



# COMMENT ON “SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS’ HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE”

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## COMMENT ON “SHIFT IN MARX AND ENGELS’ HISTORICAL MATERIALISM PERSPECTIVE”

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According to Shen (2024), Marx and Engels did not start their intellectual journey as natural historical materialists. Their development of historical materialism was a result of their critique of Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian humanistic materialism. It was in “The German Ideology” that they first introduced the concept of historical materialism and provided a comprehensive analysis of its foundational principles. This marked a significant turning point in the history of philosophy. This study aims to highlight Marx and Engels’ critique of Feuerbachian humanistic materialism, which played a crucial role in their transcendence of Feuerbach and the emergence of historical materialism. By examining their criticisms, we can gain a deeper understanding of the transformative process that led to the birth of historical materialism.

Marx and Engels identified limitations in Feuerbach’s humanistic materialism, particularly its focus on the individual and its failure to address the social and economic structures that shape human history. They argued that understanding history requires an analysis of the material conditions and the class struggles that underlie social development (Yong, 2010, p. 36). By recognizing the primacy of material production and the role of economic forces in shaping society, Marx and Engels moved beyond Feuerbach’s individualistic perspective and laid the foundation for historical materialism.

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Through their critique of Feuerbachian humanistic materialism, Marx and Engels established the key principles of historical materialism, such as the primacy of the material base, the dialectical relationship between the forces and relations of production, and the role of class struggle in driving historical change. These principles formed the basis for their analysis of capitalism and their revolutionary socialist theory. Marx and Engels' development of historical materialism was a result of their critical engagement with Feuerbachian humanistic materialism and their recognition of its limitations. Their critique led to the transcendence of Feuerbach and the establishment of historical materialism as a revolutionary philosophical framework. By examining their criticisms, we gain insights into the intellectual journey that shaped their ideas and deepens our understanding of historical materialism as a transformative approach to analyzing society and history.

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

Marx and Engels offered a critical analysis of Feuerbach's abstract notion of human in their works. They identified limitations in Feuerbach's approach, which focused primarily on the individual and neglected the social and historical context in which individuals exist. According to Marx and Engels, Feuerbach's humanistic materialism failed to account for the role of social relations, economic structures and historical processes in shaping human existence.

Feuerbach viewed human nature in an abstract and ahistorical manner, emphasizing the individuals' essential qualities. However, Marx and Engels argued that human nature cannot be divorced from the material conditions and social relations that form the society's basis. They contended that human nature is a product of historical development, shaped by the material forces of production, class struggle and social relations.

Marx and Engels emphasized the dialectical relationship between individuals and their social environment. They posited that human consciousness, desires and actions are shaped by the prevailing social and economic conditions, rather than being predetermined by abstract essences. In their critique, they emphasized the need to understand individuals as social beings embedded in specific historical contexts (Wang, 2019, p. 34).

By challenging Feuerbach's abstract notion of human, Marx and Engels laid the groundwork for historical materialism. They shifted the focus from individual essences to the material conditions and social relations that shape human history. Their analysis introduced a dynamic understanding of human nature, emphasizing the individuals' interconnectedness with the larger social and historical forces at play.

In the spring of 1845, Marx and Engels began their systematic critique of Feuerbach, focusing on the "Theses on Feuerbach". Subsequently, they co-authored "The German Ideology", which extensively refuted post-Hegelian philosophy, including Feuerbach's humanism. Through this critique, they developed historical materialism and systematically elaborated its fundamental principles. This marked a significant step in shaping their worldview and providing a solid theoretical foundation for their future works.

Through their critique of Feuerbach's abstract notion of human, Marx and Engels contributed to the development of a more comprehensive and materialist understanding of human existence. Their insights formed the basis for their revolutionary theory of historical materialism, which sought to understand society, history and human nature in a more concrete and dialectical manner.

At the same time, Marx and Engels believed that, as a society's part, 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 offered a critique of Feuerbach's concept of the "purely natural man" and his emphasis on material production as the source of human history. They argued that Feuerbach's understanding of human nature and historical development was limited and failed to capture the complexities of social relations and class struggle. Feuerbach portrayed the "purely natural man" as an abstract and ahistorical being, focusing primarily on individual desires and needs. According to Marx and Engels, this approach neglected the social, economic and political dimensions that shape human history. They contended that human nature cannot be separated from the material conditions and social relations that define and constrain individuals.

Furthermore, Marx and Engels critiqued Feuerbach's reductionist view that material production is the sole determinant of human history. While they acknowledged the importance of material production and the economic base in shaping society, they argued that

it is not the exclusive factor. They emphasized that social relations, class struggle, ideology, and other non-material factors also play significant roles in shaping historical development (Wang, 1985, p. 7).

Marx and Engels developed the concept of historical materialism to provide a more comprehensive understanding of human history. They argued that the economic base, which includes the means of production and the relations of production, forms the society's foundation. However, they stressed that the superstructure, which encompasses institutions, ideologies and cultural practices, interacts with and influences the economic base.

In their critique of Feuerbach, Marx and Engels introduced a dialectical approach that takes into account the complex interplay among material conditions, social relations and ideology in shaping human history. They emphasized the role of class struggle and the dynamics of power relations in driving historical change.

By critiquing Feuerbach's purely natural man and his exclusive focus on material production, Marx and Engels expanded the understanding of historical materialism. Their analysis recognized the multifaceted factors that shape human history, paving the way for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of social development.

Marx and Engels did not initially embrace historical materialism. Their views on this concept developed through their critique of Feuerbach's ideas. Feuerbach's concept of the "abstract human" and his purely "natural human" approach focused on individual essences and neglected the social and historical context in which individuals exist. Marx and Engels rejected these notions, emphasizing the significance of the "real human" and the role of material production in shaping human history. By criticizing Feuerbach's abstract and ahistorical view of human nature, Marx and Engels sought to move beyond his theories and develop a more comprehensive understanding of society and history. They recognized the importance of material production and social relations in shaping the human society's development. From this foundation, they established the fundamental principles of historical materialism, which marked a significant turning point in the history of philosophy. Through their critique of Feuerbach, Marx and Engels deepened their understanding of the limitations of his theories and shifted their focus to historical materialism. They recognized the dynamic interplay among material conditions, social relations and historical processes in shaping human society. This shift allowed them to transcend Feuerbach's ideas and bring about a transformative development in their own philosophy.

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

Following this path, Marx and Engels emphasized the central role of material production in shaping human history. They posited that human history is contingent upon the living individuals’ existence, and their continued existence relies on the production of material goods to satisfy their needs and the process of human reproduction. These two types of production are fundamental to human history, comprising the production of means of subsistence, the production of means of production and human self-production through procreation.

Marx and Engels underlined the significance of material production, particularly the production of material goods, like means of subsistence and means of production, as the determining factor in historical development. They asserted that material production is the primary premise for all human existence, the first historical activity and the fundamental condition underlying all historical processes.

Moreover, they analyzed the mode of production, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of productive forces. They argued that the total productive forces available to society determine its social conditions. As productive forces evolve, contradictions arise between these forces and the existing relations of production. When these contradictions cannot be resolved within the prevailing mode of production, the productive forces demand new and more suitable relations of production. Consequently, in human history, a sequence of interconnected social forms emerges as productive forces continue to develop. The old forms that become hindrances are replaced by new forms that align with advanced productive forces, and this process continues with each new form eventually becoming a hindrance and giving way to further transformations.

Based on this understanding of historical development, Marx and Engels expounded on various forms of ownership and their successive replacements, revealing the dynamic nature of transitions from one social form to a higher one. Their analysis illuminated the human society’s ever-changing landscape and the continual advancement of social relations in response to the development of productive forces.

### **CONCLUSION**

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. Marx and Engels' journey towards historical materialism involved a critique of Feuerbach's concept of the "abstract human" and his purely "natural human" approach. By rejecting these ideas and emphasizing the role of material production and social relations, Marx and Engels developed the basic principles of historical materialism. This transformation in their thinking marked a significant advancement in the history of philosophy, deepening their understanding of society, history and the human condition.

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