

**KARL MARX'S' THESES ON FEUERBACH':  
TOWARDS AN ANTI - HERMENEUTIC STUDY.**

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Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' are eleven small notes written in 1845 and theoretically spaced as the mediating text between the 1844 philosophy of alienation and *The German Ideology* (1845 -6) that lays the foundations for the theory of historical materialism. Its importance lies as an epistemically mediating work that articulates the Marxist conception of humanity and praxis, as well as poses the question of the Marxist subject that is able to have dialogue with classical German philosophy in particular and the history of philosophy in general.

Louis Althusser had described the 'Theses on Feuerbach' as the few lightning flashes that announce a major event in philosophy, breaking the night of an idealist past by glimpsing at the new world through the discovery of an unknown continent of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This metaphor of the lightning flash has since become the signifying zone that lays bare the birth of the new philosophy of Marxism. Yet the paradox is that this new world found in the eleven theses would be concealed in the mist of diametrically opposed and numerous displaced readings.

The principal theme stated is of interpretation and change. Consider Marx : " The philosophers have only *interpreted* ( *interpretiert* ) the world in various ways, the point however is to *change* ( *verändern* ) it."<sup>2</sup> Two distinct epistemes emerge from the site of change : Gramsci's *philosophy of praxis* and Althusser's *different practice of philosophy*. Despite the great stress that post

Marx-Marxism has laid on these theses, the epistemological mechanisms of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' would not be examined.

The task of this paper is to explore the very mechanism of the eleven theses and relate these with Marx's critique of estranged significations. Principally the paper inquires into

- (1) the nature of change, truth and interpretation in the theses,
- (2) The relation between sensuous human activity (*sinnlich - menschliche Tätigkeit*) and reality (*die Wirklichkeit*) appearing in the object - form (*der Form des Objekts*),
- (3) the structures of theory and praxis announced since the 1843 - 4 *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, and
- (4) interpretation as the hermeneutical estranged gaze of reified labour.

There are two displaced sites functioning in post- Marx-Marxism. The first deals with the theory - praxis dialectic. Thus Marxism has hitherto asked what is theory and praxis, but it has tended not to probe in depth on the liberating meaning of Marx's conception of praxis with specific reference to the questions of " form of the *object* " and " sensuous human activity "; and has not asked why Feuerbachian anthropology regards praxis as a *mere* " form of appearance " (*Erscheinungsform*). It has tended not to inquire into knowledge in relation to humanity's *being-with-objects* and consequently why sensuous reality appears in *object-form*. It is at this nodal juncture where one inquires into Marx's assertion that both materialism and idealism displace real action. The ' Theses on Feuerbach ' is an examination of the conditions of the possibilities of praxis. In raising the question of praxis this text becomes the mediating zone between the 1844 works on alienation and the production of historical knowledge in *Capital*.

The second displaced site reads Marx's works according to the logic of self-sufficient endogamy. Thus Althusser in the quest for the exemplaric Marxist text would fracture Marx's works according to the celebrated *epistemological break*.<sup>3</sup> In this Althusserian episteme the theses become the midwife that ruptures the scientific Marx from the embryo of the ideological Marx of 1844. This self

- sufficient endogamous reading would give rise to two antagonistic schools of thought :

(1) the structuralists who seek the exemplaric text devoid of all Hegelian and Feuerbachian remnants,

(2) The historicists and humanists, most notably the post-Lukacsian thinkers that read the complete history of Marx's thought in terms of the 1844 problematic of alienation.

It is with reference to these two distinct schools of thought that our analytics of the theses proceeds. In contrast to the endogeneous textuality we present the questions of interpretation and change in Marx's episteme that runs from the 1844 critique of alienation to *Capital*.

Firstly we refer the question of change (*Veränderung*) with the logic of the *Aufhebung* ( sublation-supersession - transcendence ) and *Verwirklichung* ( realisation ) of philosophy stated in the 1843-4 critique of Hegel. <sup>4</sup> We shall stress the two German original terms *Aufhebung* and *Verwirklichung* in order to highlight their importance as they emerge from classical German philosophy. It is with this young Marxist theme in mind that three other sites are discovered :

- (1) Philosophy as onto-theology and the hegemony of estranged significations in the history of class societies,
- (2) The philosophical discovery of the rational kernel hidden in the mystical shell, explicitly stated in the 1873 Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, VOL. I, where Marx develops his theory of reading Hegel, and,
- (3) The political economy of use-value, value and exchange - value that relates itself to the linguistics of referent, signifier and signified, and the Lacanian psycho-analysis of the real, imaginary and symbolic. It is the *combination* of all these sites *working together* that Marx's conceptions of praxis and change fully reveals itself. It must be noted that a simple binary opposition between theory and praxis is not recognised by Marx. Thus it is not the case that philosophy has hitherto dealt with theory, the point is to apply

this theory into reality. One recalls Marx, "to develop a science by criticism . . . . . is an altogether different thing from applying an abstract ready made system of logic . . . . . " <sup>5</sup> . Thus there is no instrumental rationality where pure reason is applied onto practical reason. Nor is praxis defined as what the Young Hegelian August Von Cieszkowski called " post-theoretical praxis ". <sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the theory-praxis dialectic is *complexly and differentiatedly structured*. Its evenness and unevenness works in a combined and disjoint manner. To talk of a "complexly and differentiatedly structured logic " is to stress that there is no even relation between theory and praxis. Both theory and praxis have manifold structures, each continuously in a state of perpetual becoming.

For Marx, knowledge is not posed in terms of the dualistic site of theory and praxis. Neither is it posed as an identity of theory and praxis. On the contrary, the logic of the sites of *complex differences* would be the answer to the questions of praxis and change grounded in the critique of contemplation and interpretation.

The dominant question running in the works of Marx is : how are discourses dominated by idealist signifiers ? Now it is imperative to understand Marx's claim in the first thesis that both idealism and materialism are the groundworks of idealist significations. The importance of Hegel and Feuerbach is that nodal points are found where the possibilities of the meaning of idealist significations are decoded. Because discourses are surrounded by the aura of the *ideal*, deconstructing, the *real* is largely left suspended. With Marx's reading of Hegel however, the storm and stress of idealism surface and the tensions and conflicts repressed in the archives of the idealist text surface. Cracks emerge in the master idealist Hegel where the double sites - the mystical shell and rational kernel - are made to function.

Keeping the question of the mystical and rational in mind, we relate change ( *Veränderung* ) of the eleventh thesis to the *Aufhebung* (sublation ) and *Verwirklichung* (realisation ) of philosophy. The new philosophy has to be read in terms of this dialectic of *aufheben* and *verwirklichen*. Yet we disagree

with the traditional workings of the sublation-realisation dialectic. Principally this dialectic is understood as the sublation of philosophy in theory and its realisation in practice. Matters may not be all that simple.

On the contrary the logic of complexly - differentiated site shall claim that all four domains outlined above : (1) *Aufhebung - Verwirklichung* of philosophy. (2) Philosophy as onto - theology, (3) rational - mystical dialectic and (4) the political economy of use-value, value and exchange - value analysed together in its concreteness shall be able to illuminate Marx's conceptions of interpretation and change. Principally the *Aufhebung* of philosophy is the mediation towards the site of estranged discourses. It studies the genealogy of estranged and contemplative discussive practices.

That is why it is imperative to state the paradox that Marx does not understand philosophy as a mere contemplative text, but an experimenting field where in humanity labours with truth (*Wahrheit*). In *Capital* the human being appears as a tool making animal, a being - with - tools.<sup>7</sup> With these tools humanity chips out the untruth clustered together as " form of the object ". The epistemological mechanism of the eleven theses and the workings of Marx's production of knowledge follow.

## II

These principal categories appear :

reality ( *Wirklichkeit* ), real ( *Wirklich* ) and work ( *wirken* ). Reality ( *Wirklichkeit* ) is a product of work ( *wirken* ). In the first thesis Marx says that materialism sights reality appearing as "form of the *object* " and praxis as " form of appearance ". Now these two ideal signifiers : *object - form* and *appearance - form* displace the subject working with truth. In this object world the subject is devoid of tools. The subject also loses its sensuous activity. The sole reality available in contemplation ( *Anschauung* ),

Thus the first thesis traces the chief defect of the history of materialism, Feuerbach included, as presenting " the thing ( *Gegenstand* ), reality ( *Wirklichkeit* ), Sensuousness ( *Sinnlichkeit* ) . . . . . only in the form of the

object ( *Form des Objekts* ) or of contemplation ( *Anschauung* ), but not as human sensuous activity, praxis, not subjectively. " 8 In this estranged dilemma the subject regress into the " imaginary world" ( 4th thesis ) of " abstract thinking " ( 5th thesis ). The world is now the world of contemplation and object ( *Objekt* ), appearance ( *Schein* ) and filth ( *Schmutz* ) ( 1<sup>st</sup> thesis )

In this paradoxical field Marx works out his epistemology. The episteme of the theses not only chides philosophy for idle theoretism and calling them to arm themselves with the weapons of praxis. This anti - hermeneutic work claims that the very mode of philosophy is constituted within idealist significations. Strange then that orthodox Marxism would follow the logic of idealist significations. Engel's *Feuerbach and the End of classical German Philosophy* and the works of Plekhenov shall be laying the foundations of *ideological philosophies* within Marxism. Ideological philosophies operate in terms of an inward exchange between signifier and signified. The historical referent is missing from ideological philosophy. Thus questions are raised in terms of Being - Consciousness- Matter-Substance-Presence etc. Its chief functions are antihistorical hypostatisations and transfigurations. Althusser had understood this issue and called it " philosophical ideology ". 9

On the other hand the eleventh thesis shows a rigorous difference between ideological philosophy and historical mutations. A historical mutation is that ( to recall Walter Benjamin ) which " blows open the continuum of history". And this mode of knowledge is constituted within both pure and practical reason. To recall the second thesis, in praxis the truth ( *Wahreit* ) must be proved. There are two significant parts of this thesis :

- (1) objective truth ( *gegenstandliche Wahrheit* ) is a question of praxis, and
- (2) isolating the question of the reality ( *Wirklichkeit* ) or non-reality of thinking from praxis is a scholastic question ( *scholastische Frage* ). 10

From both these aspects of the second thesis it is clear that Marx is working on the questions of *objectivity* and *praxis* in Hegel and Feuerbach. Both objectivity and praxis are liberative categories for Marx. Whilst both these are raised by Hegel and Feuerbach they relapse as *estranged signifiers*. On the other hand Marx consistently mentions deconstructing the reified referent before

having dialogue with *estranged signifiers* located as the "purely scholastic question". And Marx claims in 1844 that this grand deconstructionist gesture is carried out in the paradigm of an *expressionist philosophy*. Thus the Marxist "objective" and "praxis" are moulded in the labour of expressionism. In section III we shall highlight Marx's *philosophy of expressionism*.

On the other hand the non-expressive site can only be an estranged scholastic possibility. It is here that we must emphasize that Marx is drawing out lines of demarcation in order to demonstrate the difference between the emancipatory and the reified. Whilst sensuousness, objectivity and praxis are liberative; scholasticism and interpretation are enslaved reifications.

In the third fourth and fifth thesis Marx shows how a schism takes place in which philosophical arguments are constituted in duplicated, imaginary and abstract worlds. Interpretation is the culmination of the logic of this *duplicated imaginary*. In this strategic zone one recalls another grand gesture - this time from *The German Ideology* - where philosophy is said to have no history.<sup>11</sup>

It was Althusser who had worked on this irony. Recall Althusser: philosophy is nothing but repetition of two fundamental tendencies (materialism/idealism). Philosophy is consequently the *Gestaltung* of repetition: "history of philosophy is merely the history of these forms. . . . . to become a *game for nothing*. Ultimately, philosophy has no history, philosophy is that strange theoretical site where really nothing happens, nothing but this repetition of nothing."<sup>12</sup> As philosophy leads nowhere, Althusser calls it (after Dietzgen and Heidegger) *Holzwege*: Paths leading nowhere.

That is why the young Marx in 1843-4 wrote that the *Aufhebung* of this pathless philosophy cannot be act of negation of philosophy by merely uttering angry phrases and turning one's back on philosophy. The *Aufhebung* is carried out through the act of "practical overturning" (*praktischen Umsturz*).<sup>13</sup> This overturning method is a process carried out in actuality. It dismantles the imaginary and symbolic worlds to reach the concealed archaeological site of sensuous reality.

Despite Derrida's criticism of translating *Umsturz* as "subversion" instead of the traditional rendering of "overturning"<sup>14</sup>, one ought to stress the

subvertive aspects in Marx's notion of "real, sensuous activity" ( 1st thesis ). *Real action* thus qualifies Marx's other great methodological remark of *making Hegel stand on his feet*. When Marx works out Feuerbach's *Umkehrungsmethode* as a real critique of idealist significations the epistemic aspects of inversion, transformation, overturning, subversion are clearly outlined.

It is in this way that the praxical aspect of real sensuous activity comes to the forefront. The master idealist Hegel has to be deconstructed on the site of *real praxis*. *Real praxis* claims that the battle has to be fought not with *abstract theoria* but with *alienated praxis*. Thus in 1843 Marx distinguishes two forms of praxis<sup>15</sup> : alienated ( constituted in the binding zones of value and exchange - value, signifier and signified, imaginary and symbolic ) and de-alienated ( use - value, referent and the real ).

In this way Marx challenges the dualistic schizzy splitting of discourses into theory and praxis. On the other hand Marx insists that philosophy is the narrative of fragmentation and splits. Hegel earlier had taken up the challenge of reading this story of the split (*Spaltung*). In fact he celebrates this *Spaltung*. But the celebration of this act is constituted within the theory of contradiction (*Widerspruch*) that lives in the life- world of the "whole".

For Marx the principal question is : how does one avoid all these fractured estranged discourses without regressing into monistic metaphysics ? How is the dream world of the *Holzwege* overcome ? What is the nature of the subject postulated in the first thesis when Marx claims that materialism has ignored subjectivity ? And why does this paper claim that the subject found by hermeneutics is an infantile disordered subject more akin to Judge Schreber's disjunctive hallucinations as outlined by Freud's case study on psychosis ?<sup>16</sup>

### III

Hermeneutics is essentially the critique of the " structure " dominated problematic. For example the structuralist anthropologist Levi - Strauss talks of a " complete system " to be presented in terms of " *Unconscious* infrastructure " and " *general laws* ".<sup>17</sup> Likewise Piaget says that the concept structure signifies a " self - regulating " system that denotes three key ideas, (1) totality, (2)



transformation, and ( 3 ) self-regulation. <sup>18</sup> The logic of structuralism become even more transparent when one considers Durkheim who talks of considering " *Social facts as things*", and the most important characteristics of a " thing" is the impossibility of its modification by a single effort of the will. In fact these " things " determined the will "from without ; they are moulds in which actions are inevitably shaped ". <sup>19</sup>

Now these methodological remarks are important in understanding : how the classical hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Weber, would influence Feuerbach, Lukacs and Habermas would start from a critique of abstract structures, only to follow the pattern of these abstractions.

Even post-Marxism poses the question of praxis in abstract terms. On the one hand one wants to put " the will at the base of philosophy " (Gramsci ), on the other hand one understands the will as the " bearer " (*Träger* ) of the scientific structures of history : productive forces-relations of production ( Althusser ).

In contemporary discourses this aporia can be traced to Dilthey who makes a methodological distinction between the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften* ), Whilst the latter is said to deal with law like regularities in the natural world, it is the task of the *Geisteswissenschaften* to grasp the *meaning of the human life - world*. Likewise Dilthey's colleague in the Heidelberg School, Weber introduced the method of the *Verstehen* hermeneutic as the discursive practice for sociology. Thus sociology is an " interpretative understanding of social action. " Further : in " ' action ' is included all human behaviour when and in so far as the acting individual attaches subjective meaning to it. " <sup>20</sup>

Yet this subject and consequent subjective meanings emerging thereafter would not be a redeeming factor that would be able to critique the reification of positivism.

On the contrary the hermeneutical subject would be a *transcendent subject* refusing to encounter the real world. The subject and the real world would lie in diametrically opposed worlds of *Geist* and *Nature*. The *interpretive* subject is thus different from the *real sensuous subject* of Marx. In 1844 Marx

had outlined his conception of the subject as an "objective being" (*gegenstandliche Wesen*), a being that objectifies itself in the world<sup>21</sup>. The subject defined as an *objective being* does not epistemologically split itself from the world, whether in the structuralists sense of reading "history as a process without a subject", positivism's search for "objective laws independent of the subject" or the hermenutical *Geisteswissenschaften's* solipsist closure of the subject.

It is at this nodal point where one outlines the mechanisms that explain how interpretation has become the dominant discourse in the history of philosophy. Interpretation operates on the site of the "alien object" (*fremde Gegenstand*) not the "real object", thus its mode of functioning is at the level of "estranged objectivity" (*entfremdeten Gegenstandlichkeit*) and not at the level of "objectivity as such" (*Gegenstandlichkeit als solcher*).<sup>22</sup>

For Marx the realm of the objectivity does not signify a "structure without a subject" but the site of expressionism. In 1844 Marx draws this equation: objective (*gegenstandlich*) = site of expression (*Außerung*). That is why in Section II of this paper we claimed that Marx interpellates the discourses of Hegel and Feuerbach with the philosophy of expressionism. When one sutures the first two theses stating the questions of "objective activity" and "objective truth" with the 1844 philosophy of expressionism we develop the above equation to: objective = expression = praxis site of humanity itself. On the other hand there is the silent zone of the interpretative text which negates the above equation and thus postulates: alien objectivity = repression = contemplation = site of dehumanisation.

In the eleventh thesis Marx is clear that interpretative discourses can only emerge from the splitting of the world into either a *subjectless structure* or *structurless subject*. That is why Marx would insist that "objectivity" does not signify the site of a reality that is "independent" (*Selbständig*) of the mind, where the estranged mind interprets an independent world. On the other hand Marx demonstrates how the interpretative text signifies the schizy reflection of *estranged discourses*, thus merely miming the *estranged signifier*. Interpretation consequently becomes a reflection of a reflection, a copy of a copy, a gaze of a gaze. It is a *primitive accumulation of reified gazes*. That is why the first thesis claims that in the interpretative zone, knowledge appears in object (*bjekt*) form.

Marx approaches philosophy not in terms of transcendent signifying systems, but in terms of the analysis of the historical being-in-the-world. This is the way the ideological philosophical questions of superstructural abstractions are deconstructed in the base of the abstractions. In the fourth thesis Marx calls these questions " self - alienated " ( *Selbstent - fremdung* ). Whilst the base is the worldly foundation ( *Weltliche Grundlage* ) understood in terms of its self - cleavage ( *Selbstzerrissenheit* ) and self -contradictoriness ( *Sichselbstwidersprechen* ), the solution is found in what Marx calls " revolutionized becoming " ( *revolutioniert werden* )<sup>23</sup> , In the site of this *revolutionized becoming* Marx examines the conditions for the emergence of emancipatory praxis.

The ' Theses on Feuerbach ' is the strategic zone in which the sublation ( *Aufhebung* ) of Hegel and Feuerbach is made possible, highlighted by the emancipatory significance of Marxist praxis. When it is remarked that the point is to change ( *verändern* ) the world, one explores the genealogy of *praxis*, *Veränderung* and *Aufhebung*. Of great importance are the epistemic sites created that show how a Marxist *Aufhebung* and *Werden* are different from the Hegelian logic, and what Marx means by a materialist conception of history that is different from a traditional materialism and idealism.

### NOTES

1. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster ( London : Verso, 1979) p. 30; Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster ( London : Monthly Review Press, 1971 ) pp. 15, 39, 42, 72.
2. Karl Marx, ' Theses on Feuerbach', in Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Selected Works* ( Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 30. Our Paper however is based on Marx's original German text. See ' Thesen Über Feuerbach', in Karl Marx, *Die Frühschriften* ( Stuttgart : Alfred Kroner Verlag, 1964), p. 341.
3. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster ( London : Allen Lane, 1969), 13, 32 -5, 186, 244.

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19. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans Sarah A. Solovay (New York : The Free Press, 1964). pp. 27 - 8.
  20. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons ( New York : The Free Press, 1964), p. 88.
  21. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ( Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1982), pp. 95-6 136 - 8.
  22. Karl Marx, *Ibid*, pp. 136, 139.
  23. Karl Marx, '*Thesen Über Feuerbach* ', p. 340.

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