

# Young Marx versus Philosophical Communism

Yushan Wang

School of Marxism, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

Email: yswang213@cufe.edu.cn

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## Abstract

Taking the critique of Germany philosophy as the theoretical background for exploring the issue of Marx's shift to communism, it can be seen that young Marx engaged in a critical dialogue with mainstream communism based on Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy in the period from Krotznacher to *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücheras*. But the ultimate direction of Feuerbach's philosophy was "true socialism" rather than scientific communism. What's more, Robert C. Tucker's conclusion about Marx's "stage of philosophical communism" was based on a one-sided extraction, abstract generalization, and inappropriate evaluation of the overall ideology of young Marx, so he did not show much more ideological insight. Based on this stage of ideological exploration, Marx gradually achieved a true shift and confirmation towards communism through later political and economic research and philosophical revolution.

## Keywords

Young Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Philosophy of Feuerbach, Economic Alienation, Philosophical Communism

## 1. Introduction

There is always some kind of change in people's minds over time. Because of the creation of historical materialism and the analysis of the capitalism mode of production, Marx has become a millennium thinker who is constantly talked about, but can never be ignored. When did Marx begin to possess the above-mentioned form of thought, which is known as the "Karl Marx Issue" in academic circles. The "Karl Marx Issue" is a major fundamental question in research about Marx, and answering "when and how Marx became a communist" is one of the key answers to the above questions. In fact, Marx's recognition, confirmation, and belief in communism underwent a relatively complex dialectical development process, and the period from Krotznacher to *Deutsch-Französische*

*Jahrbücheras* is the key stages of his ideological formation and development. In recent years, some researchers believe that young Marx did not directly turn to scientific communism, but completed the final transformation through the intermediate stage of philosophical communism. The time when Marx worked in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücheras* and even in *Rheinische Zeitung* is exactly the stage of Marx's philosophical communism.

Regarding the statement that Marx embarked on the path of philosophical communism during the period of *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücheras*, there are two typical explanations in detail. Someone, mainly represented by young Frederick Engels (1843) and Moses Hess (1843), believed that German communism was an inevitable conclusion of German philosophy, when others (Robert Charles Tucker, 1968) thought Marx turned to be a communist through philosophical concepts such as "alienation" and "proletariat". However, in fact, based on the critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, the claim of "philosophical communism" is generally untenable.

## **2. The Natural Conclusion of Feuerbach's Philosophy Is Far Away from Scientific Communism**

In October 1843, Engels proposed in his *Progress of Social Reform On the Continent*, which introduced the current development of communism and socialism in the European continent, that the development of communism in Germany followed a philosophical communism route different from Britain and France. "The same love of abstract principle, the same disregard of reality and self-interest, which have brought the Germans to a state of political nonentity, these very same qualities guarantee the success of philosophical Communism in that country," he wrote (Marx & Engels, 1975a, Vol. 3: p. 493). What's more, he figured out that Germany communism was a necessary consequence of New Hegelian philosophy, German republicans such as Marx became communists by this philosophy. In his later *Preface to the Situation of the Working Class in Britain*, Engels more specifically pointed out that German socialism and communism are more based on theoretical premises than any other country's socialism and communism... Among the representatives who openly advocate for this reform, almost no one has gone to communism without overcoming Hegel's speculation through Feuerbach. Engels' argument is not an isolated one. In fact, Moss Hess, the first person of German communist, had already begun this philosophical argument on communism, believing that the communist viewpoint was an inevitable conclusion of the entire development of German philosophy in the past. In the article *Socialism and Communism*, Hess combines Feuerbach's categories of "alienation", "essence of class", and "essence of human beings" with individual propositions of French socialists, attempting to prove the parallel development of German philosophy and French socialism, leading to a consistent conclusion; In *Socialism and Movement in Germany*, Hess further believed that "the improved German philosophy, namely Feuerbach's philosophy, is the

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relationship between theoretical humanitarianism and practical humanitarianism.” (Hess, 2010)

There is currently no direct textual evidence of whether Marx in 1843 agreed with Engels’ classification of him as having “joined the communist camp”. However, from Marx’s rejection of mainstream communism and the stage of Marx’s own ideological development, the answer is actually negative. To be honest, on the one hand, although Marx’s understanding of communism was no longer superficial at this time, due to his philosophical inclination in theoretical themes and unfamiliarity with political economy, young Marx’s understanding of communism had not yet reached a very deep level. Taking the evaluation of Wilhelm Christian Weitling as an example, when he still made slightly superficial comments on the communist propositions proposed by Weitlin and others in reality. One year later, he praised Weitlin’s book more than once as a “genius” when criticizing political economy. On the other hand, the “philosophy” in the “philosophical communism” discussed by Engels and Hess is completely different from the subsequent historical materialism theory, and directly refers to the philosophy of the young Hegelian school, especially Feuerbach’s philosophy. Although Marx at this time was greatly influenced by Feuerbach’s theory of “human essence” and the logic of “subject verb inversion” by which Feuerbach criticized Hegel, however, such influence and borrowing actually remain at the shallow level. In the narratives of *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and *Introduction to Critique of Philosophy of Right*, Feuerbach’s concepts of “sensual contemplation”, as well as the concept of “alienation” based on the perspective of the human subject, which are more important and deeper, have not been effectively reflected in Marx’s articles. But afterwards, in the *Excerpt Notes of 1844*, by his rediscovery from Feuerbach, Marx finally confirmed the centrality of human nature, the reality and starting point status of nature and human history, and achieved the first limited recognition of communism through this. In other words, Feuerbach’s true attempt to surpass Hegel has not yet been fully recognized and utilized by the young Marx of this stage, and it cannot be said that Marx used this philosophy to extend the conclusion of communism, let alone argue that Marx at this time was a philosophical communist.

On this basis, a deeper inquiry reveals that the more important question behind Hess’ thesis on “philosophical communism” is whether communism is truly the inevitable conclusion and development direction of German philosophy, especially the young Hegelian philosophy under the banner of Feuerbach’s philosophy? The answer is uncertain. On the one hand, communism, which is related to the material demands of the proletariat, does not originate from abstract theoretical or ethical emotional needs, nor is it the result of theoretical logic. On the contrary, it is a reflection and refinement of real movements and situations, originating from the summary and empirical research of real economic-social life and material prerequisites. In 1845, Engels candidly and rigorously introspected his philosophical communist viewpoints two years ago, pointing out that

he had no exception in Hegelizing the views of England and France many years ago, “treating it as a brand new invention, exposing it in a much more worn-out and abstract form” (Marx & Engels, 1957, Vol. 5: p. 655). However, Hess always believed that communism originated from rational thinking and “sympathy for human suffering”, and was a product of ideas and a purely logical conclusion. Marx later explicitly criticized Hess in his *German Ideology* that Hess synthesizes the development of French socialism and the development of German philosophy: Saint-Simon and Schelling, Fourier and Hegel, Proudhon and Feuerbach (Marx & Engels, 1975b, Vol. 5: p. 491). On the other hand, from the perspective of the development of ideological history, Feuerbach’s philosophy based on the “self-awareness” of the young Hegelian school and the promotion of humanism ultimately failed to achieve a reasonable argument for communism, but instead embarked on the path of “German or ‘true’ socialism” (Marx & Engels, 1976, Vol. 6: p. 510) that Marx criticized later. Hess was the first promoter of efforts to combine Feuerbach’s philosophy with communism, and Feuerbach himself pointed out in his response to Steiner’s statement that “Feuerbach armed his own materialism with the armor of idealism, Feuerbach should not be called a materialist, nor should he be called an idealist... So what is he? Feuerbach places the substantive rights of human beings in the social sphere, he is a person of society and a communist” (Feuerbach, 1984: p. 435). However, objectively speaking, Feuerbach’s response was powerless. Steiner criticized Feuerbach’s approach to solving the problem by reversing human essence and subject verb in *The Ego and Its Own*, which was “after just peeling off the snake skin of the old religion, but putting on a new layer of religious snake skin” (Stirner, 1989: p. 51). In this new religion, the position of God was only replaced by abstract “class essence” and “sociality”, real individuals and real history still do not exist. Steiner’s assertion is straightforward, Marx later made a similar criticism in *The German Ideology*: “it is also clear from these arguments how grossly Feuerbach is deceiving himself when by virtue of the qualification ‘common man’ he declares himself a communist, transforms the latter into a predicate of ‘man,’ and thereby thinks it possible to change the word ‘communist,’ which in the real world means the follower of a definite revolutionary party, into a mere category.” (Marx & Engels, 1975b, Vol. 5: p. 57) The fundamental crux of this “true socialism” lies in an abstract and hollow understanding of history. It can’t discover the true and concrete historical starting point and individual subject, and the inability to understand the process and driving force of historical development. In short, true socialists are all thorough historical idealists.

### **3. Abstract and Misalignment: Tucker’s Theory of “Philosophical Communism”**

If Engels and Hess made the above judgments about the German communism of their time as historical “playwrights,” then modern researchers such as Tucker, after understanding the overall historical progress and results, came up with

similar conclusions as “theater watchers”. Tucker believed that under the influence of Hess and others, the core focus of Marx during the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* was on the issue of human alienation in economic life. Marx proposed to liberate humanity from the Jewish spirit by studying the theme of “economic alienation” in *On The Jewish Question*. It means that social organizations are in such a way of eliminating the concept of “doing business for profit”. In this concept, there is implicit acceptance of socialist or communist views. In the *Introduction to Critique of Philosophy of Right*, Marx endowed Stein with a revolutionary and material representation of the human race as a whole based on his concept of the “proletariat”, stating that “although communism is the class ideology of the proletariat, it is destined to serve not only its own level of material interests, but also the universal spiritual needs of ending self alienation”, Thus, it did not depart from the creed of philosophical communism for a moment (Tucker, 1972: pp. 112-113).

Tucker’s argumentation logic is very typical, representing a common argumentation approach among researchers of intellectual history who are later generations of history: using Marx’s ultimate “mature” and perfective classical thought form as a reference, exploring the components, conceptual paradigms, thematic context, characteristic attributes, specific viewpoints, and propositions of this “finished product of thought”, and then using it as a “sample” to trace the formation and development process of thought, searching for “similarities” or “embryonic states” within it. To be honest, such hindsight research approach is an important approach to historical research, but it is easy to focus on a certain part or “component” of the study and ignore the overall nature of the thought itself if improperly used. It is also easy to use the “taking end as the starting point” theory and underestimate the possibility of other directions in the specific historical stage. Thus, it is impossible to fully understand the true driving force and logic of historical and ideological development.

Firstly, Tucker abstracted the term “alienation” and “proletariat” as the keywords which seem to run through the main process of Marx’s ideological development. But he neglected the theoretical and logical context in which young Marx used relevant concepts. Thus, it was not possible to understand the different connotations and meanings of the same term in the specific ideological and historical context. Taking “alienation” as an example, the concept of “alienation” used by Marx during the period of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* is more of a philosophical concept, mainly referring to the reversal of purpose and means, with a focus on the loss of human essential purposes in reality. The reason for the loss is the duality of human beings caused by the dichotomy between the state and civil society. The purpose of “eliminating business profits” is also to eliminate the alienation state in civil society, there is a clear dimension and depth difference from the discussion in the *Paris Manuscripts* and subsequent texts, such as “alienation and the abandonment of alienation follow the same path”. Therefore, discussing the same concept across different articles without understanding different theoretical background and internal logic in different

text is speculative and abstractive.

Secondly, Tucker made an inappropriate evaluation of Marx's political economy research before the *Paris Manuscripts*. During the period of *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Marx focused on criticizing German philosophy and philosophy of right. Overall, he lacked sufficient research on political economy, and he did not have first-hand contact and in-depth investigation of real economic organizations and workers' conditions as Engels did. His theoretical focus and knowledge reserves could not support Marx's core theme of "economic alienation". One year later, Marx did indeed read a large amount of political and social history materials in Krotznacher, attempting to return to the starting point of Hegel's starting point, and Marx fundamentally completed his criticism and transcendence of Hegel by reading the historical works on which Hegel relied for research and argumentation. However, objectively speaking, although he did poke Hegel's weakness in state theory, Marx exactly didn't get Hegel's excellent understanding and innovations of the modern economic nature of civil society, such as the "system of needs", the generation of labor value, division of labor, and exchange, etc. What's more, just because Marx did not take "economic alienation" as the core theme and perspective at this time, he did not fully understand its significance. It was not until the *Paris Manuscripts* that Marx would begin to rediscover Hegel's journey of political economy.

Once again, Tucker preset the connotation of communism as imaginatively fixed and unchanging. He ignored Marx's different understanding of "communism" at different stages due to different ideological backgrounds. For example, during the *Rheinische Zeitung* period, Marx criticized communism as utopian based on his recognition of the philosophy of freedom and rights. During the *Paris Manuscripts* period, based on humanistic philosophy, he believed that communism was a necessary transition as the "active abandonment of private property". However, in the later texts of *The German Ideology*, the connotation of communism as a science has undergone new changes.

In fact, if we want to categorize the philosophical background of young Marx before the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx should be in a transitional process from Hegelian rational philosophy to Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy at this time. He believed that the principle of reason "always exists", he borrowed Feuerbach's terminology to regard Hegelian philosophy as "logical, pantheistic mysticism". The philosophical concepts of "human nature" have been elevated to a considerable level to conduct philosophical evaluations of communism and socialism. Young Marx brought the value principle of "man is the end" to the extreme, even replacing national rationality as the ultimate goal of rational development. However, this abstract "man" that shares the essence of abstract nature inevitably became a new principle of absolute rationality and "god", and was subsequently pointed out by Steiner when criticizing Feuerbach. Soon after that, Marx indirectly admitted in his *German Ideology*, where he cleared up his philosophical beliefs, that his "copy" criticism a year ago did not leave Hegel's philosophical base. "Not only in its answers, even in its questions there was a mystifica-

tion.” (Marx & Engels, 1975b, Vol. 5: p. 28)

#### 4. Summary

In summary, in the perspective of communist cognition, from the end of the *Rheinische Zeitung* to the closure of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücheras*, although young Marx had a certain understanding of communism, he didn't become a philosophical communist. Despite of this, Marx still established the starting point for the logic of alienation and abandonment in the period of *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücheras*. The theoretical center began to transform from the state to civil society, truly paid attention to and began to explore the issue of private property and the production labor behind it, began to use the “historical genesis” method to explore social reality, and began to reveal the phenomenon of currency worship and the social relationships behind objects. Marx started to criticize the overall ideology of modern capitalism, began to truly pay attention to “people”, and constructed an important ideological beginning and embryonic basis for the formation of scientific communism theory thereafter.

Afterwards, in the *Excerpt Notes of 1844* (1844), Marx continued to explore Feuerbach's humanistic concepts such as the “essence of class” and “sensuous contemplation”. He showed his finite philosophical recognition of communism in the first time, and began to talk more about communism in the main texts from then on. In *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels together sorted out the origins, theoretical development history, and philosophical basis of socialism and communism, and began to explain the materialistic characteristics of communism. In *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx used newly created historical materialism as the basic examination position, perspective, and method, and supported communist theory and action with “practical materialism” and “new materialism”. He clarified that the basic task of communism was to revolutionize the existing world, proposed the content and conditions of a series of communist reforms, and began to become a “true communist”. Gradually, he completed the scientific argumentation of communism by certain steps. After much deeper research on political economy such as *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx summarized the basic proposition of communists as eliminating capitalist private ownership in *Communist Manifesto* (1848). In late years, economic manuscripts or works such as *Grundrisse* (1857-1858) and *Capital* (1867), Marx discussed the formation, existence mechanism, and significance of capitalism in the frame of “capitalism production mode”. Finally, a systematic and thorough examination of historical materialism was conducted on internal contradictions, ultimately completing a complete demonstration of the “historicity” of capitalism and the scientific nature of communism.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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