

Is the Theses of Feuerbach the Outline of German Ideology?

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Abstract

The Theses of Feuerbach has attracted people's attention since it was published as "the genius sprout containing the new world outlook". It began to exist as an appendix to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German classical philosophy*. Under people's investigation, it is found that *Theses of Feuerbach* is closely related to *German ideology*. Therefore, *Theses of Feuerbach* is regarded as the programmatic work of *German Ideology*, which has gradually become an academic consensus. In Chinese country's research, most scholars regard *the Theses of Feuerbach* as *the outline of the German Ideology*. However, whether this view can be established or not should be examined in combination with the situation of the times. Not only that, for the grasp of the specific connotation, the elaboration of the core content also needs to be carefully compared. *The Theses of Feuerbach* is the main point written by Marx in order to criticize Feuerbach. Whether it is the outline of *German Ideology* needs to be reconsidered.

Keywords

Outline, Practice, Epistemology

1. On the Publication of the Theses of Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Later Generations

In 1888, Engels added a manuscript named "*Marx on Feuerbach*" to the appendix of the single volume of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German Classical Philosophy* (hereinafter referred to as "*Feuerbach*"). This is the first time that *the Theses of Feuerbach* was published. Before that, Marx just labeled it as "Ed Feuerbach" (Marx & Engels, 2003). At this time, Engels was preparing to publish his "*Feuerbach*". Before the manuscript was sent to press, Engels found out Marx's "old manuscript" and read it again, "the chapter on Feuerbach has not

been finished yet. The part that has been written is about the historical materialism. This kind of explanation only shows how little knowledge we had in the history of economic criticism at that time. There is no criticism of Feuerbach's theory itself in the old manuscript. Therefore, the old draft is not applicable to the present purpose. But I found it in an old note of Marx. Eleven outlines of Feuerbach are now printed as an appendix to this book. This is a hastily written note for future research. It is not intended to be printed at all. But it is very valuable as the first document containing the budding genius of a new world view". (Marx & Engels, 2003) Here, Engels pointed out the reason for the publication of the outline. He wanted to find out the relevant content in the "old draft", that is, *the German Ideology* (hereinafter referred to as the "*Ideology*") to support the criticism of Feuerbach's theory. However, it is difficult to achieve this purpose by using the *Ideology*. So Engels looked at Marx's notes and found the theses in an old notebook. The notes that were just written in a hurry were "the first document containing the germination of genius of new world outlook". Therefore, Engels added it as an appendix, which also added a strong sense of massiveness to Engels' book. Therefore, from the point of view of Engels' additional outline, he does not think that *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German Ideology* have too much relationship, although the "bud" is "the bud of genius" and is only "bud". It is not an outline of a mature paper.

Later, the Central Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union changed the title to "*the Theses of Feuerbach*" according to the formulation of "eleven outlines about Feuerbach" in the preface of Engels' 1888 edition of "on Feuerbach", which is still in use today (Zhang & Yang, 2012). The German version of the outline does not mention the outline in the title. Instead, it uses the word "thense", which means "thesis and manuscript" in Chinese. In Chinese, "Outline" means "writing, speaking, studying, researching, discussing, etc" (Luo, 1986). According to the Chinese understanding, the outline is understood as the "Outline", as the main point of Marx's research and criticism of Feuerbach, which is justifiable. But whose outline is it?

In Chinese country's research, most scholars regard *the Theses of Feuerbach* as the outline of *the German Ideology*. In *the history of Marxist philosophy*, when talking about the status of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, we can see that *the Theses of Feuerbach* is the outline of *the German Ideology*. In 1845-1846, Marx and Engels continued to criticize Feuerbach in their Book German Ideology, and for the first time comprehensively expounded the historical theory of new materialism. This outline of Marx can be said to be the outline of *the German ideology* (Sun et al., 1992). In the author's opinion, the outline mainly refers to the criticism of Feuerbach, and the later form is the comprehensive and detailed development of the content of the outline. In *the history of Marxist philosophy* edited by Huang Nansen, it is also mentioned that "Marx's *the Theses of Feuerbach*" was written for this purpose, while "*German Ideology*" was "elaborating this viewpoint" (Huang, 1999). This is also consistent with Gu Hailiang's and Mei Rongzheng's views that "*the Theses of Feuerbach*" is a great ideological program

that Marx clearly proposed to establish the theoretical system of historical materialism. “This was elaborated in *the German Ideology* jointly created by him and Engels later” (Gu & Mei, 2006). From the perspective of *the history of Marxist philosophy*, the relationship between Marx’s texts will inevitably be involved. In the arrangement of the original works of Marx and Engels, *the Theses of Feuerbach* is placed before *the German ideology* according to the time sequence. The consistency of the contents before and after the contents and the consistency of the core points lead to the tendency of the outline function of *the Theses of Feuerbach*. However, according to Engels, there is still a lack of criticism of Feuerbach himself in the “old draft”, so it is supplemented with the outline, which shows that there are some differences between the two, but whether the difference is just the difference between the main points and the detailed content, we need to combine the context at that time.

2. On the Relationship between Outline and Form from the Perspective of Writing Reasons and Purposes

As for the relationship between *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*, we think that we should first return to the specific situation of Marx’s writing, understand the writing reasons and writing purposes of the two texts, and make a comparative analysis. As for the writing reason and time of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, Bagatulia and Taubert have a dispute on this issue, and the focus and purpose of the dispute is also the relationship between *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*. In Bagatulia’s opinion, the specific time of writing *the Theses of Feuerbach* was April 1845, and it happened that Engels and Marx met, and they discussed historical materialism together, so the appearance was born. Therefore, this “document containing the germination of a new world outlook” is the outline of *the German ideology*. However, Taubert thinks that the writing time should be July, and the reason for writing is to focus on the debate about *the Holy family* at that time, that is, the criticism of contemporary people on *the Holy family*. *The Theses of Feuerbach* and *the holy family* are more closely related than *the German ideology*. In the view of Professor Lu Kejian, “It can be reasonably inferred that Marx read Hess’s *on the socialist movement in Germany* and *the late philosophers* in mid May and early June of 1845, and had a new understanding of the shortcomings of Feuerbach’s theory, and jotted down his criticism and new understanding of Feuerbach in his Notepad. It can be clearly seen from the comparison and analysis of the thoughts contained in Hess’ *on the socialist movement in Germany* and *the late philosophers*.” Moreover, in the last article of the outline, Marx said that “philosophers in the past have interpreted the world, the problem is to change the world” (Lu, 2008). This was also influenced by Hess. In his article *the late philosophers*, Hess classifies the representatives of post Hegelian philosophy, including Feuerbach, Powell and Steiner, into “explaining the world”, that is, only solving the contradiction between “class” and “individual” (Lu, 2008). This point was also absorbed by Marx and put forward “changing the world” on this basis.

We agree with Professor Lu's point of view. Through the analysis of the outline, in the first article of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, Marx talked about the word "old materialism" at the beginning of *the Theses of Feuerbach*. It mainly relies on Feuerbach's "materialism" to refute their "words only against the existing world. Are not against the reality and the existing world" act (Marx & Engels, 1972). There is no distinction between the old and the new in the treatment of materialism, which is clearly shown in the manuscript. Marx's evaluation of Feuerbach is still very high and highly appreciates his natural materialism. Now Marx began to reflect on Feuerbach and try to surpass Feuerbach and find out the main defect of his "materialism" viewpoint—"only understand them in the form of object or intuition, instead of taking them as human perceptual activities and practice" (Marx & Engels, 1972). Feuerbach's natural materialism is good at analyzing natural things, but when it is used to analyze human society and human practical activities, its shortcomings are revealed. This is not only the inspiration of Hess to Marx, but also the conclusion that Marx began to study social history deeply in practice, so that Marx still firm his materialist position and put forward his own new materialist viewpoint. Although Marx has turned the perspective to practice, but the understanding of practice is not very clear, and has not combined with specific, specific practice to analyze, so it still stays in the general perspective of philosophy.

Compared with *the Theses of Feuerbach*, the writing reasons of *the German ideology* are similar. They all expound their own views by criticizing the views of contemporaries. Before Marx wrote the form, at the end of 1844, Steiner published his work *the only one and his belongings*, and the analysis of "I" holds that all consciousness, religion, morality, law, truth, state, society, people, nation, motherland, human beings and even the world itself are all aimed at enslaving individuals through various non personal universal things, all of which are "negating yourself". This shows that everything in the world itself is egoism, so the "only one" is, of course, egoistic. It also points out the path of self complete liberation, that is, "go back to yourself". He advocated that the liberation of self can not be realized by any eternal ideas or principles outside the self, but only by making the self sovereign over these concepts or principles. This argument structure is consistent with Feuerbach's *the nature of Christianity*, which should be an imitation of Feuerbach. Secondly, the third volume of the *Wigan* quarterly published Powell's article *on Ludwig Feuerbach* in 1845. Powell criticized some of Feuerbach's articles and responded to Marx and Engels' criticism of him in *the holy family*. This shows that in Powell's view, Marx and Feuerbach are the same system, and at this time Marx has been reflecting on Feuerbach. In addition, in the summer of 1945, *the wegand* quarterly also published some publications about "real socialists", that is, petty bourgeois socialists. These people are hostile to the idea of class struggle and call on people to give up political activities and propagate fraternity and friendship in order to transform society. Therefore, the debate between Marx and Engels and "real socialists" is inevitable.

In this case, Marx and Engels were determined to settle these views. In the preface of *the critique of political economy*, Marx talked about the reasons and purposes of writing at that time: “to study the opposition between our opinions and the opinions of German ideology together is actually to sort out our previous philosophical beliefs. This wish is realized in the form of criticizing Hegel’s philosophy” (Marx & Engels, 1998). Therefore, the reason why Marx wrote the form is to continue to criticize the young Hegelian school, and also to criticize the “real socialists”, so as to sort out the past philosophy and find a new world outlook from the criticism.

Comparing the writing reasons of *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*, although there is some consistency, for example, in terms of criticality, whether it is Feuerbach or Steiner or Powell, Marx is clearing up the past philosophy and establishing his own new philosophy and new world outlook. However, there are still many aspects worthy of our attention. The writing of *the Theses of Feuerbach* is mainly influenced by Hess, and the criticism of Feuerbach is consistent with Hess in some core connotations. For example, the concept of “practice” has a strong Hessian color, implying “the teleology of implicit idealism”; as for *the German ideology*, it covers a wide range of aspects. Its purpose is to clear up the philosophical belief and rebuild the philosophical system. The core concept of “practice” has been integrated into historical materialism by means of material production in *the German ideology*, and Marx also got rid of the influence of Hess. Therefore, how can the two documents with different reasons and purposes be related to the outline and content?

3. On the Relationship between the Outline and the Form from the Perspective of Practice

In the two texts of *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*, the practical point of view is their core point of view. To investigate the relationship between the two texts from the perspective of practice and compare their practical views will be a powerful grasp to explore *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*.

In *the Theses of Feuerbach*, the viewpoint of practice runs through it, which is also a powerful weapon for Marx to criticize Feuerbach. In the first article of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, Marx pointed out the mistakes made by all materialists, including Feuerbach, that is, “to understand things, reality and sensibility. Not as human perceptual activities, as practice, not as subjective aspects. Idealists have developed active aspects”. Here, Marx talked about the understanding of practice: the perceptual activities which are understood from the subjective aspect and give full play to the initiative of the subject (Marx & Engels, 1972). Here, Marx seems to focus on the specific practice, but from here, it is still the abstraction of the general attribute of practice, and the practice is still in the general vision. In the second article, Marx mainly talked about the role of practice, that is, to test the truth of human thinking, “the reality and strength of one’s own

thinking”. The third, when it comes to “revolutionary practice”, means that “changes in the environment are consistent with human activities”. That is to say, practice is the realistic basis for the unity of man and environment. Fifthly, Feuerbach continued to criticize that Feuerbach only focused on “perceptual intuition”, rather than “perception as a practical and human perceptual activity”. Article 6, “the essence of man. In its reality, it is the summary of all social relations”. This point talks about the essence of human beings and the issue of reality, which is a step forward compared with the abstract, but the sum of social relations remains at the general level of philosophy. Article 8 the theory that “social life is essentially practical” can be continuously tested and improved in practice. Article 9 and Article 10 mainly talk about the foothold of old materialism and new materialism. One is “civil society”, the other is “human society or socialized human”. Here we talk about the foothold of old and new materialism, one is civil society based on old philosophy, the other is based on practice. Almost every item in *the Theses of Feuerbach* talks about practice, which is also Marx’s explanation of practice from different aspects.

However, for the practice of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, we think it is still an immature concept. “The practice embodied in *the Theses of Feuerbach* is still an abstract practice, not a realistic, social and historical practice.” The practice mentioned in the outline is only a concept of “perceptual activity” which includes human subjectivity and initiative. “Subjectivity”, “initiative” and “perceptual activity” are abstractions of the general attribute of “practice” (Liu, 2016). From the “general practice” in *the Theses of Feuerbach*, what we can see is only the “ordinary people” with subjective initiative, rather than the real people with special characteristics who are active under specific historical conditions; “practicality” is also regarded as the “general nature” of human beings, and this “generality” is used to explain the real existence of individuals, which violates the basic theoretical principle of “starting from the real man”. From this point of view, *the Theses of Feuerbach* is still inextricably linked with the western traditional metaphysical abstract humanism philosophy contact. If we develop the dynamic aspect of perceptual activities unilaterally and abstractly, we will inevitably turn the initiative and subjectivity of practice into the initiative and subjectivity of spirit, which will inevitably lead to idealism (such as Hegel); if we develop the “passive” side of practice one sidedly and abstractly, we will inevitably understand the “perceptual activity” as the “perceptual existence” that has lost the initiative of the subject, so “we will move towards Feuerbach’s old materialism” (Liu, 2016). What’s more, we mentioned that the practical viewpoint of the outline is greatly influenced by Hess, and the practical viewpoint still stays in the general vision of philosophy. Therefore, “in *the Theses of Feuerbach*, in order to criticize Feuerbach’s non dialectical perceptual intuition, the practice category emphasized by Marx has strong subjectivity color” (Li, 2011). It implies the teleology of implicit idealism. “At this time, Marx did not really get rid of the Hessian philosophical communism. The opinion is still in the context of historical

teleology” (Lu, 2009).

In *the German ideology*, Marx gave practice a new connotation, and put forward a mature concept of practice around four aspects: production practice and human nature, communicative practice and history, industrial practice and human development, revolutionary practice and human liberation. First of all, Marx understood the essence of human from the perceptual activities of human beings, that is, production practice. Human existence is human practice. Moreover, communication practice is the premise of history. Thirdly, the history of industry is an open book on the essential power of man. Finally, we should promote people’s liberation through revolutionary practice. Marx put the practice as “material production” in the basic position, “thinking” and “spiritual communication” are regarded as “direct products” of material production. In addition, Marx did not simply emphasize the basic position of material production, but proposed to understand the way of producing means of living as the way of expressing his own life (Guo, 2010).

Here, Marx raised the practice of “material production” to a very important position, which also reflected Marx’s attention to “material production”. “The first premise of any human history is undoubtedly the existence of living individuals. Therefore, the first thing that needs to be determined is the concrete fact that these individuals’ physical organizations and their relationship with nature are restricted by the physical organizations. When people themselves began to produce the necessary means of living, they began to distinguish themselves from animals to produce the necessary means of living for them.” From this passage, we can feel that Marx’s vision has been implemented in people’s specific practice, and began to investigate history, so as to establish Marx’s historical materialism system.

From the abstract and philosophical practice in *the Theses of Feuerbach*, to the practice based on material production, we can clearly feel the difference between *the Theses of Feuerbach* and *the German ideology*. When *the Theses of Feuerbach* was born, Marx did not have a specific and in-depth analysis on this issue. Influenced by Hess, its connotation is still immature. Therefore, can we regard the immature *the Theses of Feuerbach* as the outline of mature *the German ideology*?

4. On the Relationship between Outline and Form from the Perspective of Epistemology

From the perspective of epistemology, *the Theses of Feuerbach* only mentions the standard of testing truth. “Whether people’s thinking has objective truth is not a theoretical problem, but a practical one. The debate about whether thinking that leaves practice is realistic is a purely scholastic question.” (Marx & Engels, 1972). Here, Marx said that the test of truth lies in practice, but for the argument between Feuerbach and Hegel, Marx thought that it was divorced from practice, a purely scholastic problem, and could not be clearly demonstrated.

Here, Marx introduced practice into epistemology for the first time, criticizing all the mistakes in the truth standards of old philosophy in the past. In *the German ideology*, what Marx really criticizes is young hegelians's thinking method, that is, the thinking method of deduction and reasoning from abstract concepts. Which way of thinking is correct? This is a question that epistemology must answer.

From 1843 to 1848, Marx gradually revealed the basic principles of historical materialism in the process of reading a large number of historical and political economy documents and criticizing the historical philosophy at that time. This cognitive process has both logical and empirical components. This is an interactive process. But young hegelians just canceled the step of experience. For history, the step of experience is to describe and summarize the history of real life. "The history of civil society, business and industry" written by "a preliminary attempt to provide a materialistic basis for historiography." (Marx & Engels, 2009). Is the step of experience. Without this empirical step, all abstract things will have no foundation. For Marx, "these abstractions themselves have no value if they leave the history of reality. They can only provide some convenience for sorting out historical data and point out the order of all levels of historical data" (Marx & Engels, 2009). Therefore, for us, we must examine a large number of realistic historical materials, sort them out and analyze them by using certain thinking methods, and summarize and summarize the historical laws from them, instead of using a simple category.

Young hegelians criticized by Marx, such as Feuerbach, Powell and Stiener, share common characteristics. Marx had an allegory about this: "A hero suddenly thought that people drowned because they were fascinated by gravity. If they run away from this idea, for example, claiming that it is a superstitious idea and a religious idea, they will avoid any danger of drowning. He struggled with the illusion of gravity all his life, and various statistics provided him with a lot of new evidence about the harmful consequences of this illusion. This hero is a specimen of German revolutionary philosophers." (Marx & Engels, 2009). Marx criticized these people because they ignored the reality of gravity, but only struggled with the concept of gravity in their minds, imagining how to eliminate this thing in their minds. However, people in the water are those who are dominated by gravity and buoyancy. Those who have not studied statics, and those who have not developed the concepts of gravity and buoyancy, are still dominated by gravity and buoyancy. Struggle with the idea of gravity for millions of times, and you will still be dominated by gravity and buoyancy when you get to the water. This is the role played by laws that are not transferred by human will. It's not about statics. What statics does is to let people master the law and make full use of the relationship between gravity and buoyancy in the water, so as to avoid drowning. Powell's mistake is that they believe that as long as people abandon the assumptions that do not meet the "standard person" and "self-consciousness", they realize their own liberation. As long as these isolated ideological activities

are enough. But “standard person” and “self-consciousness” are unrealistic.

In *the German ideology*, Marx gradually established his own concrete and realistic viewpoint by criticizing the thinking logic of young Hegelian school, and applied it to the investigation of history, thus establishing his own historical materialism. In *the Theses of Feuerbach*, Marx’s focus is still on the criticism of Feuerbach, and only mentions the test standard of truth at the cognitive level. The points involved are relatively narrow and not comprehensive enough. Therefore, it is not appropriate to regard the incomplete *the Theses of Feuerbach* as the outline of complete *the German ideology*.

5. Summary

To sum up, since the introduction of *the Theses of Feuerbach*, which is regarded as the “bud of genius”, which Marx wrote down in a hurry for future research and use, its content and status in Marxist philosophy have been controversial, especially its relationship with morphology. Originally, it only existed as the appendix of Engels’ on Feuerbach. With a large number of interpretation and research, its status is rising day by day. The close relationship with the form also makes people look at the relationship between the two texts in the way of outline and specific expansion. However, after careful investigation, there are great differences in the causes of the text, the purpose of writing, and the core concepts and categories of the two. The main points mentioned in the outline have not covered the text of *the German ideology*. Therefore, *the Theses of Feuerbach* is not the outline of *the German ideology*. *The Theses of Feuerbach* contains a new world view, while *the German ideology* makes an in-depth investigation and analysis of the new world view. However, the relationship between the two can not be defined as the relationship between “Outline” and “content”. “Because *the Theses of Feuerbach* is just a record of Marx’s ideological experiment, we can’t hope that the brief sentence pattern of the outline can explain the above problems clearly. Otherwise, it will lead to the excessive theoretical elevation of *the Theses of Feuerbach*.” (Zhang, 2014). We need an objective evaluation of the status of *the Theses of Feuerbach*. *The Theses of Feuerbach* is the main point of Marx’s criticism of Feuerbach. It is about Feuerbach’s outline, which can’t be absolutized as the outline of *the German ideology*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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