

FEUERBACH AND THE YOUNG MARX

Studies in Marxist thought have been variously orientated, as they emphasised this or that aspect of the Marxist vision of Man and Life.

For several decades, there has been a noticeable trend to revalorise the early writings of Marx, by drawing attention to the fundamentally anthropological outlook of Marxist Philosophy. On the other hand, particularly in the school of Althusser in France, studies of the structure of Marxist philosophy have highlighted a clear division between the writings of the young Marx and those of his mature years. According to this school, the real "theory" discovered by Marx was a truly scientific theory, limiting itself to a description of the structures of economic, social, political and cultural reality, rather than a theory intent on working out an anthropology of the philosophical type.

It is not, however, my intention to discuss these matters : my subject is the Thought of the Young Marx, and to be more precise, how that thought finds its originality through contact with the philosophy of Feuerbach.

It would be an extremely awkward and difficult task to draw up a complete list of all that influenced Marx : the same, of course, is true of any author whose original thought is inspired by a variety of sources, whilst at the same time it integrates these sources and profoundly modifies them, so as to arrive at a synthesis which is deeply personal.

Briefly then, let me quote LENIN. Writing in 1913, in "Prosvechtchenie", (Education), Lenin sketches the three sources of Marx's thought.

"The genius of Marx was to find an answer to the questions already raised by an advanced society. His doctrine came into being as the direct and immediate continuation of the

doctrines of the most eminent representatives of philosophy, political economy, and socialism. (His doctrine) is the legitimate successor to all that was best in 19th century German philosophy, English political economy, and French socialism."

It seems helpful to add to this quotation a remark of H. ARVON in his little book on Marxism, Arvon is thoroughly familiar with the period he mentions since he has produced a study of Feuerbach and also of Stirner.

"Although there does exist an intermingling of these sources in Marx's thought, we would make a grave mistake if we were to attribute an equal importance to each source. The edifice built by Marx is the result not of the juxtaposition of these different sources, but rather it results from placing one on top of the other, in such a way that it is the source which lies at the base of the edifice which commands and controls the entire structure. And that base is a philosophical one. This is all the more true from the fact that in Marxist thought, neither French socialism, nor English political economy, in their original form, are adjuncts of German philosophy. The Marxist edifice takes shape with both the French and the English ideas accommodated to the Hegelian schema."

It was, in fact, through Lorenzo von Stein's book: "Socialism and Communism in present-day France" that Marx and his first introduction to French socialism, as also through the works of Moses Hess entitled: "Liberty, one and total", "The Philosophy of action", "Socialism and Communism". It is, on the one hand, in Hegelian terms that von Stein expresses the class warfare between bourgeoisie and proletariat, those two classes emerging from the Revolution. Hess, on the other hand, tends to introduce a common denominator into the early beginnings of French Communism and the early beginnings of German atheism.

As for English political economy, Marx was introduced to this through an article of Engels, his future friend and collaborator, entitled "A critical sketch of political economy".

But let us now look at the philosophical inspiration behind Marx's thought, drawing attention particularly to Feuerbach's contribution, and Marx's attitude towards Feuerbach.

Karl Marx, like Feuerbach, began by sitting at the feet of Hegel, —or to be more exact—since Hegel had died five years before Marx's arrival in Berlin—by becoming a disciple of the disciples of Hegel. Indeed, at this period, almost the whole of German thought revolved around the exceptional genius of Hegel.

The discussion first opens in the domain of Religious and Political thought.

Hegel had, in fact, worked out a philosophy, the basic inspiration of which was Religion, and more specifically, the Christian Religion. The "absolute knowledge" which Hegel describes is nothing more than a total grasp of the Christian Revelation which goes beyond imaginary figures and historical representations. These latter are to act as a foundation and essential point of reference for the grasp of Christian Revelation. To be a philosopher, in the Hegelian manner, means entering into a realm of knowledge which integrates the whole of human reality, including the religious dimension, in a "superior" form. Such a philosophy not only insists on the importance of religious data (and especially Christian Revelation) in order to achieve an understanding of man and history, but it further claims not to restrict itself to a religious attitude as such, because such an attitude has not yet become conscious of the provisional and limited nature of its knowledge.

As for Hegel's political thought, this is expressed above all in a conception of the State coming to the relief of the Church, understood as the communion of believers. Just as religious faith must pass into philosophical knowledge, so also must the religious

community pass beyond itself to become the political community, within the State, which is thus the final force which brings the whole of humanity together.

Among Hegel's successors (after his death) two very marked and strictly opposed tendencies appeared. They are called the "Hegelian right" and the "Hegelian left". The "right" upheld the authenticity and value of religious data, in their own order, and insisted on the absolute nature of the State. The Hegelian "left", on the other hand, saw no value in a religious universe and treated it more and more as a myth and an illusion: with regard to the absoluteness of the State, the Left offered first resistance and soon a feeling of revolt.

On the one hand, we find Strauss and his "Life of Jesus" in which all the positive reality of Christianity is reduced to the status of a myth. Along the same lines, Bruno Bauer works out a philosophical interpretation which reduces the Christian assertions to nothing. As to Feuerbach, he brings about a purely anthropological transformation of Christianity and religion.

Marx is soon involved in the dynamic group of the Hegelian Left in Berlin. It is there that he meets, among others, Feuerbach. For quite a time Marx falls under his sway, being particularly impressed by Feuerbach's purely anthropological transformation of religious reality. In his enthusiasm for Feuerbach, he even writes—playing on the name "Feuerbach" which means "the stream" (*Bach*) of "Fire" (*Feuer*).

"The only way to Truth and Freedom is through the Feuerbach. Feuerbach, or the stream of fire is the purgatory of our present world."

The Feuerbach of the "Essence of Christianity"

I cannot obviously give here a complete exposition of Feuerbach's thought, especially if this were to involve the different stages of his evolution. Feuerbach's philosophy, indeed, underwent different orientations at different times in his intellectual career.

One might, however, say, in general, that Feuerbach the religious man, very quickly experienced what he thought was an incompatibility between Christianity and the reality of the world. But this incompatibility is expressed along three different lines of thought, the second of which, alone, interests us directly, since this is the one which attracted Marx before he rejected it and treated it as outmoded.

Feuerbach's first orientation in his critique of religion is still metaphysical. Starting from Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach believes himself forced to the conclusion that this philosophy has nothing Christian or religious in its content. Fidelity to the Hegelian inspiration (Feuerbach's first wish) would imply letting Hegel's religious inspiration disappear altogether—a source of inspiration which Hegel had wished to adhere to till the very end. Hence forward, it is "reason" with its infinite universality, which is the absolute according to which all reality must be measured. Hegel, indeed, made this reason operative within absolute knowledge. Now, however, we are dealing with a "reason", no longer animated by the whole current of religious revelation, but, a "reason", simply explainable in and by itself along. This first philosophical synthesis of Feuerbach considerably impoverished the inheritance left by Hegel.

Feuerbach, dispensing with, or losing the Hegelian reference to the absolute spirit, inevitably moved more and more in the direction of an inflexible anthropological perspective, completely closed to any reality outside of man.

These are the salient traits of Feuerbach's thought from 1839 to 1843. "The Essence of Christianity", published in 1841 is the key-book of this second period. This is the work of Feuerbach which has had the most direct and lasting influence. Marx, in particular, was affected by this book, before finally rejecting it and going beyond it. Let us look, then, a little more closely at the philosophy of Feuerbach, during these years.

Before doing this, however, may we sketch the new direction taken by Feuerbach from 1844 onwards? Going beyond a humanism, which in a certain sense was still a "spiritualistic" humanism, Feuerbach moves more and more resolutely in the direction of materialism. This will be "the sensitive sphere" of reality which will provide the global and definitive explanation of the entire universe. Everything will be explained in terms of this sphere: not just the world of knowledge, but also the world of feeling, and particularly, the world of love. In this last period of his philosophical reflections, Feuerbach develops ideas completely in keeping with the principles of positivism.

Let us now return to what one might consider as Feuerbach's most influential contribution to the history of thought: I mean his staunchly humanistic and atheistic philosophy.

The fundamental concept, which Feuerbach refers to, in his desire to construct a non-transcendental anthropology, is the concept of "the human race", or of "generic being" (*Gattungswesen*). This is the concept which, in the humanist perspective which he wishes to draw, represents the ultimate and absolute point of reference. Let us clarify the way in which Feuerbach believes he must have recourse to this "generic being". The latter is the result of two types of facts or options. The first fact is that of the human individual's insuperable limitations. It is impossible for man not to be aware of the limitations which he carries within himself. Such limitations are apparent in space, in the time of his life, in the possibilities of that life—all this is verifiable by each human being within himself in the realm of knowledge, as well as in human will and human love. The second fact, which is rather an option, consists in the refusal of all reality or being which is transcendental. The God of religious thought, says Feuerbach, inhabits the consciousness of man. He cannot thus be transcendent to man, rather He must be connatural, and if one may say so, co-measurable to him.

God, then, is of the same nature as human reality; there can be no God except a human one. But, since God has always been understood as the unlimited, infinite, absolute being, and since the individual human being is bound to recognise his limitation, finitude, relativity, this human god cannot either be identified with individual man. He is in fact nothing less than the totality of mankind, "the human race", "generic being" (*Gattungswesen*) in as much as the latter is made up of the infinite sum of limited individuals.

By putting "the human race", the totality of mankind in the place of God, Feuerbach believes that he explains both the fact that God is measurable by man (since God is known by man) and the fact that God is beyond the individual man, since the "human race" includes and goes beyond all limited individuality. The Totality of Truth, Goodness, Love, that is what God is, in religious thought: and that is what the Totality of mankind is according to Feuerbach.

The individual human being as he relates to the generality of man (which is what happens for example, in specific encounters between the I and the You) opens himself to the true absolute, and thus, within the limits proper to his being, he becomes infinite.

Christianity has already sought a solution to this problem. By saying that Jesus is both man and God, and that He is the object of religious worship, it explains that the infinite can be both present to man as well as beyond him. But (according to Feuerbach) the contradiction which lies at the heart of this explanation is this: when Christianity thinks it can present, under the traits of a particular human individual, the whole of human reality, this is impossible, since this exists only at the level of the entire human race. Jesus, from the fact that he is man, and an individual man, is limited in space and time: his capacities, like those of any other man, are limited. No amount of magic illusion on the part of religion can divide this individual in two,

and render him infinite and absolute. We must shake off this religious illusion by becoming aware of the contradiction inherent in the Christian religion.

It must, however, be acknowledged that Christianity has rendered great service, even eminent service to man as the religion of the God-man, it has prepared the way for the demystification of religion. And the humanism of Feuerbach will complete this.

There is a lot more to be said about *The Essence of Christianity*, and the other more or less contemporaneous works of Feuerbach. His effort is not only to go beyond what Marx will call religious "alienation", but also to explain why and how such an "alienation" was ever possible in the first place. His explanation involves not just the taking to pieces of the whole "mechanism" of the religious world as such, but also the task of clarifying all the elements which make up this religious world.

Henceforward, the question is to become men, and nothing more than men. The world of religion has concealed from man the riches which he actually carries within himself. In this way, and through the influence of religion, there has grown up a humanity tied, bound, enslaved, incapable of reaching freedom, because freedom comes from God and cannot be exercised except in reference to Him.

An end, then, to all religious transcendentalism : let man be restored to himself : to his humble condition of being an individual : but also, let all the riches of his generic reality be restored to him !

It is not difficult to see how characteristic such a conception is of many humanistic currents of thought. It is not at all certain for instance, that thinkers such as Sartre so close to us in time, and the movement of French existentialism springing from him, have added anything new to the atheism of Feuerbach. The latter laid the foundations of a conception of man whose only reference was to "absolute" mankind (to what extent can this word "absolute" still be meaningfully used ?). A conce-

ption of the creative liberty of God and of the freedom of man is here at stake,—a conception which conceives of these freedoms as limitative and exclusive of each other, rather than as two forces bringing each other to greater activity. A conception of the individual person and his relationship with the totality of humanity is also at stake, in which the abstract universality of humanity seems to be more important than the most personal singularity, and, in a sense, the most “ absolute ” singularity of each person.

Marx and Feuerbach

But the subject of our expose was, in fact, the relationship between Marx and the philosophy of Feuerbach. What were Marx's reactions to the “ Essence of Christianity ” ? When this book was published, Marx was only 23 years of age, a young man, still searching for his identity, still trying to clarify his ideas. At first, he adheres, and apparently without any reservations, to Feuerbach.

Unlike Feuerbach, however, who had a truly religious sense, Marx seems never to have had any religious temperament, in the personal sense. His family was a Protestant—liberal one whose tenets bordered on mere rationalism, and it was without any kind of personal anguish or painful personal struggle that he discovered he was an atheist. When, in 1841, Feuerbach's “ Essence of Christianity ” was published, Karl Marx was finishing his doctoral thesis with the profession of faith of Prometheus : “ In a word, I have nothing but hatred for all Gods ”.

Religion for Marx is a mere “ alienation ”, an “ opium of the people ”. Marx calls upon man to pass beyond resignation. Resignation is an attitude which is based upon a transcendental justification of the appalling conditions in which large numbers of humanity have to live.

At this stage of his reflection, Marx still clings to Feuerbach's synthetic affirmation : “ when man is poor he invents a rich god ”. Man, in fact has become impoverished by giving all to God, and it is only by re-appropriating his riches that he can

become himself again. It is only by the death of God, and by man becoming, in some sense, his own absolute, that he can exist really and fully. For Marx, Feuerbach appears as a precious ally against Hegelian transcendentalism, a thinker who has found the way out of the idealistic chimera of the transcendental world.

Nevertheless, it did not take Marx very long to realise that the philosophy of his contemporary—and for a time his friend—L. Feuerbach, was inadequate as far as Marx was concerned.

From 1842 onwards, he takes a very different direction from that of Feuerbach. He becomes more and more sensitive and influenced by the social-economic problems of the period, and more open to the influence of the French socialists.

To his friend Ruge, he writes :

“The one essential point in which I disagree with Feuerbach’s aphorism is this : he attaches too much importance to nature and not enough to politics. In my view, present day philosophy can succeed only if it finds an ally in politics.”

It is on this essential point that the gap between Marx and Feuerbach was to widen. Whilst maintaining Feuerbach’s “Demythification-critique” (centred on religion), Marx becomes more and more conscious of the need not merely to apply man’s critical faculties to “heaven”, but more precisely to this “earth” of ours. What is important, for Marx, is to reveal, condemn, suppress and finally replace the actual concrete conditions of life which have forced men to seek a refuge from their misery in religion.

Marx’s criticism of Feuerbach is, at first, implicit, but as time goes on, it becomes more and more explicit and is expressed more and more succinctly. As far as Marx is concerned the mere transformation of religion into philosophy, even into a humanist philosophy, falls short of the mark. What is required, according to Marx, is that we install ourselves in an economic and social position. In such a position, the present anachronism of man can be abolished.

It is only by transforming the economic, social and political factors of man's life that religious "alienation" can be abolished and man can thus be given back his dignity and his freedom. The Philosopher, alone, by himself is inadequate for this task. He must have as his ally a force which is capable of "shaking up" the social-economic-political world, and forcing it into his line of action. Where is the philosopher to find this efficacious force? According to Marx, in the proletariat, which is a revolutionary force.

As to the concept of "generic being" or "human race"—which we saw was of central importance in Feuerbach's anthropological criticism of religion—Marx takes it up and uses it, more and more, along the lines of his own thought. This concept (of "generic being", "human race") in Marxist thought, tends to apply more and more to humanity, conceived of in terms of the concrete realities of man as a social, economic, political being, rather than a concept which abstractly includes the totality of humanity, composed of countless individuals.

The famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, (written by Marx in 1845 and published by Engels in 1888) will throw some light both on the meaning and the far reaching effects of Marx's option for the concrete reality of man as a social, economic, political reality, rather than the abstraction of Feuerbach's Totality of mankind. There are 11 of these theses. I shall enunciate them, rapidly, and try to point out their precise meaning and intent.

Thesis 1.

The weakness inherent in all philosophies of materialism is this: Concrete reality, perceptible by the senses, is perceived only by the senses, and as an object. It is not perceived subjectively, as a human activity of which man is sensibly aware. Feuerbach, unaware of human activity in this sense, cannot therefore, grasp the notion of revolution and its practical reality. Genuine human action is both critical and practical. That is why it is revolutionary.

Thesis 2.

Can the human mind reach objective truth? This is not a theoretical question but a practical one. In other words, truth is to be found not in conceptualisations, but in action, which has its idea of truth and makes it a reality.

Thesis 3.

That kind of materialist teaching which maintains that man can be changed by his situation or circumstances, his education, etc. is forgetful of the fact that educators have themselves to be educated.

Thesis 4.

Feuerbach has the merit of bringing religion down to earth, down to its real temporality, down to its roots and foundation in time. But he does not show, and he does not understand why this temporal reality of religion has led to religious escapism, nor, consequently does he put forward a solution for the very necessary revolution in religion.

Thesis 5.

Feuerbach, in keeping with his abstract thought, resorts to intuition. But intuition is abstract since it is not knowledge connected with man's active transformation of the world.

Thesis 6.

Feuerbach makes little of man's religious experience. But the "human race" or "generic being" is not to be understood as an abstraction inherent to each individual human being. In fact, what matters is the totality of social relations. According to Karl Marx, men are not linked by a common nature, but through the reality of working together.

Thesis 7.

Feuerbach has failed to perceive that man's religious experience is bound up with a facet of his social life. Religion does not

come from some abstract conceptualising of man : it comes from the practical reality of men living in a given and determined social situation.

Thesis 8.

Man's entire social life is essentially practical : To deny this essentially practical aspect of man's social life leads to the mystical and illiisory notions of religion and philosophy.

Thesis 9.

The final result of Feuerbach's materialistic outlook is a view of human beings, isolated in their individuality, juxta-posed as it were, and as it is in bourgeois society, where the relationship between individuals remains at a purely abstract level.

Thesis 10.

The ideas of the materialist philosophers of the past find their realisation in present day bourgeois society : the ideas of modern materialism are represented by human society as such.

Thesis 11.

The only thing that the philosophers have done has been to give a conceptualised interpretation of the world. They have missed the point. The point is to *Change The World*, in practice.

In these 11 theses, there are many views which diverge from those of Feuerbach; and some are fairly basic. We feel that these divergencies can be reasonably described in two points:—

- (a) On the one hand, a perspective of a world and humanity, as a concrete reality, whose future is determined and conditioned by economic factors as well as social relationships.
- (b) On the other hand, there is an insistence on the need for commitment to practical revolutionary *action*. Such action also justifies and gives authenticity to the theory which lies behind it. Marx insists on a total commitment to revolution which justifies not simply the bringing about of revolution but also the understanding of why revolution is necessary.

In Marx's view, it is the philosophers, Feuerbach among others, who are in fact "alienated". What is philosophy's solution, finally, to the many contradictions of human life? A conceptual one. A solution which is, in fact, un-real, in the sense of being disconnected from practical reality. It is not a genuine, living, real, solution. Man has been alienated by his day-to-day concrete, practical existence in the kind of society we know. This has led to his inability to liberate himself except in the illusory fantasies of...philosophy. Why has Philosophy enjoyed such esteem in Germany? Why has it been such an illusory, inefficacious, false substitute for man's true freedom? The answer is simple. Because the economic, social and political situation of Germany is such that it excludes, definitely, all hope of man's liberation. Marx does not spare Feuerbach and the Hegelian Left. All that their lengthy philosophical ruminations can achieve is a liberation of man which exists only "in their minds".

There is only one way out of this kind of impasse, and it is imperative that we take it. It consists in active criticism of the profane world whilst at the same time revolutionising it. To the theory of socio-economics must be added the practice of the same.

As to the "alienation" brought about by religion, and Feuerbach's criticism thereof, the same thing applies. As far as Marx is concerned, the atheism of his friend Feuerbach is too purely speculative. It is thus an important atheism quite incapable of abolishing the phenomenon of "alienation" brought about by religion. The "generic man" of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* is idealistic, unreal, and as lacking in concrete application as the heavenly God of religion. Henceforward, for Marx, it is not enough to consider religion merely as an intellectual illusion: we must go beyond that and recognize it for what it is, namely an intrinsically falsified manner of human existence.

The purpose of this denunciation of the illusions of religion is to draw attention to the real cause of man's "alienation". The

criticism of religion, far from sufficing, must find its explanation in further stages of criticism. A theoretical anthropology is not enough to resist a theocentrically based philosophy of escapism. What is needed is an anthropocentrism which is both realistic and capable of transforming the very conditions of human existence.

It is certain that Marx's option for concrete "praxis", and his sense of the concrete links which constitute social reality, explain not merely the force of conviction of his philosophy, but also its power of making things happen, its power of transformation, of revolution.

In their strong points, these two options seem to me, paradoxically, to link up with two key lines in the Christian Faith: on the one hand, the notion of effective love linked to knowledge, of a love which is committed, concretely in precise works and actions, and which makes possible the true knowledge depending on the eyes of the faith; on the other hand, the notion of incarnation as constitutive of human life, as lived in the concrete, where each individual is linked with all others by the most concrete conditions of his life and of theirs. It is in this way that the community of believers in Christ is to be understood and lived.

But obviously, since Marx's point of departure was a ready-made criticism of religion, an elimination of the notion of divine transcendence, he does not succeed in finding the original Christian source of the two options he made. The ideas of Christianity, as they pass into atheistic systems, become as Chesterton has it, completely mad. In my opinion, an enormous gap, not to say chasm, separates Teilhard de Chardin's "divine milieu" made up by the Christian world with its Incarnation-perspective, from Marx's uniquely "human milieu". The latter, from the fact of its uniquely human aspect is essentially precarious, vacillating. But this is all that Marx's philosophy of social reality is finally left with. Another great gap separates the workings of the Spirit

of God from Marx's revolutionary praxis. The God, who is love, transforms the face of the earth in proportion as men give themselves to the strength of that love; whereas the criterion of Marx's praxis (seen in the perspective of class warfare) is intrinsically opposed to the realisation of unity which it professes to promote.

These few thoughts are merely signposts towards further dialogue. My real intention, in this expose, was to suggest directions, or open up ways for further dialogue, but dialogue which will be lucid and above all respectful of the thought of Karl Marx himself, and of Marxists everywhere.

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