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An Interpretation of the "Philosophers" in the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach

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ABSTRACT

Interpretations of Marx's famous proposition, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it," easily tend toward extremes, thereby negating the achievements of philosophy workers. Connecting Marx's experiences at the time and the content of The German Ideology, "the philosophers" specifically refers to the Young Hegelians, and "interpreting the world" refers to their idealistic standpoint, engaging solely in theoretical activity while failing to undertake any practice. Accurately grasping this point is the premise for us to correctly view the relationship between theory and practice.

KEYWORDS

Young Hegelians; Idealism; The German Ideology.

1. INTRODUCTION

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." As the final thesis of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, it ultimately became Marx's epitaph. This short yet powerful statement is thought-provoking, enjoying wide dissemination and enormous influence. Thus, the eleventh thesis has become an important entry point for studying Marx's thought, and different research approaches have led to pluralistic interpretations. It is generally believed that Marx's words define the fundamental nature of traditional Western philosophy as "interpreting the world" and put forward "changing world" as his own ideological principle. However, this mode of interpretation often leads to extreme thinking, scoffing at philosophy that merely "interprets the world" while infinitely elevating the status of "transforming the world," resulting in a loss of direction and falling into blind action. As a doctoral graduate in philosophy who was able to transition from idealism to materialism, from revolutionary democracy to communism, and found historical materialism, Marx has already proven that philosophy plays a significant role in human social development. Therefore, interpreting the meanings of "philosopher" and "interpreting the world" in connection with The German Ideology is of great significance for us to correctly recognize the role of philosophy in promoting social progress.

2. THE DESIGNATION OF "THE PHILOSOPHERS": THE YOUNG HEGELIANS

The Theses on Feuerbach is an outline written by Marx for the composition of The German Ideology, and its purpose was not publication. Considering Marx's distinct personality and the examination of The German Ideology, "the philosophers" here should not be understood as all philosophers from ancient times to the present, but specifically refers to the Young Hegelians.

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After Hegel's death, Hegel's philosophy gradually disintegrated, splitting primarily into two factions: the Old Hegelians and the Young Hegelians. Among them, the Old Hegelians represented the thought of the German conservatives. In philosophy, they still adhered to Hegel's concept of the "Absolute Spirit"; in religion, they insisted on the existence of God, continuously defended religion, and supported church activities; in politics, they opposed the democratic revolutionary movement and defended the estate system and the feudal monarchy of Prussia. However, after the success of the Glorious Revolution in Britain and the French Revolution, from a worldwide perspective, the voices of bourgeois democratic revolution grew increasingly louder. As a neighbor of France, the Kingdom of Prussia was inevitably affected. The forces of the Old Hegelians also declined day by day due to the world revolutionary situation and domestic revolutionary calls in Germany, gradually fading from people's view and failing to exert an influence on subsequent philosophy. The Young Hegelians were the radical faction produced during the disintegration process of Hegel's philosophy, whose members included Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, David Strauss, Max Stirner, and others. Marx and Engels also participated in the activities of the Young Hegelians in their youth.

As one of the core figures of the Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach's criticism of Christianity had a great impact on society. His humanistic philosophy made contributions to the history of the development of materialism, while some of his materialist views deeply influenced Marx, with works such as Principles of the Philosophy of the Future and The Essence of Christianity. Bruno Bauer was a leading figure of the Young Hegelians, and he was Marx's teacher, mentor, and close friend. Marx was very familiar with him and his theories, but later broke with him due to ideological disagreements. Bauer's criticism before 1843 focused mainly on religion, with works such as Critique of the Evangelical History of the Synoptics and Critique of the Gospels and History of their Origin. As an important German philosopher in the 19th century, his thoughts and works exerted a significant influence on the philosophical community and society at the time. In addition, the theories of other figures of the Young Hegelians, such as David Strauss and Max Stirner, also had an important impact on the German philosophical community and society. The members of the Young Hegelians advocated criticizing religion to achieve human emancipation and formed many theoretical works, which had an important impact on Marx, Engels, and others. For example, Feuerbach devoted his entire energy to the criticism of religion, setting himself the task of illuminating the dark essence of religion with the torch of reason. Especially the publication of The Essence of Christianity enabled materialist views to make a comeback. Engels stated: "It placed materialism again on the throne without direct-formality... This at once swept away the contradiction." [1] "Everyone was enthusiastic: we all became Feuerbachians for a time. How warmly Marx welcomed the new view and how strongly it influenced him (despite all critical reservations), one can see from The Holy Family." [2] This illustrates the profound and far-reaching impact of Feuerbach's materialism on the German philosophical community, which was also the theoretical choice of the Young Hegelians-a choice determined by their dissatisfaction with the standpoint of Hegel's philosophical system.

As the mainstream of the theoretical community at that time, the propositions of the Young Hegelians naturally became the main target of Marx's criticism. Initially, Marx was the youngest member of the Doctor's Club and a member of the Young Hegelians. However, during his tenure as editor of the Rheinische Zeitung, he broke with the Berlin group "The Free" composed of the Young Hegelians, which was the beginning of Marx's break with the Young Hegelians. From the autumn of 1843 to early 1844, Marx published On the Jewish Question and Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, marking his transition from idealism to materialism and from revolutionary democracy to communism, while also marking his further break with the Young Hegelians. Subsequently, from June to August 1844, Marx wrote the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where while conducting a critique of political economy, he also criticized Hegel's dialectics and philosophy as a whole. In the sections discussing philosophy, Marx endorsed Feuerbach's views, criticized Hegel's idealistic elements, and simultaneously criticized other members of the Young Hegelians. Marx stated: The critique of modernity is so lacking in awareness of its relation to Hegel's entire philosophy, especially to

dialectics, that critics like Strauss and Bruno Bauer remain bound by Hegel's logic; the former is entirely bound, while the latter, in his Synoptics (replacing the substance of "abstract nature" with the abstract human "self-consciousness," in contrast to Strauss), and even in The Truth of Christianity, is at least potentially completely bound [3]. Marx writing the names of Strauss and Bauer into his article is sufficient to show his dissatisfaction with the propositions of both men and the Young Hegelians. From September to November 1844, Marx and Engels jointly completed The Holy Family, which explicitly pointed out that it was a critique of "Bruno Bauer and Company," namely the Young Hegelians. By the spring of 1845, Marx realized that Feuerbach's materialism still had flaws and pointed out: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism-that of Feuerbach included-is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is grasped only in the form of the object or of intuition, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively." [4] From then on, Marx completely broke with the Young Hegelians and theoretically moved toward historical materialism.

The title of the first volume of The German Ideology-Critique of Modern German Philosophy as Represented by Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism as Represented by Various Prophets-explicitly points out that its primary target of criticism is the Young Hegelians. In addition to the criticism of the contemporary Young Hegelians shown in the title, combined with Marx's Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, we know that Marx and Engels had another purpose in writing The German Ideology. Having once been part of the Young Hegelians and maintaining views relatively close to them until before the Rheinische Zeitung period, their critique of the Young Hegelians was simultaneously a "settling of accounts with our former philosophical conscience." Aside from criticizing Feuerbach, Bauer, and others, Marx and Engels were also criticizing themselves during their Young Hegelian period. The way to criticize their former philosophical conscience was to replace the old worldview with a new one-historical materialism-thereby achieving a true transcendence of Hegel's philosophy. Therefore, Marx stated: Since we have achieved our main purpose-clarifying things to ourselves-we are quite willing to let the manuscript gnaw away by the rodent teeth of criticism [5].

In short, combining Marx's experiences before and after writing Theses on Feuerbach and the trajectory of his ideological development, the main theoretical opponent he faced at the time and the primary target of his criticism were the Young Hegelians. The Young Hegelians referred not only to Bauer, Feuerbach, and others, but also included his own former philosophical faith. Therefore, "philosophers" refers to all Young Hegelians, including Marx himself in his youth.

3. IDEALISM: THE ESSENCE OF YOUNG HEGELIAN THEORY

The French Revolution of 1848 undoubtedly had a huge impact on the political situation of the entire European continent. The concepts of freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights advocated by the Enlightenment penetrated people's hearts with the overthrow of the French Bourbon dynasty. What the French Revolution destroyed was not only the absolute monarchy of France, but it also threatened the thrones of monarchs across Europe. As a major European country adjacent to France, the Kingdom of Prussia possessed relatively high levels of economic strength, population size, and education at the time. Most young intellectuals hoped to carry out a bourgeois revolution to abolish the dictatorship of the Prussian king. The rulers of Prussia would not sit idly by; they attempted to control the ideological sphere to complete their dominance over German thought. After Hegel's death, they even employed Schelling as the spokesperson of official philosophy to retrieve the situation, while the conservative remnants of the Hegelian faction formed the Old Hegelians to continue defending the Kingdom of Prussia. In this historical background, young people studying Hegel's philosophy formed the Young Hegelians to oppose Schelling and the feudal forces he represented, while simultaneously criticizing and transcending Hegelian philosophy, attempting to transform the world through theory.

The Old Hegelians believed that as long as everything was subsumed under Hegel's logical categories, they understood everything. That is to say, as long as the developmental process of things was deduced step by step according to the logical system, everything existing in reality could be explained, and the principles of everything existing in reality could be understood. To transform the world, one only needed to transform people's concepts. This was merely because of their stubborn belief in the first half of Hegel's famous saying, "What is rational is real and what is real is rational," believing that established existing things were rational and should not be changed. Engels stated: This obviously sanctified everything existing, blessing despotism, police states, arbitrary justice, and press censorship philosophically [6]. Philosophically, they emphasized the conservative components in Hegel's philosophy; religiously, they defended the position of religion in society; politically, they continuously defended the autocratic system of Prussia.

The Young Hegelians took religious criticism as their main battlefield, and many of their works were critiques of religion, among which Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity held an important position in this ideological emancipation movement. Feuerbach believed that God is the alienation of human essence. In his view, man is the starting point of religion, man is the center of religion, and man is the destination of religion. The essence of religion is human essence; religion is the alienation of human essence, and man created religion rather than the God in religion creating man. Therefore, the old religious view is actually an inversion of the real world, and the essence of God comes from man rather than the reverse. The core category of religion, "God," is human; the opposition between God and man is illusory; the essence of God is human essence, which is the self-alienation of human essence. Since the relationship between man and God in religion is inverted, how to overcome this alienation? Feuerbach proposed: to expose and criticize the hypocrisy of religion, return the human things alienated to "God" back to humans, turn people's love for God into love for people, and establish a religion of "love." Because the essence of religion is human, human love for God is essentially human love for humanity itself. Aside from Feuerbach, Bauer, Strauss, and others all criticized religion. Therefore, Marx stated in Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction: For Germany, the criticism of religion has been largely completed; and the criticism of religion is the premise of all other criticism [7]. In this sense, the Young Hegelians were rational in theory and had positive significance for the formation and development of Marxism. They pulled religion from heaven back to earth, replaced God with man, and replaced the otherworldly sphere with this-worldly sphere, promoting the founding of Marxism.

However, the Young Hegelians' excessively centralized criticism of religion caused them to notice only the religious sphere while ignoring other more important fields. The Young Hegelians stubbornly asserted that everything contained religious concepts or declared everything to be theological, thereby criticizing everything. The Young Hegelians agreed with the conviction of the Old Hegelians that religion, concepts, and the universal dominate the existing world. In their view, as long as religion was criticized, it was equivalent to criticizing everything existing in the world; the completion of religious criticism was the completion of the criticism of the real world, and the completion of the criticism of the real world would change people's concepts-once people's concepts were transformed, people's actions would change accordingly with the concepts, ultimately changing the world. This was identical to the solution of the Young Hegelians. Just as the Old Hegelians regarded them as the true shackles of human society, it goes without saying that the Young Hegelians only needed to fight against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to the Young Hegelians' assumption, the relations between people, all their actions, and the restraints and limitations they received were products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians quite logically presented a moral demand to people: to replace their current consciousness with human, critical, or egoistic consciousness, thereby eliminating the limitations binding them. Therefore, the Young Hegelians seemed progressive, revolutionary, radical, and opposed to the Old Hegelians, but in practice, their core was identical. Both the Young Hegelians and Old Hegelians started from concepts and attempted to change the world through changing people's concepts, making it impossible for either to transform reality. Marx evaluated: Although the ideologues of the Young Hegelians were

full of so-called "world-shaking" phrases, they were the biggest conservatives [8]. Therefore, the Young Hegelians, like the Old Hegelians, were idealistic whether viewed from their starting point or their solution.

4. MERELY "INTERPRETING THE WORLD": THE DEFICIENCIES OF THE YOUNG HEGELIANS

The Young Hegelians started from abstract universality, constructing their theories from categories such as "species," "the unique," and "man." This idealistic standpoint led the Young Hegelians to believe that humans are rational; as long as the motives, processes, and trends of things' development were theorized, humans would change their behavior according to inherent rationality and enter the next stage. Politically, this manifested as opposing the feudal absolute monarchy and carrying out a democratic revolution. For them, the most paramount task was to interpret everything in the existing world, classify it as rationality, and disseminate it to everyone; therefore, what they did was merely interpret the world. The Young Hegelians philosophers essentially only interpreted the world in various ways, daring not to use revolutionary practice to change the dark reality of Germany. Their theory was one that constantly described the world and continuously perfected itself, yet could never break through its own boundaries to achieve an impact on the real world. The fundamental defects of this faction can be summarized as follows: it believed that philosophy could become reality without abolishing philosophy [9].

Marx keenly perceived: Not a single one of these philosophers has thought of inquiring into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material environment [10]. This problem is the prerequisite for the existence of an ordinary human being living in daily life-a real human being. These are real individuals, their activities, and their material conditions of life, including those they found already existing and those produced by their own activity. That is, to understand society starting from concrete, real individuals, and realistically transform society using this as a starting point.

5. CONCLUSION

Philosophy is the crystallization of human wisdom, the mapping of the spirit of the times, a summary of existing human civilization achievements, and an exploration of the direction of future human civilization development. However, the theories of the Young Hegelians did not break through Hegel's framework, sublate the idealistic components in Hegel's philosophy, or point out the true path for the development of civilization. The "philosophers" referred to by Marx are not all philosophers, but philosophers like the Young Hegelians who cannot jump beyond theoretical activity itself to conduct real practical activities. Therefore, "the point is to change the world".

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