

On the Founding Process, Basic Principles and Contemporary Value of Historical Materialism: A Textual Study Based on Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy

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Abstract. As an important work of Engels in his later years expounding Marxist philosophy, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* addresses the erroneous influence of Neo-Kantianism on the development of the proletarian movement in Western European society in the late 19th century. It deeply analyzes the development history of modern German classical philosophy, clarifies the critical inheritance relationship between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy, comprehensively discusses the founding process and basic principles of Marxist historical materialism, and analyzes the revolutionary transformation and its significance brought about by the birth of Marxist philosophy in the field of philosophy. The relevant exposition of historical materialism in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* helps us better grasp the stage of China's social development from the perspective of social and historical progress at the present stage, and consolidate the ideological defense line.

Keywords: Marxism, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Historical Materialism

1. Introduction

Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy (often shortened to *Feuerbach Thesis*) is the final philosophical work completed by Engels during his lifetime. The direct motivation for writing this work was Engels' criticism of the erroneous views in Starcke's *Ludwig Feuerbach*, while its fundamental motivation was to defend Marxist philosophy and refute the fallacy propagated by the bourgeoisie that "Marx had no philosophy". In this work, Engels traces the relationship of inheritance, criticism and transcendence between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy, thereby explaining the ideological path of the formation of historical materialism and several of its basic propositions. Lenin once spoke highly of this work: "Their views are set forth most clearly and fully in Engels' works *Ludwig Feuerbach* and *Anti-Dühring*, both of which, like *The Communist Manifesto*, are essential reading for every class-conscious worker [1]."

2. The founding process of historical materialism: established in the process of subsuming old philosophy

In the work, Engels deeply analyzes the relationship between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy. He expounds that historical materialism absorbs the "rational kernel" of Hegel's philosophical thought and the "basic kernel" of Feuerbach's philosophical thought, and realizes a theoretical leap on the basis of subsuming old philosophy.

In the 1870s and 1880s, the trend of Neo-Kantianism rose, deliberately distorting the theoretical sources of Marxism in an attempt to shake the working class's faith in Marxism. On the surface, they wantonly attacked German classical philosophy and tried to obliterate its positive influence. In fact, they were propagating the idea that "Marx had no philosophy", and vigorously distorted Marxist philosophy as nothing but a "simple patchwork" of Hegel's philosophy and Feuerbach's philosophy with no intrinsic value of its own, in an attempt to cover up the scientific nature of Marxist philosophy.

In this work, Engels clarifies the essential differences and internal connections between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy. Although German classical philosophy is the direct theoretical source of Marxism, the latter is by no means a simple continuation of the former. Instead, it transcends the former in the process of subsumption and constructs its own complete philosophical system and framework. Marx and Engels stripped away the shell of Hegel's idealist system and rescued the "rational kernel" of his dialectics. At the same time, they broke through the perceptual and metaphysical limitations of Feuerbach's materialism and absorbed the "basic kernel" of his anthropology. In this critical construction, a new dialectical materialist view of history was founded. It not only overcomes the defects of previous old philosophy, but also forms a scientific, correct and truthful philosophical understanding of the laws governing nature and human society.

2.1. The subsumption of the "rational kernel" of Hegel's philosophy by Marxist Philosophy

Hegel's philosophy, as the peak of German classical philosophy, constructed the most complete philosophical framework in the history of idealist philosophy, pushed dialectics onto the stage of history again, and expounded the development process of nature and human history from the perspective of movement and development. It broke Kant's philosophical admiration for metaphysics and brought the thinking of the unity of opposites back to people's minds. Literally, Marxism, with its clear materialist stance, should be incompatible with Hegel's idealist thought and diametrically opposed to it. However, in the process of its founding and development, Marxist philosophy absorbed the rational elements in Hegel's philosophy. Even in the face of slander against Hegel from many philosophers, Marx said in public, "I openly avow that I am the pupil of that great thinker". On this issue, Engels introduces Hegel's famous proposition "What is actual is rational, and what is rational is actual" [2] in the work to analyze the rational elements of dialectics in Hegel's philosophy. This proposition has both a conservative side and a revolutionary side. The conservative side lies in that it acknowledges the rationality of the status quo, does not seek to overthrow the rule of the feudal Prussian state, and defends the survival of the Prussian regime. But on the other hand, it is revolutionary and contains the revolutionary elements of dialectics. The German poet Heine once pointed out that German philosophy, especially Hegel's philosophy, was the ideological preparation for the upcoming German democratic revolution. Unfortunately, the revolutionary nature of this proposition was overshadowed by its conservative nature.

Engels grasped the revolutionary nature of this proposition and analyzed its revolutionary elements. First, actuality is not equivalent to existence; what exists is not necessarily rational.

"According to Hegel, by no means everything that exists is unconditionally also actual. In his view, the attribute of actuality belongs only to that which is at the same time necessary [3]." Only existing things that conform to a certain necessity can be actual. What is actual is conditional and develops in accordance with the trend of necessity, which is immutable. Only when existing things conform to the direction required by necessity, that is, conform to laws, can they become actual and thus rational. If an existing thing does not conform to or loses its necessity, it is irrational and will surely be eliminated by history. Conversely, if it meets the development requirements of necessity, even if the thing has not yet become a real existence, it will surely become actual in the future. In the work, Engels points out that when applying this proposition to the state, Hegel emphasized that the Kingdom of Prussia met the development requirements of necessity in a certain historical stage, so it was rational when it was within the "scope" of necessity. But at the beginning of the 19th century, the Kingdom of Prussia no longer met the development requirements of necessity. Its feudal autocracy and decadent characteristics hindered the progress and development of German society. Yet it still existed because of the weakness of the German bourgeoisie, which feared both the German Junkers and the masses and dared not launch a revolution against the Prussian state.

"If it nevertheless continues to exist in spite of its badness, then the badness of the government finds its reason and explanation in the corresponding badness of the subjects [2]."

2.2. Actuality is not an eternal attribute, still less fixed and unchanging

"Actuality is by no means an attribute that a social or political state possesses in all circumstances and in all times [2]." With the change of historical conditions, the actuality and necessity of things are constantly changing. All things are in constant development and change, and their inherent necessity is also changing. The rise and fall, order and chaos of dynasties and eras in history are all the results of changes in their necessity. In the work, Engels takes the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire as examples to reveal the transience of the actuality and necessity of all things: "On the contrary, the Roman Republic was actual, but so too was the Roman Empire which supplanted it [2]." In Engels' view, following Hegel's logic of thought, as the conditionality of things constantly changes, this proposition eventually transforms into "All that exists deserves to perish". Hegel's philosophical dialectics examines the development of human society from the perspective of development and movement, which is revolutionary. However, Hegel's philosophical dialectics is, after all, idealist. Although "idealism developed the active side abstractly", in Hegel's view, the self-negation and self-development of things are the externalization of the "Absolute Spirit", nothing but the externalization of ideas. He still dragged the pigtail of the German philistine. Marxist philosophy sublates Hegel's philosophical dialectics, eliminates its idealist elements, transforms it with materialism, and expounds the basic principles of materialist dialectics.

2.3. The sublation of the "basic kernel" of Feuerbach's philosophy

Marxist philosophy does not arise out of nowhere. Its theoretical construction mainly relies on the critical inheritance of two major achievements of German classical philosophy: one is the dialectical thought contained in Hegel's philosophy, and the other is the materialist orientation preserved in Feuerbach's anthropology. Feuerbach once said, "My first thought was God, my second was reason, and my third and last was man [3]." After a profound analysis of Hegel's system of speculative idealism, Feuerbach realized a fundamental transformation of his philosophical standpoint and returned to the foundation of materialism. He advocated that matter has ontological priority, affirmed that the world is unified in matter, and that consciousness is a product of the long-term

development of the material world, always in a subordinate position determined by matter. These views are correct; he correctly answered the fundamental question of philosophy, that is, "The great fundamental question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is the question of the relation between thinking and being [2]." With Feuerbach, materialism returned to the throne. However, as Feuerbach himself assessed, "When we go backwards, I am in agreement with materialism; but when we go forwards, I am not [2]." We must recognize that Feuerbach's materialism still bears the deep imprint of old materialism and remains incomplete. It is a materialism based on perceptual reflection, lacking dialectical elements. It only examines the world from the perspective of natural science, which is correct in the natural world, but in the field of social history, it can only reduce human beings to abstract beings that are neither human nor ghostly, and ultimately falls into idealism, where human beings are no longer "human beings". Feuerbach's philosophy abstracts human beings from a biological perspective, understands human essence as "species-being", and holds that this "species-being" consists of human reason and love, both of which are innate to human beings. Proceeding from the abstract view of human nature, Feuerbach's philosophy obliterates the class nature of human beings and ignores the differences between people. In terms of historical view, Feuerbach mainly understands human history as the history of religious development. Although Feuerbach criticized religion, he did not transcend it. Instead, he replaced Christianity with his own religion of love. In his view, human history is the activity of human beings pursuing the essence of "species-being" for their own happiness starting from egoism. For Feuerbach, God is nothing but the alienation of human essence, and this alienation only occurs in a certain historical stage. The religion of "love" he advocated would eventually end Christianity and allow human beings to return to the essence of "species-being". But this "love" is too weak and pale. As Engels commented, it is "as powerless as Kant's categorical imperative". The metaphysical nature of Feuerbach's philosophy is also reflected in its handling of the relationship between Hegel's philosophy and other materialist philosophical thoughts. The reason why Feuerbach's philosophy lacks dialectics lies in his wrong attitude towards the ideological heritage of Hegel's philosophy. He totally rejected all of Hegel's philosophy, including dialectics, simply cast it aside and ignored it, instead of carrying out sublation. "But simply declaring a philosophy false is not enough to vanquish it [2]." Precisely because of this, Feuerbach refused to name his own philosophy materialism, believing that it was fundamentally different from vulgar materialism and disdaining to be associated with it. Engels points out that Feuerbach did not understand the relationship between the general and the particular, between tradition and contemporary forms, nor did he see that materialism would present different forms with the change of historical conditions. With the development of social history, the contemporary manifestations of materialism vary, but Feuerbach reduced materialism to a static, perceptual classification label to define his own philosophical position. Using the basic principles of dialectics, Engels criticized Feuerbach's idealist views in the field of social history, overcame the loopholes in his thought, and organically combined the basic standpoint of materialism with dialectics, thus further laying the foundation for and clarifying historical materialism.

Engels emphasizes in the work that Marxist philosophy did not arise out of thin air, nor is it a "simple patchwork" of old philosophical views. Instead, it developed continuously in the process of sublating German classical philosophy, especially the "rational kernel" of Hegel's philosophy and the "basic kernel" of Feuerbach's philosophy, and thus constructed a new materialist worldview, namely historical materialism.

3. Basic views of historical materialism: the motive force of social and historical development

Before the birth of historical materialism, philosophers of old times did not give a correct answer to the motive force behind the laws of social and historical development. They attributed social development to the "motives" in people's minds, believing that human spirit was the driving force of social and historical progress, and "judged everything by the motives of actions, dividing historical figures into gentlemen and villains". In the text, Engels demonstrates the motive force of social and historical development, emphasizing that social history seems to be produced by the collision of multiple contingencies, but behind these contingencies, there is an invisible hand controlling the progress of the whole society, that is, the motive force behind the "motives".

3.1. The direct motive force of social and historical development is class struggle

Taking Britain and France as examples, Engels expounds in the book that class struggle is the direct driving force of modern history. After the advent of the era of capitalist large-scale industry, the capitalist mode of production shattered all old hierarchical orders, tore off the hierarchical coat covering classes, and exposed the concept of class nakedly to the world. "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations [4]." Social relations between people have been simplified and clarified, and class struggle has become the driving force of social and historical development. During the bourgeois revolutions in Britain and France, the class contradiction was mainly manifested as the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy. This contradiction promoted the improvement of the capitalist system in the two countries and was the direct motive force of their social development at that time. "The struggle for supremacy between the two classes, the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, was the central point of all political struggle in England." "Historians of the Restoration period, from Thierry to Guizot, Mignet and Thiers, always pointed to this fact as the key to understanding French history since the Middle Ages [2]." With the increasing consolidation of capitalist society, the "ideal society" spoken of by Enlightenment thinkers did not come true. Instead, severe social crises followed one after another. Social problems under capitalism continued to highlight and amplify in the mid-19th century, and the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat became increasingly acute. Three workers' movements broke out in Europe in the 1830s and 1840s: the Silesian weavers' uprising in Germany, the Lyon workers' uprising in France, and the Chartist movement in Britain. The working class awakened its class consciousness and emerged on the historical stage as an independent political force. It became the third fighter for supremacy after the feudal landlord class and the bourgeoisie, opening the chapter of the international workers' movement. By reviewing the history of struggle among the feudal landlord class, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Engels reveals that class struggle is the direct motive force of social progress: "Only he who deliberately shuts his eyes can fail to see that the struggle of these three classes and their clash of interests is the motive force of modern history, at least in the two most advanced countries [2]."

3.2. The fundamental motive force of social and historical progress is the movement of basic social contradictions

Engels points out in the text that class struggle is the direct motive force of social progress, but this is not enough to unveil the fundamental motive force that propels society forward. Where do classes come from? Why do classes differentiate? These problems arising from classes themselves cannot

be answered from classes themselves; we must find the reasons behind them that determine classes. On the surface, the birth of classes is caused by political reasons, but after peeling off layers of complexity, it is not difficult to find that all class struggles are based on material interests. The feudal landlords' exploitation of serfs through land ownership, the struggle for power between the bourgeoisie and the feudal landlord class for economic interests, and the exploitative and exploited relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat all show that class conflicts stem from conflicts of material interests, and political struggles are nothing but the political expression of economic interest conflicts and a means to realize the economic interests of their own class. Then where do conflicts of material interests come from? Why do the reasons behind material interests act on classes, and why are classes different in different historical periods? Engels expounds in the text that the root of the above problems lies in the changes of internal contradictions in the mode of production. When this change acts on social and historical development, it becomes the movement of two pairs of basic social contradictions: productive forces and relations of production, and economic base and superstructure. The mode of production is the unity of productive forces and relations of production, and their contradictory movement is the fundamental motive force of the transformation of social formations. Productive forces indicate the degree of social development and determine the total amount of social material interests. Relations of production determine the possession and distribution of material interests by different classes. Classes in various historical periods are only the historical and contemporary manifestations and carriers of the contradictory movement of the two, which determine the changes of classes in social history. The replacement of the feudal class by the bourgeoisie as the ruling class is the result of the internal contradictory movement of the mode of production. The original feudal relations of production could no longer accommodate the advanced productive forces represented by capitalism. "The productive forces represented by the bourgeoisie rose up against the productive order represented by the feudal landowners and guild masters; the outcome is well known: the feudal fetters were shattered [2]." Similarly, the replacement of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat is the result of the contradictory movement of the mode of production within bourgeois society. With the continuous development of capitalism, its internal contradictions have become increasingly acute. The contradiction between private ownership of the means of production and socialized mass production has become increasingly prominent, manifested in problems such as overproduction, polarization between rich and poor, mass impoverishment and periodic economic crises. Capitalism has never been able to solve its inherent contradictions. This hinders the further development of productive forces. To completely eliminate a series of crises and problems brought about by capitalist society, it is necessary to transform capitalist relations of production and unleash productive forces with new relations of production. "This contradiction necessarily demands that the productive forces be freed from their fetters by changing the mode of production [2]." For a class to obtain its own economic interests, it must replace the ruling position of another class. The first thing to do is to seize political power and establish a state form adapted to its own interests. "It has been proved at least in modern history that all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles for emancipation, despite their necessarily political form (for all class struggles are political struggles), ultimately revolve around economic emancipation [2]." Proceeding from the idealist view of the state, the state is often regarded as the supreme force determining social relations. For example, Hegel's philosophy of the state places the state above civil society. But from the perspective of historical materialism, changes in political relations are ultimately restricted by economic relations. "The will of the state is on the whole determined by the changing needs of civil society, by the dominant position of a particular class, and in the last resort by the development of productive forces and exchange relations." Once

the state comes into being, it becomes independent of society and controls and dominates people through its own ideology. On the surface, these ideologies are indeed independent of social and economic relations and born in people's minds. When these ideologies operate, people always feel that economic relations in society are regulated by these ideologies. Here, taking law, religion and philosophy as the entry points of research, Engels expounds the decisive role of the economic base on ideology, which is part of the superstructure. First of all, these products of people's minds are not processed by "truly" independent people using "truly" independent thinking, but are produced by real people in society. These people are the aggregate of various social relations of their time, and their thoughts are, in the final analysis, products of the society at that time. "This thought process, which takes place in the heads of men, is in the last resort determined by the material conditions of life of the men concerned [2]." Ideological products such as law, religion and philosophy that seem detached from the economy are still products of material life and closely linked to it. "'Spirit' is cursed from the very beginning to be 'burdened' with matter [5]." They are the ideological expression of the dominant relations of production. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force [5]." The development of the economic base requires that these ideologies as part of the superstructure also be transformed accordingly. Taking the Reformation as an example, the seeds of capitalism continued to grow in Europe in the 15th century, and the capitalist mode of production continued to expand. However, the corruption and extravagance of the church contradicted the development requirement of "tightening one's belt" in the stage of primitive accumulation of capitalism. The growing pursuit of freedom and equality by the citizen class conflicted with Catholicism, which was characterized by hierarchy, asceticism and complicated rituals. The call for reforming the existing religion became increasingly loud. Finally, with the publication of Luther's *The Ninety-Five Theses*, the Reformation officially began and Protestantism emerged in history. "The ineradicability of the Protestant heresy corresponded to the invincibility of the rising burgher class [2]." Of course, while emphasizing the decisive role of the economic base on the superstructure, Engels also points out the reaction of the superstructure on the economic base. "Once religion has taken shape, it always contains certain traditional materials, for tradition is a great conservative force in all ideological fields [2]."

In short, the fundamental motive force of social and historical development lies in the movement of basic social contradictions. Historical materialism emphasizes the decisive role of productive forces and the economic base, which by no means means that relations of production and the superstructure are passive. They are dynamic. Social and historical development is by no means determined by the single economic factor, but by the joint action of multiple factors. As Engels said, "If someone distorts this here by saying that the economic factor is the only decisive one, then he turns that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure also exercise an influence upon the course of the historical struggle and in many cases determine its form predominantly [6]."

4. Contemporary value

Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy applies historical materialism to the field of social history, centrally presenting the new worldview of Marxist philosophy. It summarizes historical materialism in a conclusive way, and on the basis of correctly demonstrating the relationship between the founding of historical materialism and German classical philosophy, uses the principles of materialist dialectics to correctly point out the laws of social and historical development. Studying the thought of historical materialism in this work today still has important

practical significance. First, it helps us establish correct standards for right and wrong, and screen and sublate various kinds of thoughts in society. Second, it helps us understand real society from material production, social relations and basic contradictions, so as to more accurately recognize the basic national condition that China is still in the primary stage of socialism. Third, the interpretation of materialist dialectics and historical materialism in the work helps us deeply study the essence of Marxist theory, cultivate our ability to learn and apply theory, enhance theoretical confidence, defend the leading position of China's mainstream ideology, hold high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the realization of socialist modernization.

5. Conclusion and prospect

As an important work of Engels in his later years on Marxist philosophy, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* systematically sorts out the formation process, main contents and historical value of Marxist historical materialism, effectively refutes various erroneous views distorting Marxism at the end of the 19th century, expounds the critical inheritance relationship and essential difference between Marxist philosophy and German classical philosophy in a penetrating and easy-to-understand way, correctly states the theoretical sources of Marxist philosophy, and defends and develops Marxist philosophy. Focusing on the present, we need to further explore and master the important content of historical materialism in this work, combine with the era requirements of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, more clearly and accurately grasp the stage of China's social development, and contribute to the journey of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through the Chinese path to modernization.

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