his manuscripts, Marx extended Engels' argument to show that the dehumanisation of the workers resulted from their relationship to the forces of production and the commodities they produced. Marx' equating of the dehumanisation of workers within the capitalist mode of production with their alienation as producers from what they made, and from one another, is certainly his original thesis. The tone of his argument, however, as a decided Feuerbachian ring about it.

The impact of Engels on Marx' intellectual development at this time cannot be understated. His first manuscript contains reflections on political economy that clearly follow from and further develop the viewpoint of Engels on the proletariat and modern political economy.²⁶ His critique of political economy in the manuscripts of 1844 I would argue, is therefore a logical development and extension of his earlier critiques of religion, of Hegel's political philosophy and his criticism of German social conditions in general. The position of Engels is itself most interesting; the critical attitude of his article to the abstract concepts of political economy, I maintain, mirrors Marx' own attitude to Hegel's political thought in 1843. This is especially evident where Engels, discussing the idea of value, says, "Thus everything in economics stands on its head. Value, the origin or source of price is made dependent on that which is its own product. As is well known, this inversion is the essence of abstraction; on which see Feuerbach".²⁷ Engels' reference to Feuerbach here is significant insofar as it was Feuerbach's *Thesen* that demonstrated to Marx how Hegel's philosophy inverted the relation of thought to being, reifying thought and giving it human qualities.²⁸ The opening sections of Marx' first manuscript therefore mark the end of his criticism of the *abstract* political philosophy of bourgeois society and the beginning of his criticism of its real economic life, of which, according to Marx, now, religion, politics and philosophy were merely modes of existence, mere predicates of the true subject, political economy. Antithetically, the final section of his manuscripts, the *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole* marks the end of his first critique of bourgeois society and its political economy and forms the beginning of a campaign against what he regarded as the *intellectual expression* of bourgeois society, the philosophy of Hegel and its extension in the work of Bauer and Feuerbach. In this last section of his manuscripts, Marx fulfilled the promise he made in the Preface, "I have deemed the concluding chapter of the present work — the settling of accounts with *Hegelian dialectic* and Hegelian philosophy as a whole — to be absolutely necessary, a task not yet performed".²⁹ Full of lavish praise for Feuerbach and sharply critical of Bauer, the Section places the whole of Marx' intellectual development and relationship to Hegelian philosophy between 1839 and 1844 into perspective. Not surprisingly, the work that followed these economic and philosophical manuscripts was a furious attack mainly by Marx, but with some help from Engels, on the entire position of Bauer's thought and its evolution, namely, *The Holy Family*.

In what was essentially an analysis of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Marx' Critique took up the attack where Feuerbach left off. In a brilliant and clear discussion of the intellectual genesis, character and motion of Hegel's relationship as a thinker both to thought and to the world, Marx demonstrated that Hegel's

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approach to knowledge devitalised the objective existence of human beings into an abstracted essence. Just as bourgeois political economy drained the humanity from the proletariat, so too did Hegel's philosophy; with Hegel, thought departed from the thinker and gained a real existence. Marx perceived that the importance of Feuerbach's attack lay in his regard for the speculative character of Hegel's dialectic. Hegel's negation of the negation was considered by Feuerbach to negate the empirical, sensible world and open the way for the restoration in abstraction and infinity of theology that posed as philosophy. Feuerbach attacked the re-affirmation of theology in Hegel's thought by opposing to his final negation a self-supporting, positive, sense certainty "based in itself" and upon perception.³⁰ In his Theses, Feuerbach argued that this sense certainty pointed the way to the true basis of philosophy, "the beginning of philosophy is the finite, the determinate, the actual"³¹ in short, man and nature. Hegel, said Marx, regards the essence of man as self-consciousness, itself, an abstraction from humanly sensuous consciousness. Hegel's entire conception of human existence was therefore an estrangement, and abstraction from the categories of empirical human life and the complete opposite of Feuerbach's vision of an unalienated and therefore human existence of "real, corporeal *man*, man with his feet firmly on the solid ground" who "*establishes* his real, objective *essential powers* as alien objects by his externalisation".³²

Despite his exposure of the strong threat of idealism running through Hegel's thought, Marx did not lose sight of its *positive* aspects. The most important of these, said Marx, was its estranged insight into the process of man's objectification and self-development. Despite its origination within the sphere of the entire estrangement, this insight enabled Hegel to grasp that,

"man's loss of objectivity and his loss of realness as finding of self, change of his nature, his objectification and realisation within the sphere of abstraction, Hegel conceives labour as man's act of *self-genesis*."³³

Hegel, Marx noted, recognised that man comes to have a *species* life and *species* consciousness through his labour, in other words, through his active life despite the fact that these confront him as abstractions. While Feuerbach had exposed the entire unreality of Hegel's *thought* beings, the fact that for all their estrangement, they were able to act in their own world and change both it and themselves was not lost on Marx. Despite his false existence, Hegel made man "the outcome of man's own labour" and "conceives the self-creation of man as a process". Feuerbach's unalienated, real, corporeal, communist man, in contradistinction, seemed to lack dimension and self-development, but above all, lacked *activity*. Despite his corporeal reality, Feuerbach's man, the subject of the new philosophy, was an object of perception, a passive entity.

In 1843, the work of Feuerbach was instrumental in enabling Marx to understand that the theoretical criticism of man's social existence had necessarily to be grounded in a correct perception of them. Such 'perception', however, could only be gained through a practical involvement in the circumstances of political and economic life. By the winter of 1844, Marx had concluded that perception and intellectual criticism by themselves could not change circumstances — and that it was the desire to change real conditions, above all, that now distinguished the communist, Marx, from the scholar, Feuerbach.

FROM REAL HUMANISM TO REAL POSSIBILITY

Despite praising his philosophical achievements and humanism, Marx was already aware in 1844 of Feuerbach's disinclination for any kind of *political activity* and involvement in worldly affairs. But his comprehension of the true character of Feuerbach's criticism of Hegel only attained perspective in the last months of that year and the first months of 1845, when the philosophical meaning of his self-imposed isolation at Bruckberg clarified itself in the fires of reflection. The first fruit of this reflection was Marx' famous eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*.³⁴

The basic theme of Marx' criticism of Feuerbach in these Theses was that despite his wish to transfer philosophical enquiry to the practical realm of living men, his own practice of philosophy was abstract. From his isolated farm in the heart of the German countryside, Feuerbach declared that the task of philosophy should be to study man and that the means for this study was to be the perception of men in their relationship to nature. Not the analysis of spirit, but the study of men, of human beings as the germs of real life, was to be the task of philosophy, Feuerbach maintained early in 1842. In essence, the tenor of his critique of Hegel was a call for the abandonment of philosophy as the study of thought and a turning to nature for the study of the material world. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx took up the theme of his earlier criticism of Feuerbach that he expressed in his article for Ruge, "You of the practical party demand that actual germs of life be the point of departure, but you forget that the German nation's actual germs of life have until now sprouted only in its cranium. In short, you cannot transcend philosophy without actualising it."³⁵ The actualisation of philosophy lay in practice; for Feuerbach, the practice of philosophy revolved around the perception and study of man and man's relationship to nature. For Marx, the practice of philosophy by 1845 had taken on an entirely new meaning, the study of and practical involvement within the sensuous, real world activities of men. His Fifth Thesis on Feuerbach succinctly summarises the basic difference of outlook between them in 1845: "Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract*

thinking, wants contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical* human sensuous activity".³⁶ Despite his desire to radicalize the practice of philosophy, Feuerbach's own practice of philosophy remained abstract, for he refused to advance beyond prescription and advice to practical worldly activities, to personal involvement in worldly affairs. He believed that philosophy could be transcended through criticism and transformation, without actualising this criticism in the world in the shape of the transformation of real, worldly conditions.

Marx' reappraisal of Feuerbach took place between the last months of 1844 and the spring months of 1845, so that by April of that year, Engels was able to write that Marx had already advanced from the principles and ideas of his Paris writings on economics and philosophy, "to the main aspects of his materialist theory of history".³⁷ During this period, Marx and his family moved to Brussels after he, Heine and Ruge had been expelled from France by the order of Guizot; the only writing of Marx to have survived from it were his *Theses on Feuerbach*. These crystallise both his philosophical reappraisal of Feuerbach and his own first statement of the materialist theory of history and society; a statement only possible after the initial reappraisal of Feuerbach had been attained. In fact, given the events of Marx' life in the years 1843 and 1844, it is not at all surprising that his critical reappraisal of Feuerbach historically coincides with his first statement of the materialist conception of history and society in the Theses. Yet why was it that only six months earlier in the *Paris Manuscripts* Marx generously praised Feuerbach's contribution to philosophy as a "great achievement", as being the true conqueror of the old philosophy only to repeatedly condemn Feuerbach in the spring of 1845 for taking as his point of departure, a privatised, individualistic conception of man's sociability rather than *social man*? Earlier, in 1844, Marx had said of Feuerbach, "His great achievement is the establishment of *true materialism* and of real science, since Feuerbach also makes the social relationship 'of man to man' the basic principle of his theory".³⁸ Now, in his First Thesis, he argued that Feuerbach's materialism was defective because reality was only conceived,

"in the form of the object or of contemplation but not as *sensuous human activity, practice* Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. Hence in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude....."³⁹

Marx' disaffection with Feuerbachian humanism, I maintain, originated in his appraisal of Feuerbach's writings on religion. No less than four of the eleven Theses discuss Feuerbach's critical thinking and philosophical understanding of religion. In fact, in the very first thesis, Marx criticised Feuerbach's materialism as a defective theory of knowledge of religion, mentioning by name the work in which Feuerbach made most thorough use of his *humanistic* critique of the subject.⁴⁰ This association of a defective theory of religious knowledge with a defective materialism is a thread that runs through all the *Theses on Feuerbach* and forms a pivot around which Marx highlights his criticism of him and develops his distinctive materialist conception of history and society. Feuerbach explained the essence of religion by analysing the character of man's religious consciousness. He starts out, says Marx in his Fourth Thesis, "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", he "resolved the religious essence into the human essence", says Marx in his Sixth Thesis. "But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations," he continues. This last point is most important, for Marx now accuses Feuerbach of delimiting the human essence to the individual rather than revealing it to be the expression of society. It is not difficult to understand why it was that Marx came to have this opinion of Feuerbach's thought. In his critical writings on religion and philosophy between 1841 and 1844, Feuerbach had repeatedly expressed the view that the foundations of social reality rested upon the intimate relationship between discrete individuals.⁴¹ His conception of the, "ensemble of the social relations" was one where sentiment and love united solitary individuals. Feuerbach held the emotional unity between the "I" and "Thou" to be the true expression of human reality because he believed that the *sensual bond of love* was the primitive essence of man's natural state, a natural state within primitive nature. In this way he saw sociability as meaning an intimacy of social living expressed through the bond of love, not, as Marx now believed, "social life carried on in the historic course of events".⁴²

Feuerbach's peculiarly *anthropological* interpretation of man's state of social nature was fundamentally a product of his epistemology of religion. The essence of religion, he argued, in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, could be grasped only by analysing the quality and character of worldly oriented human consciousness. Despite reducing the whole heavenly choir to a devilish existence within the *human brain*, his view nonetheless located religious sentiment within human *emotion*. It was both a psychological and positivistic interpretation which held up the individual as ultimate data yet severed him as a repository of emotional-religious disposition from the objective social world. To repeat Marx' Sixth Thesis,

"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.

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"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" which *naturally* unites the many individuals."⁴³

i.e. comprehended as 'species'. If the relationship of individuals to one another is expressed through consciousness, its character being that of sentiment, then it was certainly logical for Feuerbach to have expressed man's *natural* existence as a generalised, abstract state *genus*, species, in which man's emotional essence, his species-being, bound him to other beings within the abstract, but for Feuerbach, *real* collective. This collective of human essence, said Marx, "can with him be comprehended only as a 'genus'", within which men and women lived in isolation from the dynamic course of real history. Consequently, "Feuerbach 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."⁴⁴

This brings my discussion back to the criticism that Marx made of Feuerbach's theory of knowledge in his First Thesis. With all previous materialism, Feuerbach's included, "the thing, reality, sensuousness" in other words, that which is regarded objectively, "is conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively". *In other words, the object of study, in Feuerbach's case, religiosity and religious practice, is regarded from the point of view of the religious consciousness of the worshippers and not from the point of view of their religious practice as activity* in the real world. Their subjective activity belongs to consciousness alone, their practice is the adoration of spirit, the activity of mind..... the whispering of lips, sighs; the building of churches, a mere mental disposition. Thus, says Marx, "the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism" which in Feuerbach's case meant that the human activity of religious practice was divorced from social cause and historical event and delimited to the sentiment of isolated being. It was only a year after he had published his *Essence of Christianity* that Feuerbach was to introduce his theory of knowledge into his famous transformative critique of Hegel's monolithic idealism when, resolving the "religious essence into the human essence" and the human essence into a *natural* essence, he declared the sentiment of love to be the cement of social relations, Feuerbach equated the "human essence" with sentiment and human sensuousness with human thought, whereas for Marx, the reality of the human essence was expressed in "the ensemble of the social relations". "Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects," said Marx in his First Thesis, "but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity". For Feuerbach, as opposed to Hegel, it was man who became the sensuous object, but not man as an acting being, able to experience and respond collectively. On the contrary, what Feuerbach held up to be sensuous and active in man was man's thought, man's consciousness. "Hence in *Das Wesen des Christentums*" says Marx, "he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty judaical manifestation" i.e. its appearance. Some six months later, Marx, in a manuscript now known as *The German Ideology* described Feuerbach's recognition of sensuousness as being highly restricted.⁴⁵

Feuerbach restricted human activity to the consciousness of the thinking subject and the human essence to sentiment; he substituted the contemplation of man's real consciousness and the critical analysis of sentiment for Hegel's phenomenology of mind. Marx attacked Feuerbach's contemplative materialism in his Ninth Thesis because it "does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity". The highest point it reached, said Marx, "is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society". It was, he maintained, a critical contemplation of *consciousness* as the heart of human activity, rather than the critical appraisal of *the real earthly, social activities of human beings*. Feuerbach's humanism was abstract; real only insofar as he focussed upon human beings, abstract because he found the human essence to lie in the given consciousness of single individuals rather than in the ensemble of the social relations they created. He consequently never regarded human beings as a dynamic reality subject to social and political forces. What was to be the point of political activity or social criticism when contemplation was to be the basis for all appraisal? "Quiet first, then loud" he had written to Ruge, in response to the latter's request to become involved in the political struggles within Prussia. His disinclination for the political and social struggles of human beings was the very product of his humanism; quiet contemplation first, then loud criticism..... but never action. In philosophical terms, action, for Marx, was the bridge between Feuerbach's abstraction of real humanism and the real possibility of a social humanity. Basically, Feuerbach believed that the human condition could be understood and changed by intellectual activity, namely, the study of human consciousness. Along with Bauer, the essence of his thinking was that consciousness determined being, only *he* stressed the consciousness of real empirical men and women whereas Bauer's man was more an entity of consciousness, of Spirit. Feuerbach applied contemplation to the study of man's consciousness, but being concerned only with the disposition of mind, he removed men and women as living, sensuously acting, responding subjects from the dynamic reality of history and from the history of their own dynamic social reality. Believing that human consciousness had its spiritual heart in *nature* rather than in *society*, real worldly society never appeared to him as the "autonomous constructive force of man"⁴⁶ the result of man's practical activities. His early retirement and disdain for entry into the fray of politics concretely reflects the spirit of his philosophy. For along with his wife and their shared intimacy, he could study society as he saw it theoretically,

in the relationship of his farmworkers to the soil of nature and he to his spouse. Certainly, Feuerbach was deeply concerned about the relationship of human beings to one another and man's relationship to society, only he regarded society as a natural, given reality..... like nature, unchanging, in which human relationships were based on *emotional* rather than *social* necessity. "Feuerbach's whole deduction with regard to the relation of men to one another", said Marx in *The German Ideology*,

"goes only so far as to prove that men need and *always have needed* each other. He wants to establish consciousness of this fact, that is to say, like the other theorists, merely to produce a correct consciousness about an *existing* fact; whereas for the real communist it is a question of overthrowing the existing state of things."⁴⁷

Thus despite the evaluation of Feuerbach by Bauer in 1843/44, Marx certainly did not regard the former as a genuine communist.

If Marx' comprehension of the real philosophical nature of Feuerbach's theory of knowledge and truth enabled him to critically reappraise the value of the latter's critique of Hegel, it was his Paris researches and writing in political economy that enabled him to finally dispose of Feuerbach as an intellectual phenomenon. Marx' 1844 studies in the history of economics enabled him to regard the structure of human social relations as being based upon economic necessity. Human physical need received the social response of technical means, produced and supplied by men; it created a society of men and women who acted socially to create the means to supply their needs. Man's economic activity was his first social act of independence from primordial nature and the foundation of his own social history; it united human need with human social history. This perspective views men and women as social beings who *act* upon the circumstance of their natural environment, upon nature, to forge their *human* society. "All social life", says Marx in his Eighth Thesis, "is essentially *practical*" it has economy as its rational end. By the Spring of 1845, Marx' conception of human social relations, distinct from that of Feuerbach, held human history to be characterized by the purposeful action of men and women on the circumstance of their environment to supply their physical needs. They built the bridge between their physical need in primordial nature and the human society that they established, *by acting, by revolutionising their circumstances*; they operationalised their thought in practice. "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men", said Marx in his Third Thesis. "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*". Here, Marx describes the action of men upon their environment as "revolutionary practice", revolutionary because men actualised in their activity what they thought. This was far removed from Feuerbach's involvement with man's religious mental disposition and anthropomorphic cry to the forests.

Marx' conception of human history as a reflection of the social activity of human beings followed as a logical consequence of his criticism of Feuerbach's abstract and static perspective of human life. At the same time, these Theses unite his criticism of Feuerbach's theory of knowledge with his own theory of history in a general attack on idealism and early materialism. In reply to the age old philosophical question as to whether objective truth could be attributed to human thinking, he said in his Second Thesis, "The question..... 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".⁴⁸ In Marx' materialist conception of history, man's thinking, his knowing, is *completed* by his practical activity.⁴⁹ Human thought and human need found a complementary concrete response in the practical activities of human beings. Human society, and the ensemble of the social relations that men and women created, reflected the social collectivity of their practical activity as individuals who physically responded to their thoughts. Here, man's social humanity results from his desire and ability to change his natural circumstances and thereby change himself; *social humanity* was the standpoint of the new materialism, he declared in his Tenth Thesis, and the social humanity of Marx' materialist conception of history was founded upon human beings who revolutionised their thought in practice, whether patrician or slave, master or journeyman, capitalist or revolutionary proletarian.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx divided the activity of philosophy into two distinct branches, the interpretation of the world and the "dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking". The former, with Bruno Bauer, endeavored to make the world philosophical, to actualise philosophy without transcending it. The latter activity, which Marx declared to be a purely scholastic question *when isolated from practice*, thought it could transcend philosophy by studying man. This second activity, contemplation and intellectual criticism of man and the world, thought it could transcend philosophy without actualising it in the life of men. Despite its orientation towards worldly activity, Feuerbach's own practical activity remained an activity of mind and as such, his humanistic materialism merely became reduced to another mode of interpreting the world, as is the case with Bauer and Criticism. This leads me to Marx' final thesis. The whole point of his criticism of Feuerbach was the that latter believed he could transcend philosophy without giving it practical effect, a point whose origin I have shown above.⁵⁰ "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways" said Marx in his final

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Thesis, "the point is to *change it*".⁵¹ *Philosophy could only be transcended as an interpretive activity by giving interpretation a practical effect in the real world, namely by acting in and upon the real world, by changing it.* It was *this* Thesis that completely separated Marx from Bauer and Feuerbach.

Two years earlier, in his *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx had addressed himself to the "practical party" that, "thought it could transcend philosophy without actualising it". Now, his critical *Theses on Feuerbach* expressed the full understanding he had gained of both Feuerbach's critique of Hegel, and his humanism. Marx certainly regarded Feuerbach's humanism as a *real advance* over Hegel's philosophy of mind and Bauer's Critical Criticism. By the end of 1844 however, he understood that more was needed than just another statement of intention or more adequate interpretation of the world. Interpretation of the world, even prescriptive criticism, was ever bound to fail as a means of changing real conditions. As an activity of worldly contemplation, Feuerbach's humanism began from the standpoint of mind rather than the real possibility of the germs of life, within which existing social conditions lay the *real possibility* of creating a truly human society. Marx' researches and writing in economics, his earlier experience of the character of capitalist production and the social conditions it created in 1844, had given him the understanding that the means for creating a truly human society, or "social humanity" lay in the given conditions of the social order. *Real possibility* was coterminous with real, given social conditions rather than in intellectual contemplation, scholarly criticism and humanistic interpretation, however enlightening (as Feuerbach's grasp of religious alienation certainly was). By the beginning of 1845, Marx held that the means to forge *human* society from given social conditions was that of practice, the revolutionary practice of thought acting upon and revolutionising existing social conditions. With his call for revolutionary practice in his final Thesis, Marx passed once and for all time from *real humanism* to *real possibility* in a materialist conception of history and society.

These critical *Theses on Feuerbach* which end with the clarion call of his materialism signify the final stage of Marx' intellectual relationship to the spiritual content of Hegelian philosophy. In criticising Feuerbach, Marx criticised the earthly humanism of the Hegelian Spirit gone to ground in contemplative materialism, for no sooner had Feuerbach put Hegel's world mind to death, than he became infected by its rapidly rotting corpse. Like Hercules who seared the Hydra's limbs with flame after severing its heads, Marx seared the limbs of Hegelian idealism with the fire of materialism after severing its Critical, humanistic and nihilistic heads,⁵² this searing was part accomplished in *The Holy Family* and finalised in *The German Ideology*.

NOTES

¹ K. Marx *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophies of Nature* in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (English trans.) Vol. 1 Progress Publishers Moscow 1975.

² See K. Marx *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* in *ibid.* Notebook 6 p. 497 "In expounding definite questions of morality.... This has recurred in recent times, due to the operation of a similar law." See also pp. 491-493 *ibid.* "As in the history of philosophy..... The same now with the philosophy of Hegel." "He who does not acknowledge this historical necessity..... and how after Hegel, attempts, most of them abysmally indigent, could be made by more recent philosophers". Marx also spoke of Hegel in the Note on Philosophy that he appended to his dissertation at the end of 1841, in *ibid.* from pp. 86-87 "This duality of philosophical self-consciousness..... I shall completely explain their relation, in part to each other, in part to Hegel's philosophy." etc.

³ For an excellent short discussion of Bruno Bauer see pp. 48-49 in D. McLellan *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* London 1969.

⁴ See D. McLellan *ibid.* pp. 59-63 and 69-73.

⁵ Hess' views were strongly influenced by A. von Cieszkowski whose book, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* Berlin 1839 contrasted philosophy as an activity of mind with thought as a practical worldly activity, a philosophy of action. N. Lobkowitz in his book, *Theory and Practice: The History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* Indiana 1967 gives a concise account of Cieszkowski's influence on Hess, pp. 231-235. Marx, I think, was only influenced by Cieszkowski's 'praxis' through Hess.

⁶ Translated by D. McLellan in *Karl Marx: Early Texts* p. 49 Oxford 1971.

⁷ Students of Marx' early life regard this period of political journalism either as an exercise of careful opportunism (thus O.J. Hammen in *The Young Marx Reconsidered* in *Journal of the History of Ideas* Jan-March 1970) or a time of nebulous idealism. Little thought is given, however, to any analysis of Marx' intellectual development during this time.

⁸ See A. Cornu *The Origins of Marxian Thought* p. 73. Trans. C. Thomas Springfield U.S.A. 1957.

⁹ D. McLellan *Karl Marx: Early Texts* op. cit. p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-105.

¹¹ Describing the activities of two schools, or parties of philosophy, Marx noted that, "The activity of the first takes the form of a critique i.e. philosophy turning itself against the exterior world" "the first, in spite of its inner contradiction, is in general aware of its principle and aim" unlike the second, "As regards content, it is only the liberal party, because it is the party of the concept, which makes any real progress". I have used the translation of Marx' Appended Note in D. McLellan *Karl Marx: Early Texts* op. cit. p. 16. See also *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (English) op. cit. pp. 86-87.

¹² Karl Marx and F. Engels *The Holy Family* p. 114, Moscow 1956.

¹³ *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (English) op. cit. p. 415.

¹⁴ L. Feuerbach *Zur Kritik der "positiven philosophie"* in *Hallische Jahrbucher* December 1838 and *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie* in *Hallische Jahrbucher* Issue 208 30th. August 1839. See also L. Feuerbach *Das Wesen des Christentums* Trans. M. Evans London 1893.

¹⁵ N. Lobkowitz op. cit. p. 222.

¹⁶ See Note 14 above: see also L. Feuerbach *Vorläufige Thesen* etc. in *Sämtliche Werke* Vol. 2 pp. 222-244 and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* Trans. M.H. Vogel with an Introduction, Indianapolis 1966. The effect of Feuerbach's Thesen and Grundsätze on Marx is

commented on by F. Engels in his work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Classical Philosophy* New York 1970. According to Engels, Feuerbach's work was received exuberantly. As Marx and Engels did not become close friends until the summer of 1844, I think that Engels comment about how everyone became Feuerbachians refers more to his own enthusiasm together with that of Hess than Marx' cautious welcome.

¹⁷ This article was written at the end of 1843 and published in the *Deutsche-französische Jahrbucher* February 1844. See Karl Marx *A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Trans. A. Jolin and J. O'Malley Cambridge 1970. This book contains a translation of Marx' article.

¹⁸ L. Feuerbach *Briefwechsel und Nachlass* p. 175 ed. K. Grun Leipzig 1876.

¹⁹ See E. Kamenka *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* p. 26 London 1970.

²⁰ This work comprises a manuscript in the form of an untitled notebook known today as Marx' *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* op. cit.

²¹ Most of Ruge's end of the financial backing for the *Jahrbucher* came from his successful speculation in railway shares.

²² Replying to Bauer's work *The Capacity of the Present Day Jews and Christians to Become Free*. Zurich and Winterthur 1843. Marx argued in his article *Die Judenfrage* that his attitude to the subject of human rights was abstract and non-political. See J. Maguire *Marx' Paris Writings: An Analysis* Dublin 1972 p. 27.

²³ F. Engels *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* in K. Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* Trans. M. Milligan ed. D.J. Struick 1967.

²⁴ M. Hess *On the Essence of Money* written at the end of 1843; see E. Silberner *Moses Hess* Trans. E.J. Brill Leiden 1966.

²⁵ A. Cornu op. cit. p. 84.

²⁶ It is most instructive to precede a reading of Marx' comments on the position of the working class in modern political economy with a consideration of his statements on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat in the article he wrote for Ruge's *Jahrbucher*. Through his reading of Engels' article, Marx saw that the revolutionary potential of the proletariat lay in their immediate relationship to the productive forces of modern political economy as an oppressed class.

²⁷ Lobkowitz op. cit. p. 380.

²⁸ "Hegel thinks all objects only as predicates of Thought which thinks itself" said Feuerbach, whereas "the real relation of thought to being is as follows: being is subject, thought is predicate. Thought proceeds from being, but being does not proceed from thought." L. Feuerbach *Thesen in Sämtliche Werke* Vol. 2 pp. 222-244.

²⁹ *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* op. cit. p. 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 171-173.

³¹ E. Kamenka op. cit. p. 76. For an excellent short discussion of Feuerbach's early relationship to Hegel's philosophy see pp. 69-80.

³² *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* op. cit. p. 180.

³³ *Ibid.* 1959 edition, p. 165.

³⁴ These were written in Brussels between February and April 1845 and are contained in Marx' Notebook of 1844-1847 under the title "*I Concerning Feuerbach*". The title *Theses on Feuerbach* is that of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism USSR and given according to the instruction of Engels' *Introduction* to his work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Classical Philosophy* op. cit. They are contained in Marx-Engels *The German Ideology* pp. 645-647 London 1965.

³⁵ See Karl Marx *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* op. cit. Note 19 p. 136.

³⁶ K. Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* op. cit. No. V p. 646.

³⁷ In F. Engels *On The History of The Communist League, Marx-Engels Selected Works* Vol. 2 London 1962 pp. 338-357.

³⁸ K. Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1967) op. cit. p. 172.

³⁹ *Theses on Feuerbach* op. cit. No. 1 p. 645.

⁴⁰ See *Theses* No. I *ibid.*

⁴¹ Marx makes this judgement on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology* op. cit. p.58 and with reference, I think, to Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums, Vorläufige Thesen und Grundsätze*.

⁴² In N. Rotenstreich *Basic Problems of Marx's Philosophy* p. 70. New York, 1965. See also *The German Ideology* op. cit. pp. 39-48.

⁴³ *Theses on Feuerbach* op. cit. No. VI pp. 646-647.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* No. VII.

⁴⁵ *The German Ideology*, op. cit. pp. 58-59.

⁴⁶ In N. Rotenstreich op. cit. p. 71.

⁴⁷ *The German Ideology* op. cit. p. 54.

⁴⁸ *Theses on Feuerbach* op. cit. No. II, p. 645.

⁴⁹ See *The German Ideology* op. cit. p. 654. On page 16 of his Notebook of 1844-1847 titled *Hegel's Construction of the Phenomenology* Marx wrote, "Your abolition of the imagined object, of the object as an object of consciousness, is identified with the real objective abolition, with sensuous action, practice and real activity as distinct from thinking. (Has still to be developed.)". He was, I maintain, speaking of Feuerbach.

⁵⁰ See footnotes 17 to 19 in the text of this paper.

⁵¹ *Theses on Feuerbach* op. cit. No. XI, p. 647.

⁵² The head of nihilism severed by Marx was that belonging to Max Stirner to whose work, *The Ego and Its Own* Marx devoted the final, largest and most comprehensively critical part of *The German Ideology* manuscript, *Saint Max*.