

# A Critique of Feuerbach's View of Nature — Textual Interpretation Based on *The German Ideology*

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## Abstract

In *The German Ideology*, Marx addresses a critique of Feuerbach's view of nature. Feuerbach's understanding of the sensible world is only from the dimension of pure intuition or natural science, but not as a world that interacts with people's sensible activities, and at the same time, nature is also regarded as a "self-contained nature" that has nothing to do with human activities. Marx pointed out that it is the product of people's perceptual activities, the result of people's historical and practical development, and that the nature in which people live is also "humanized nature" transformed by people, which overcame the defect of Feuerbach's lack of cognition of historical dimension and grasp of subjective initiative in the view of nature.

**Keywords:** German ideology, Feuerbach, view of nature, Marxism

## 1. Introduction

As far as Feuerbach's view of nature is concerned, it can be said to be a kind of "intuitive materialism", although it has overcome the idealistic view of understanding the whole real world as a product of the spirit, it only replaces the spirit with the matter, and makes a simple inversion of the status of the two, that is, "the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation"<sup>1</sup>, without discovering the intermediary that connects the two, namely "practice". Under the understanding of this object and intuitive materialist view, nature is only the existence of mere matter, "self-existing nature" isolated from human beings, rather than "humanized nature" interacting with human

practical activities, which was refuted by Marx.

## 2. Feuerbach's Understanding of the Sensible World — Mere Intuitive Sensation to "Intuition of Duality"

The so-called perceptual world is the visible and tangible world full of concrete things in which we live. This perceptual world includes both natural existence, i.e., the natural world with which human beings are associated, and social existence, i.e., the human society in which human beings interact materially with each other. The understanding of the sensible world is explained by materialism and idealism based on the positions of both worldviews. For example, Hegel, the representative of idealist philosophers, regarded the whole real world as a product of the externalization of absolute spirit,

and believed that it was created by spirit. Feuerbach's contribution as a materialist was to break with the idealist idea that "spirit creates the world" and to restore the authority of materialism by asserting that the world is material and that matter is the first. However, the reason why Feuerbach became the representative of the old materialism is that he only saw the materiality of the world, but did not understand the great significance of the practice of the material world, and thus could only regard the world as an "object, intuitive" world, and could only understand the material world from the negative and passive sense, thus regarded the material world as a "reflective, mirror" world. It can only be understood in a negative and passive sense, and thus the material world is regarded as a "reflective, mirror-like intuitive reflection".

Based on his old materialist theory of intuitive reflection, Feuerbach constructed his own view of the sensible world. "Feuerbach's conception of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it, and on the other to mere feeling"<sup>2</sup>. He does not see the world of sensibility as a world transformed by human practical activity, but rather as an intuitive, unchanging world. This mere intuition is to equate what one sees directly with the essence of things, and to consider the sensual appearance to be equivalent to the sensual reality. But after all, perceptual appearance is not equivalent to reality, and understanding things from direct external phenomena inevitably leads to the discordance between the essence of things and intuitive phenomena, and hence to contradiction. "In the former case, in the intuition of the sensible world, he inevitably encounters things which contradict his consciousness and his senses, and which disturb the harmony of all the parts of the sensible world which he assumes to be in harmony, and in particular the harmony of man with the natural world" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012). Thus, in order to resolve this contradiction, Feuerbach had to resort to a certain duality of intuition, between the ordinary intuition of seeing only what is "in front of one's eyes" and "the higher philosophical intuition of discerning the 'true nature' of things" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012).

The so-called "intuition of duality", which scholars Shu Yuanzhao and Geng Fan think refers to the intuition of natural science, is a kind

of intermediary link between the "ordinary intuition of what is in front of us" and the higher philosophical intuition that "discerns the true nature of things"<sup>3</sup>. "Feuerbach speaks in particular of the intuition of natural science, of secrets that only the eyes of physicists and chemists can discern, but where would natural science be without industry and commerce? Even this 'pure' natural science reaches its ends and acquires its materials only because of commerce and industry, because of the sensual activity of men"<sup>4</sup>. Because Feuerbach saw the contradiction between phenomena and essence, he turned to recourse to natural science, a form of intuition that is superior to that of the naked eye, but natural science is still essentially reflecting things in terms of mechanical materialism. Although they see forms of reflection that go further than the direct reflection of the naked eye, such as proteins in biology, molecules and atoms in chemistry, etc., they still see the object as an object rather than understanding things from the aspect of the unity of subject and object. If what is reflected by natural science is regarded as the essence of things, then it is impossible to explain how intuitive reality and essence are united, and thus what natural science sees is still not the essence of things. At the same time, Marx and Engels also pointed out that "natural science" also obtains its own material because of people's sensual activities. People can rise from the intuition of the naked eye to the "intuition of duality" not naturally without any effort, but with the help of people's perceptual activity, with the help of people's practical activity can rise to this form. Thus, Marx and Engels put forward their understanding of the perceptual world, i.e., the "higher philosophical intuition" that can understand the unity of the phenomena and the essence of things, that is, the objective world transformed by people's practice and the interaction of subject and object.

### **3. The Perceptual World Is a Product of Practice and History**

The difference between the new worldview of Marxism and the old materialist worldview lies in the fact that they discovered the existence of practice and grasped social reality from the perspective of dynamic practice, thus overcoming the defects of intuitive reflection of the old materialism. Unlike the perceptual world understood by Feuerbach, the perceptual world understood by Marx and Engels is the world

that has been transformed by people's practice, and this world is necessarily historically developing. It overcame the defects of the old materialism, one of which was that it could not see the role of practice, and thus could only understand things from the point of view of the mere object, not from the point of view of the unity of subject and object, which interacts with the subject. The second is that it does not see the historical and developmental nature; if things are understood from the perspective of the material plane alone, one cannot see the trajectory of historical development contained therein. In fact, every thing that has its present form is necessarily the product of a previous historical development, and every present thing is also in a trajectory of movement and development toward its future form; the present is also the history of the future. Thus Marx and Engels refuted Feuerbach's non-practical and non-historical nature of the world of sensibility, "He fails to see that the world of sensibility around him is by no means something that has existed directly and consistently since the beginning of time, but is rather a product of industrial and social conditions, a product of history, the result of the activity of generations, each of which is grounded on the foundations laid down by the previous generation and continues to develop the foundations laid down by the previous generation. The foundation laid by the preceding generation, continuing to develop the industry and intercourse of the preceding generation, and changing their social institutions as their needs change" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012).

This passage shows that the world of sense is integrated with practical activities and develops historically. The perceptual world is not the same as natural existence, it is not "something that has existed directly and consistently since the beginning of time" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012), but the formation of the perceptual world is a process. Before the emergence of human beings, the world could not be called "sensible existence" because "sensible activity" itself was human activity. It is only after the emergence of human beings, and when they are free from the state of primitive human beings, that they can realize their "sensual activity" as human beings. In the primitive period, man was still in a passive state of submission to nature, had not yet gathered into tribes, and was not yet social; he had not yet

learned to make tools to function in the objective world, and had not yet succeeded in utilizing the power of practice. The state of primitive man in this period is still a form of "natural existence". When people developed social settlements for the sake of survival, and learned to make tools to transform the natural world to make it more suitable for human development, then the natural world ceased to be "self-existing nature" with no direct relationship with human beings, and entered the stage of "humanized nature" in which human beings lived and became "humanized nature" through practice; the whole state of primitive man was still a form of "natural existence". The whole society also gets rid of the Robinsonian prehistory of a single person and enters the stage of historical development of human society. After entering the human history, the world of sense is the historical forward development, "is the result of the activities of generations, in which each generation is based on the foundation laid by the previous generation" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012), inheriting the results of the development of productive forces of the previous generations, and creating greater productive forces through the change of tools in their own time, when the development of productive forces to a certain extent will also bring about the development of productive relations, and the development of productive forces will also bring about the development of productive relations. When the development of productive forces reaches a certain level, it will also bring about a change in the relations of production, thus promoting the continuous progress of human society.

#### **4. Nature as Humanized Nature**

Marx divided nature into self-existing nature and humanized nature, where self-existing nature is nature that has not yet been touched by man's practical activity, or nature that has not been transformed by man before the emergence of man. Humanized nature is the nature in which human beings live after being transformed by their practical activities. For the understanding of nature, Marx affirms, on the one hand, that nature existed before human society and that "the priority of external nature will remain," and that from the point of view of historical time nature predates human society; on the other hand, Marx emphasizes that what predates human society is "self-existent nature",

"that nature which preceded human history, not the nature in which Feuerbach lived; this is the nature which today no longer exists anywhere except in some newly emerged coral islands in Australia, and which therefore does not exist for Feuerbach either" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012). The natural world that existed before human history is the natural world that existed before the emergence of human societies in terms of time, and in terms of space, in areas that have not yet been touched by human activity. In order to understand the sensible world, it is necessary to understand that the sensible world corresponds to the nature in which people live, "humanized nature", not "self-existing nature".

"Humanized nature" is the basis of the sensible world. The entire sensual world consists of both the natural world, in which people live and which serves as the basis for the formation of human society, and human society, which develops on the basis of the natural world. The reason why "self-existing nature" becomes "humanized nature" and human society is formed is inseparable from the sensual activity of human beings. This sensual activity is human labor and creation. As it is pointed out in the text: "This activity, this continuous sensual labor and creation, this production, is the very basis of the entire existing sensual world, which is interrupted for even one year, Feuerbach will see that not only in the world of nature will take place a great change, but also the entire world of human beings, as well as his own intuitive ability, and even his own existence will soon be gone!" (The Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2012). The existing continuum of sensible labor and creation is the basis of the sensible world. Sensible labor, as the basis of the initial "humanization of nature" and the formation of human society, exists as the starting point of human history. Therefore, since the beginning of human history, the natural world is no longer simply "self-existent nature" but "humanized nature". The world in which Feuerbach lived, as a human society, must be based on "humanized nature" transformed by man's practical activities, but Feuerbach understood the natural world in which he lived in the sense of "self-existing nature," and could not see the role of man's practical transformations of nature, thus he did not see the role of man's practical transformations of nature. The root cause of his mistake is that the

old materialism fails to recognize the dynamism of practice. The reason why he could not recognize the dynamism of practice also lies in the abstract nature of his anthropological thought. He could not see that human beings are real human beings, social, historical and dynamic human beings engaged in the practice of material production, and naturally he could not understand the nature of human practical activities.

## 5. Conclusion

Marx believed that the relationship between man and nature is interaction and dialectical unity, the existence of one party based on the existence of the other. This idea is based on a critique of the intuitive materialist view of nature, that is, if we uphold the subject-object separation and antagonistic way of thinking, not only can not grasp the real properties of nature, but also can not correctly understand and treat the relationship between human beings and nature. Subject and object are not abstract dichotomies, if the intuitive attitude of oneself as the subject and nature as the object, then the nature of this "object" is also upholding a predatory, appropriating attitude, that the predation of the object will correspondingly increase the power of the subject. In contrast, practical materialism believes that the subject is involved in the generation of the object, and the object also reacts to the subject, and the subject and object are not separated from each other and opposed to each other, but are in a community or interdependent contradiction and unity, and there is also a change of status due to the power of the two. Therefore, if we look at it from an intuitive perspective, the loss of one party will bring about the development of the other party, but this may only be a transient phenomenon. It is also because they look at things from the perspective of intuitive materialism that leads to short-termism, which makes them lose the historical perspective and cannot penetrate through the phenomenon to understand the essence, not seeing that the "object" that is lost contains the possibility of becoming the "subject". Just as mankind if endless plundering of nature, the surface phenomenon, human power grows while the power of nature continues to recede, but from the essential point of view, but created a deep crisis, there is a change in the power of nature, in turn, deprived of the human disaster, there is also the power of nature to dry up the "disappearance of the

object” and mankind this. There is also the possibility that the “subject” of human beings will disappear as the “object” disappears when the resources of nature are exhausted.

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