

# SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS' HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE

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**Resumo:** Marx e Engels não nasceram como materialistas históricos naturais, e o seu materialismo histórico surgiu com base na crítica ao idealismo hegeliano e ao materialismo humanista feuerbachiano. Em *A Ideologia Alemã*, eles expuseram pela primeira vez o conceito de materialismo histórico e discutiram sistemática e elaboradamente os seus princípios básicos, realizando assim uma grande transformação na história da filosofia. Este artigo selecionou as críticas de Marx e Engels ao materialismo humanista feuerbachiano para ilustrar a sua transcendência de Feuerbach e o nascimento do materialismo histórico, aprofundando assim a nossa compreensão desta questão.

**Palavras-chave:** Materialismo histórico. Marx e Engels. *A Ideologia Alemã*. Feuerbach.

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# SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS' HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Marx and Engels were not born as natural historical materialists, and their historical materialism arose on the basis of criticizing Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian humanistic materialism. In *The German Ideology*, they first expounded the concept of historical materialism and systematically and elaborately discussed its basic principles, thereby realizing a great transformation in the history of philosophy. This paper selected Marx and Engels' criticism of Feuerbachian humanistic materialism to illustrate their transcendence of Feuerbach and the birth of historical materialism, thus deepening our understanding of this issue.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historical materialism, according to Engels, is the “[...] science of reality, the science of humans and their historical development” (Zhu, 2009, p. 46). Marx and Engels founded this science and devoted their lives to its dissemination and application. However, they were not born as historical materialists, just as it is usually said that “Marx was not born a Marxist”. Their philosophical thinking went through three stages of development: the idealist Hegelian phase, the materialist Feuerbachian phase, and the dialectical and historical materialist Marxian phase.

Marx and Engels' philosophical ideas both originated from Hegelian philosophy. Initially, they were both believers in Hegelian philosophy and held idealistic views on both history and nature, belonging to the Young Hegelians. In 1841, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* was published, which restored the authority of materialism. Influenced by Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy, they turned from idealism to materialism and became Feuerbachians (Lei, 2010, p. 36; Muller-Wood, 2022, p. 67). Later, Marx and Engels, in the process of practical work, witnessed the importance of the struggle for material interests in reality and began to embark on the path of historical materialism. From the spring of 1845, Marx began to reassess his belief in Feuerbach's philosophy and criticized Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy. *The German Ideology* was written by Marx and Engels to clarify their historical materialist stance and to settle their previous philosophical beliefs.

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## 1 CRITICIZING FEUERBACH'S ABSTRACT NOTION OF HUMAN AND ESTABLISHING REAL HUMAN AS THE PREMISE OF HUMAN HISTORY

Feuerbach centered his humanistic philosophy around the “worship of abstract man”. He did not study people as “actors in history”, which means he was unable to find a way from the abstract realm that he vehemently hated to the living, real world (Friedrich, 1972, p. 237). Therefore, he could not break free from the “[...] traditional idealist constraints” in terms of his view of history (Friedrich, 1972, p. 227). Marx and Engels realized, through their own practical activities and theoretical research, that they must “[...] turn from Feuerbach’s abstract man to real, living people” (Liu, 1979, p. 2), “[...] study these people as actors in history”, and “[...] harmonize the sum of the science of society, namely, the history and philosophy of science, with the materialist foundation, and transform it on this basis” (Liu, 1979, p. 3). As a result, they decided to criticize Feuerbach’s humanism, develop a materialist view of history and explain the basic principles of historical materialism. They began this work in the spring of 1845.

Feuerbach’s book *The Essence of Christianity* caught Marx and Engels’ attention, who began studying it in July 1841 and in the second half of 1841, respectively (Friedrich, 1960, p. 83). They accepted Feuerbach’s basic ideas about materialism in nature, which can be summarized as “[...] nothing exists outside of nature and humanity, and the highest existences created by our religious fantasies are merely illusory reflections of our inherent nature” (Friedrich, 1960, p. 30). They believed that “[...] the material world, which we belong to and can perceive, is the only reality, while our consciousness and thinking, no matter how super-sensible they may appear, are always the product of material and bodily organs, namely the human brain. Material is not the product of spirit, but spirit is only the highest product of material” (Friedrich, 1960, p. 73). Influenced by Feuerbach’s philosophy, they shifted from idealism to materialism and became Feuerbachians. Engels once said: “In that tempestuous period, Feuerbach’s influence on us was greater than that of any other philosopher since Hegel. At that time, we were all excited and became Feuerbachians for a while” (Friedrich, 1960, p. 84). Until 1844, they had not completely freed themselves from Feuerbach’s influence, which was reflected not only in Feuerbach’s remnants in their works, but also in their overvaluation of Feuerbach. Marx stated in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*:

Aside from those authors who have critically studied political economy, it is solely due to Feuerbach’s discovery that there exists a critical empirical attitude toward political economy and toward the material in general [...] The empirical critique of humanism and naturalism began with Feuerbach. [...] His work is the only one which contains a real theoretical revolution after Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Logic* (Friedrich, 1960, p. 84).

In their co-authored work, *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels said: “Only Feuerbach started from Hegelianism and ended with a critique and overthrow of Hegelian philosophy” (Wang, 2019, p. 11). Feuerbach reduced metaphysical absolute spirit to ‘real human beings based on nature’, thus completing the criticism of religion. At the same time, he cleverly formulated “[...] the basic viewpoint for the critique of Hegelian speculation and all metaphysics” (Freschi, 2016, p. 65). These evaluations are clearly overstated. In the spring of 1845, Marx and Engels began to feel the need to reconcile their previous philosophical beliefs and critique Feuerbach’s humanist philosophy. Therefore, they decided to jointly study their “views” in Brussels, to clarify their “previous philosophical beliefs”, to formulate a materialist view of history, and to expound on their thoughts and “[...] the opposition between their views and the German philosophical system” (Wang, 2019, p. 22). In this way, they not only needed to critique Hegel and the Young Hegelians, but also had to critique Feuerbach. Marx had already achieved the critique of Hegel and the Young Hegelians through his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* in 1843 and the joint work with Engels in 1844-1845, *The Holy Family*. The criticism of Feuerbach began in the spring of 1845, when Marx wrote *Theses on Feuerbach* to prepare for a systematic critique of Feuerbach. Then, Marx and Engels were co-authored of the work *The German Ideology* (1845-1846), which thoroughly repudiated post-Hegelian philosophy, including Feuerbach’s humanism. In particular, through their critique of Feuerbach’s humanist philosophy, they developed historical materialism and systematically expounded its basic principles.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels first criticized Feuerbach’s abstract notion of “man” and asserted that the premise of human history is concrete individuals (Li, 2015, p. 35). They pointed out that

Feuerbach has not seen the real, active, living man, but has abstracted from him only the creature of thought; and further, that he has only considered the particular, isolated figures of the real world in his isolation, and has not apprehended their connection, their relation, their unity (Li, 2015, p. 41).

They also argued that “Feuerbach only recognized ‘real, separate, flesh-and-blood individuals’ within the realm of emotions, such as love and friendship, but did not understand the other ‘relations of man to man’ that exist beyond these idealized emotions” (Ausubel, 1996, p. 360). “Regarding the world in which this person lives, there is no discussion whatsoever, so this person remains the same abstract person that is found in religious philosophy” (Li, 2015, p. 45). “This person is not born from a mother’s womb, but rather from the divine wings of a religion, and does not live in a real, historically determined world. Although he interacts with other people, every other person is just as abstract as he is” (Li, 2015, p. 51). Marx and Engels criticized Feuerbach’s humanism and idealist historical view centered on an abstract human, and “[...] replaced it with a focus on real, living individuals who act in history” (Li, 2015, p.

56). By studying these individuals as actors in history, they recognized that the premise of human history is not an abstract human, but a real one. They stated that “[...] the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals”, and that history is “[...] premise is man, not some abstract being dwelling outside the world” (Li, 2015, p. 61). Instead, they emphasized that individuals exist in specific conditions, develop through real experiences and are observable through empirical observation. Thus, they established the premise of human history as real individuals.

At the same time, Marx and Engels believed that as a part of society, people’s various practical activities are social, and such activities would be affected by various historical conditions and social relations. In addition, they also emphasized the human beings’ sociality and historical nature and regarded human beings as an individual in a specific social form.

Marx and Engels’ dialectical materialist view of history surpassed Feuerbach’s abstract concept of man, and described the development dynamics and laws of human history through in-depth analysis of social practice and social production relations. They realized that human social production activities and their relationship are the basis for promoting historical development, and this historical development also affects the shaping of people’s consciousness and ideas.

## **2 CRITIQUING FEUERBACH’S PURELY NATURAL MAN AND THE DETERMINING MATERIAL PRODUCTION AS THE SOURCE OF HUMAN HISTORY**

Marx and Engels critiqued Feuerbach’s naturalistic conception of humanity and determined that the source of human history is material production, by studying people’s practical activities and the societies they lived in, starting from the real individuals’ perspective.

Feuerbach’s humanistic philosophy is materialistic from a naturalistic perspective, as it emphasizes that nature and humans are the only reality. In criticizing religion, Feuerbach denied the God’s personality and the idea that God is a spiritual entity, instead emphasizing that humans create God, rather than the other way around. However, from a historical perspective, Feuerbach’s philosophy remains idealistic because he did not understand the society in which humans lived nor did he understand the social roots of religion. Instead, he saw the changes in religion throughout history as the “[...] means by which human eras are distinguished from each other” (Chen, 2022, p. 6). He understands the humans’ essence as a “class”, a “[...] silent internal commonality that naturally connects many people” (Chen, 2022, p. 10). And he fails to see that “[...] it is the sum of all social relations”. Thus, Feuerbach falls into idealism in the field of history. The fundamental reason for this is that he did not start with real humans but with abstract ones, treating humans as purely natural and using this to explore history. As Marx and Engels pointed out: “When Feuerbach is a materialist,

history is outside his field of vision. When he investigates history, he is never a materialist” (Chen, 2022, p. 16).

Marx and Engels criticized Feuerbach's view of humans as purely natural and instead studied humans as active agents in society. They discovered the role of human practical activity, and thus determined that material production is the source of human history. They pointed out that Feuerbach “[...] sees people only as ‘sensory objects’ rather than ‘sensory activities’, because he remains within the theoretical realm and does not observe people from existing social relations and the surrounding conditions that make people what they are”, and “[...] he does not criticize current life relations and never understands the sensory world as the joint, vibrant, and sensory activity of individuals that constitutes this world” (Chen, 2018, p. 11). “He understands things, reality, and sensory perception only from the object or intuitive form, rather than as human sensory activity or practice” (Chen, 2018, p. 13). The reason why Feuerbach had such a limited understanding of humans was that he emphasized humans as products of nature, and regarded human natural attributes as the only attribute. He only sought to find the difference between humans and animals from one aspect of human natural attributes. Therefore, he could not truly understand that the fundamental difference between humans and animals is that humans can engage in material labor, create the material conditions for their own survival and transform nature in an active way to serve human beings. Thus, he inevitably failed to understand that the unity of humans and nature and the unity of subjectivity and objectivity are based on human active practice.

Marx and Engels, in contrast to Feuerbach, not only introduced practice into epistemology but also, more importantly, introduced a historical perspective. Starting from a practical standpoint, they examined all social phenomena and discovered that “[...] the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.” Therefore, the first specific fact that needs to be determined is these individuals' physical organization, as well as their relationship with the natural world, which is constrained by their physical organization (Liu, 2008, p. 3). “Any historical record should start from these natural foundations and the changes they undergo in the historical process due to human activity.” Here, “natural foundations” refer to the mode of production that is formed by people in their practical activities, so

[...] it should not only be examined from the perspective of the reproduction of individual physical existence. It is more about the certain way of activity of these individuals, which reflects certain forms of life and their certain way of life. Individuals behave as they live, and therefore they are consistent with what they produce and how they produce it. Therefore, what kind of individuals they are depends on the material conditions of their production (Liu, 2008, p. 13).

“Therefore, the first thing that any historical perspective should do is to pay full attention to the full meaning and scope of the above basic facts and give them due importance” (Liu, 2008, p. 15). Therefore, Marx and Engels, while acknowledging the pre-existing conditions of the natural world, emphasized more on the material conditions that people create through their own practical activities. They said:

In order to ‘make history’, people must be able to live (WANG, 1985, p. 7). However, in order to live, they first need to solve the problems of food, clothing, shelter, and other things. Therefore, the first historical activity is to produce the materials that satisfy these needs, that is, to produce material life itself. (Wang, 1985, p. 11).

They pointed out that this is “[...] the first premise of all human existence, and the first premise of all human history” (Wang, 1985, p. 13). It is for this reason that Marx and Engels identified material production as the source of human history, and from this perspective, systematically expounded the basic principles of historical materialism.

### **3 ELABORATION OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM FROM THE REAL PEOPLE’S PERSPECTIVE AND MATERIAL PRODUCTION.**

Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology*, established that the premise of human history is real people, as opposed to abstract or purely natural beings, and that the source of human history is material production (Wang, 2019, p. 55; Hayton, 2020, p. 99). From this starting point, they studied and explored human history, revealing the basic laws of its development, formulating the materialist view of history and expounding the basic principles of historical materialism. According to them, the

[...] historical view is based on explaining the real process of production from material production and interpreting the forms of communication associated with this mode of production, that is, the citizen society at various stages of history, as the foundation of the entire history, describing the citizen society as a state, and explaining the products and forms of all kinds of different theories of consciousness, such as religion, philosophy, and morality, by starting from the citizen society, and tracing the process of their emergence. (Wang, 2019, p. 57).

They followed this path and first expounded on the determining role of material production in social life. They pointed out that human history is premised on the living individuals’ existence, but the living individuals’ continued existence depends on the production of material goods to meet their needs, as well as the production of individuals themselves through reproduction. These two productions did not exist, and there would be no human history. These productions contain three aspects or factors: the production of means of subsistence, the production of means of production, and human self-production

(procreation). They argued: "From the earliest period of human history, since the first batch of people appeared, the three factors of material production have existed simultaneously and are still playing a role in history today" (Shen, 2017, p. 51). However, they emphasized that the production of material goods, specifically the production of means of subsistence and means of production, is the determining factor in this process. Therefore, they regarded material production as "[...] the first premise of all human existence", the "[...] first historical activity", and a "[...] basic condition for all history" (Shen, 2017, p. 57).

Marx and Engels proceeded to analyze the mode of production, placing special emphasis on the decisive role of the productive forces. They pointed out that "[...] the total productive forces available to men determines the social condition" (Shen, 2017, p. 62). As productive forces develop, contradictions inevitably arise between them and the relations of production. When such contradictions cannot be resolved within the existing mode of production, the productive forces demand new relations of production that are better adapted to them. Therefore, in human history, a series of "connected forms of social intercourse" is constituted as productive forces continually develop.

The connection between these forms of social intercourse consists in the fact that the old forms, which have become fetters, are adapted to the more advanced productive forces, and are thus replaced by new forms of intercourse, which correspond to a more progressive type of individual autonomy; and these new forms, in turn, become fetters and are replaced by other forms of intercourse (Shen, 2017, p. 64).

Based on this historical fact, Marx and Engels elucidated various forms of ownership and their successive replacements, revealing the dynamics and vision of the transition or transformation from one social form to a higher one.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels first discussed the dialectical relationship between productive forces and production relations, pointing out that the contradiction between productive forces and production relations is the fundamental driving force of social historical development (Li, 2015, p. 37). They said: "In our view, all historical conflicts originate in the contradiction between productive forces and forms of intercourse" (Li, 2015, p. 48).

This contradiction between productive forces and forms of intercourse (as we have seen, it has occurred repeatedly in past history without threatening the foundation of this form) must inevitably erupt into revolution every time, and it also takes various accompanying forms - manifested as a sum of conflicts, conflicts between classes, contradictions of consciousness, ideological struggles, and political struggles, etc. (Li, 2015, p. 37).

They used the term “forms of intercourse” to express the meaning of production relations, which is not very precise in terms of terminology, but in terms of content, it has already explained the meaning of production relations and the dialectical movement of productive forces and production relations as the fundamental cause of revolutionary eruption. Therefore, in fact, they revealed the dialectical relationship between productive forces and production relations and the fundamental driving force of social historical development.

Marx and Engels also discussed the dialectical relationship between productive forces and production relations in *The German Ideology*, pointing out that the economic base is “[...] the foundation of the entire history” and that the activities of the economic base are “[...] necessarily described within the framework of the political and intellectual life of the nation” (Li, 2013, p. 113; Gonzalez-Martin, 2020, p. 430). Starting from the economic base, they “[...] elucidate the various theories and forms of consciousness such as religion, philosophy, morality, etc., and trace their origins based on this foundation” (Li, 2013, p. 114).

This historical view differs from the idealistic view of history, which seeks to find a certain category in each era. Instead, it always stands on the basis of real history, and explains ideas not from the standpoint of concept, but from the standpoint of material practice. From this, it can be concluded that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be eliminated through spiritual criticism or by reducing them to ‘self-consciousness’, ‘ghosts’, ‘specters’, ‘fancies’, etc. (Li, 2013, p. 114; Jones, 2007, p. 327). But they can only be eliminated by actually overthrowing the real social relations that give rise to this idealistic fallacy. The driving force of history, as well as the driving force behind religion, philosophy, and any other theory, is revolution, not criticism (Gonzalez-Martin, 2020, p. 432).

Through their study of social and political structures in relation to production relations, Marx and Engels discovered the dialectical relationship between the economic base and the superstructure, and outlined a series of fundamental principles regarding the economic base and superstructure. They stated: “Our starting point is men and their actual, empirical activity, which is itself directly determined by the material conditions of their life” (Wang, 2021, p. 11). We can therefore explain the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process, in all its various forms, whether they be the religious, philosophical or men’s moral views, by tracing their origin to the material and economic conditions of this life-process. The men’s ideas, even their most confused ideas, are reflections of their material world. Thus, morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the other ideological systems, as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to them, lost their independent appearance. ... Those who develop their material production and their material exchange alter, along with this, their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness (Wang, 2021, p. 19).

## CONCLUSIONS

Marx and Engels were not born as historical materialists, and their views on historical materialism were developed through their critique of Feuerbach's concept of the "abstract human" and his purely "natural human" approach. They rejected these ideas and instead emphasized the importance of the "real human" and the role of material production as the source of human history. From this foundation, they developed the basic principles of historical materialism, which enabled them to transcend Feuerbach's theories and bring about a major transformation in the history of philosophy. They finally deepened the understanding of this problem and shifted to historical materialism.

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