

Excerpt from “Concepts. A Critical Approach,” pp. 188-194

1. The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. In *The Essence of Christianity*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of ‘practical-critical’, activity.

Here, in the very first recorded words of “Marxism,” Marx is criticising philosophical *materialism* and giving credit to *idealism*, i.e., Hegel. And this criticism goes to all the human sciences today. Concepts cannot be treated as representing objects, irrespective of the activity through which concepts are manifested. The Jewish reference alludes to a contemporary debate in which the Jewish God of the Old Testament, had to ‘get his hands dirty’ making the world, representing a symbolic contrast between the Christian God of the Word, and the Jewish God of the Deed, i.e., practical life. Marx is criticising materialism for taking the standpoint of natural science: that of an observer, contemplating an independently existing object. Objects exist, distinct from thought, but it is thanks to activity, ‘practical-critical’ activity, that the object is perceived. The words activity, practice and *praxis* may be used interchangeably, with or without the various adjectives.

2. The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, *i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

This is not just a claim that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” The truth is itself *internal to activity*. The truth of an action is to be found within the activity of which it is a part, and the truth of an activity to be substantiated by its viability within an entire way of life. That is not the same as saying that activity *proves* the truth of a proposition, meaning simply that you can have a theory, and then test it out, and be proved wrong or right. For example, Marx left a number of questions open when he wrote the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. He had to wait till the Paris Commune of 1871 before he clarified these questions. Marx did not try to reason them out in his head. He did not make a proposal and then watch to see if it worked. Rather, he followed the movement of the working class and tried to give voice to it. Practice is the foundational category, the substance of human life, from which all other categories must be derived.

3. The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this

doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

This caution speaks to the whole class of professional ideologists and social scientists who take their human 'subjects' as objects, capable only of responding to stimuli, while exempting themselves from participation in the same conditions as their subjects. This "God's eye view" from which a theoretician imagines himself to observe the world from outside and above culture and history is an illusion. What happens in the world, says Marx, must be understood not as individuals acting in response to circumstances, but rather as *self-change*, since the circumstances are also created by people.

4. Feuerbach starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be annihilated theoretically and practically.

This refers to Feuerbach's book, *The Essence of Christianity*, published in 1841, in which Feuerbach went through all the concepts of Christianity and showed that each apologetically reflected a corresponding earthly relation. His claim was that by saying in effect "This is how things are in Heaven," the Church sought to *justify* the earthly institution which was reflected in the myth. (Nowadays, people say instead: "This is how things are in Nature.") Religion, for Feuerbach, was an ideological rationalisation for the suffering and injustice the masses experienced on Earth. The idea behind this was that once the real meaning and function of religion had been *exposed* as a pernicious fiction, then the mystique would be broken and people would throw off their religious superstitions and see things for what they really were. This ignores the fact that ideology not only reflects earthly relations and serves to maintain and regulate them, but reflects *real needs* arising from those relations. It is not exposing religious illusions which will eliminate oppression and suffering but rather the elimination of oppression and suffering which will do away with religious illusions. The exposure of religion contributes nothing to that, save to make the critic feel superior to the deluded masses. Religion is the general theory of those oppressive relations.

So yes, religious ideology reflects social practices, but changing those practices is a practical question and has to be resolved practically. A changed ideological reflection of those new relations necessarily accompanies changed social practices.

5. Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, wants *sensuous contemplation*; but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical*, human-sensuous activity.

Here Marx emphasises the *active*, practical character of cognition. Sense perception is itself an *active* process, rather than a process of passively reflecting objects.

6. Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence is hence obliged: 1. To abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment regarded by itself, and to presuppose an abstract – isolated – human individual. 2. The essence therefore can by him only be regarded as ‘species’, as an inner ‘dumb’ generality which unites many individuals only in a *natural* way.

Feuerbach saw human beings as essentially natural creatures, whose nature could be understood solely in terms of their biological, animal nature. Consequently, he believed that everything essential to being human is to be found in each single individual, so he believed that the propensity to religious belief must be lodged in the biology of every human being. This is a mistake, for the essence of a human being, according to Marx, is the entire ensemble of social relations. So Feuerbach takes the human species as simply an aggregate of individuals of like kind, as an ‘abstract general’ concept, whereas in fact, human communities are actively constituted by the activity of their members. In this way, human beings create their own nature.

7. Feuerbach consequently does not see that the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a *social product*, and that the abstract individual that he analyses belongs in reality to a particular social form.

Thus, religiosity is a product of a given social formation, and Feuerbach wrongly ascribes this religiosity to an abstract, ahistorical ‘human nature’.

8. All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

‘Practical’ here means purposive actions, mental and physical, directed towards solving the problems which people are confronted with in their lives, i.e., activity. Marx draws an important conclusion: all problems of theory have to be resolved by (1) practical intervention and (2) having a mind to understanding the activity of those involved. Activity is the fundamental category, or substance of all social theory and philosophy, and not even logical deduction is reliable other than in close connection with activity. This is a radical activity-theoretical claim.

9. The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society.

This characterisation remains relevant to all mainstream modern social theory which can only understand human beings interacting with one another as independent agents. Economics for example, in its theory, takes human beings to be individual, self-seeking agents, and in its practical activity contributes to making people like this. On the contrary, human beings can be truly understood only in terms of their collaborative activity and struggle within definite forms of society.

10. The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity.

Marx takes human beings not as so many individuals but as a social organism which produces its own form of life through collaborative activity and a shared culture, and it

is this collaborative activity and culture which constitutes the essential nature of every individual.

11. Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.

This famous thesis is often misunderstood. Marx meant that the point of philosophy is to change the world, *not* that we have to change the world and philosophy is pointless.

I will pursue Marx's notion of activity as the substance of his philosophy, and the implications of this for his approach with just one further excerpt, from the *Grundrisse* of 1857.

In the passage on "The method of Political Economy," Marx looks at the development of abstractions like "exchange-value" and how such abstractions are deployed by political economists to reconstruct real economic activity in theoretical terms. He considers the question as to why, for more than 2,000 years since Aristotle first puzzled over the question of exchange-value, it was only in his own day that the secret of the formation of exchange-value and its ramifications were being disclosed. According to Hegel, the growing understanding of economic categories such as exchange-value, was a result of the theoretical work of political economists who disclosed the content of the concepts of political economy. Most people would understand the progress of natural science in much the same way: as a long train of problem-solving each building on the solutions of those before them. But this doesn't stand up does it?

But as a category exchange value leads an antediluvian existence. Hence, [to Hegel] the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production ... this is true in so far as the concrete totality regarded as a conceptual totality, as a mental concretum, is in fact a product of thinking, of comprehension; yet it is by no means a product of the self-evolving concept whose thinking proceeds outside and above perception and conception, but of assimilation and transformation of the perceptions and images into concepts. The totality as a conceptual totality seen by the mind is a product of the thinking mind, which assimilates the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the artistic-, religious- and practical-intellectual assimilation of this world. The real subject remains outside the mind and independent of it – that is to say, so long as the mind adopts a purely speculative, purely theoretical attitude. Hence the subject, society, must always be envisaged as the premises of conception even when the theoretical method is employed. ... The simplest abstraction which plays the key role in modern [political] economy, and which expresses an ancient relation existing in all forms of society, appears to be true in practice in this abstract form only as a category of the most modern society (MECW v.28: 38).

The point is that human activity develops in its own way. Gradually, over millennia, all the aspects of the concept of exchange-value were actualised as real relations, ultimately in the form of money, a symbol representing exchange-value, now a central part of the organisation of social life. In modern bourgeois society, the concept of exchange-value has reached its ultimate development, and the theorist has only to reflect what has already been brought to light by the development of activity itself.

Marx took this insight very seriously. The Communist Manifesto, first published in 1848, is full of contradictions and ambiguous formulations, such as "all production has

been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation.” Today’s Stalinists, Democratic socialists, Trotskyists, anarcho-syndicalists and social democrats can all alike embrace the Manifesto as their own. This is because in 1848, all these tendencies were still implicit within the workers’ movement, whereas over the century following each of these currents differentiated themselves out within the workers’ movement. Marx’s only amendment to views expressed in the Manifesto were made in the wake of the Paris Commune of 1871, when he responded to the experiences of the Commune in their attempts to overcome the counter-revolution and secure their own power, and made a small amendment to the Manifesto.

In other words, Marx understood that concepts are forms of activity, prior to their being brought to conscious awareness in theory. The job of the theorist is to assimilate activity in thought. Problems arise in the course of the development of human activity, particularly the perfection of instruments and machinery. These problems are tackled as practical problems and resolved in practice. The new forms of activity and artefacts which are produced in turn are incorporated into new theories embodying new concepts. Because human beings are born realists, each new development in human practice is ascribed to new objects and newly-discovered properties of an independently existing natural world.

With this activity-theoretical interpretation, Hegel’s highly developed speculative theory of concepts can be utilised on a scientific basis. Hegel’s science of Concepts was based on an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history, culture and natural science of his times, but neither Marx nor Hegel had ever conducted the kind of experiment and observation necessary for a genuinely scientific theory of concepts. For this an entire tradition and practice of science had to be created.