

New insights into an old-fashioned interpretation of the world

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Falko Schmieder: *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Eingang der klassischen Fotografie. Zum Verhältnis von anthropologischem und Historischem Materialismus* (Berlin and Vienna: Philo 2004)

When Ludwig Feuerbach set forth his *Principles of Philosophy of the Future* in 1843, he might not have foreseen that the future of his own philosophy would pretty soon be crucially determined by Karl Marx. Ever since, Feuerbach is best remembered as an 'intermediate link between Hegelian philosophy and our conception' (Friedrich Engels), while his own endeavours toward a reformation of philosophy have largely fallen into oblivion. Historians, not only Marxists, would recognise him as an unlucky godfather that suddenly fell from grace. After Marx had become outright enthusiastic about the critique of speculative idealism, which Feuerbach exposed as a sophisticated continuation of customary religious thoughts, he just as harshly dismissed Feuerbach's supposedly deficient materialism once and for all. As for Marx, it was Feuerbach whom he henceforth used to treat as a 'dead dog'. And so did numerous Marxists in his wake.

It was not until the early 1970s that Feuerbach's philosophy would be rediscovered as a fresh source of critical theory. Most notably, Alfred Schmidt, so as to provide the concept of Historical Materialism with a more vivid foundation, seized on Feuerbach's anthropological materialism in terms of an emancipatory sensuousness. He reviewed notions such as nature or production, central to both the Marxian concept of history and the critique of political economy, with particular regard to the needy human beings doomed to make history under different, yet invariably difficult circumstances. His own clearly Marxist approach notwithstanding, Schmidt eventually established Feuerbach as a distinguished materialist philosopher beyond the cliché of the helpful intermediary between Hegel and Marx. Now Falko Schmieder is digging a little deeper into the tangly relationship between Feuerbach's anthropological materialism and the Historical Materialism established by Marx and Engels. Not surprisingly, he first and foremost refers to the tradition of Marxist thinking represented by Alfred Schmidt, although Schmieder is aiming at a different interpretation of Feuerbach. His own argument draws somewhat closer to what Max Horkheimer, Schmidt's academic teacher, once succinctly termed Critical Theory, in order to distinguish the materialist social theory pursued by the Institute for Social Research (subsequently called the Frankfurt School) not only from 'bourgeois' ideologies such as idealism and positivism, but also from Scientific Socialism, as it had been codified by the Second and Third International. According to Horkheimer, Marxian theory ought no longer to be taken, or rather mistaken, for an algebra of the revolution. It is not by chance that he arrived at this conclusion in the 1930s in exile, after he had fled Nazi Germany. Revolutionary attempts in Europe had altogether been quelled or miscarried and authoritarian régimes were meanwhile established in many countries, including the Soviet Union. A materialist theory of society, combined with Freudian psychoanalysis, would therefore be rather expected to find out why the expectation of communism had practically failed by then and why people insistently submitted themselves to a society firmly constituted beyond their own power or control. From this point of view, Feuerbach's anthropological materialism might be discerned as an unexpected harbinger of the theory of the culture industry capturing everyone's mind by means of technical projection, thereby providing an almost Feuerbachian illusion of immediacy.

The title of Schmieder's study alludes to Engels's essay 'Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie' ('Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy'). Feuerbach, said Engels, marked the beginning of the end of speculative idealism, in that he addressed the real world with its real human beings as the most substantial subject matter of philosophical reflection. But this exit (*Ausgang*), Schmieder argues, was at the same time the entry (*Eingang*) of a new medium, photography, which had recently been invented by Niépce and Daguerre and which was now tacitly entering into philosophy. Schmieder considers Feuerbach's emphasis on immediacy, opposed to Hegel's enhancement of an all-encompassing mediation (*Vermittlung*), as the beginning of a new decade of conceptualising the world through pictures. Interestingly, Feuerbach himself described religious self-estrangement in terms of projection, albeit he never used this term. And even though he never dwelled on photography as a matter of particular interest, his materialist philosophy in many ways bears witness to this newly developed technique of capturing pictures of the outside world. As a premature theory of visual culture, Feuerbach's philosophy might well have outlived the momentous verdict of Marx and Engels: 'As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist' (*The German Ideology*). Regardless of whether or not this is true, Marx's polemical objections do certainly not offer a concluding remark on Feuerbach's philosophy, which is yet to be discovered. One might be surprised to find, for example, that Feuerbach, who is widely remembered as an intransigent religious critic, on his part eventually sought to establish a new religion of love, based upon an allegedly immediate appropriation of the material world.

Schmieder's enlightening account of Feuerbach's philosophy goes far beyond philological concerns, although he is certainly an expert in this field too, since he has co-edited the new complete edition of Feuerbach's works. Schmieder does not intend to serve justice to a putatively misprized genius. Instead, he offers an illuminating insight into the complex and equally contradictory writings of a philosopher most readers probably know by hearsay. Feuerbach, he argues, already noted the profound changes that society underwent at his time, caused by the upcoming bourgeoisie's efforts to create 'a world after its own image', as the *Manifesto* puts it. Like Hegel, he caught a glimpse of what commodification does to social relationships. But at the same time he deluded himself about the image he was drawing. His sudden reinstatement of religion, by which he sought to restore the metaphysical comfort people in bourgeois societies had been deprived of, is a comparatively innocuous example. He occasionally even drew on anti-Semitic projections in order to separate the good (namely, material production) from the bad and the ugly (commerce, allegorised by the Jew).

Schmieder is thoroughly aware of those grievous shortcomings, which he never attempts to tone down. But Feuerbach's materialism, he insists, should be reconsidered from a different point of view, undistorted by the 'defects' famously spotted by Marx. Schmieder calls attention to the fact that Marx himself at that time was still a good deal away from what he would later call the Critique of Political Economy. He had only touched upon economic matters in his Paris Manuscripts of 1844, but his fundamental critique of both economic theory and bourgeois economy would not be outlined until the late 1850s. From the perspective of Marx's subsequent writings, Schmieder reveals some peculiar defects of both Feuerbach's anthropological materialism and Marx's early criticism of it.

In his engagement with Feuerbach's philosophy, Marx on the one hand overestimated Feuerbach's achievements as to his own programme of a 'ruthless criticism of all that exists' (Marx to Ruge, September 1843). He generously attributed some of his own radical thoughts to Feuerbach, whose merits he sought to elevate at the expense of the Young Hegelians. But at the same time, he entirely ignored the regressive elements in Feuerbach's philosophy, such as the recourse to religion. Schmieder suspects that these elements did not pass

unnoticed fully accidentally. For at this point of his own intellectual development, Marx had not yet prepared the tools that would eventually prove indispensable to his ruthless criticism of modern capitalist society. In early works such as *The German Ideology*, one might find a sketch of what has ever since been termed Historical Materialism. But the economical structure referred to as the basis of the real-life process was scarcely examined then. It is particularly interesting in this context that later in the 1860s, having resumed his economic studies in London, Marx made use of a 'religion of the vulgar', by which he circumscribed the peculiar fetishism of commodities. Sarcastically, this sort of belief might be likely to fulfil the sensuous religiousness proclaimed by Feuerbach. The precursor of Historical Materialism thus looks like a forerunner of its critical heritage. However, the image of the world he evoked is standing on its head, as Marx would have it.

Perry Anderson once hinted that the recourse to pre-Marxian philosophies had frequently been a beneficial characteristic of Western Marxism. Georg Lukács, for instance, after the proletarian uprisings in Germany had died away in the early 1920s, turned back toward Hegel and thereby regained a concept of dialectics which had long since been submerged by the doctrine of Scientific Socialism. When Schmieider uncovers another important source of Marxism a good 80 years later, indeed a source that had quickly run dry already in Marx's lifetime, the situation is incomparably different, of course. Lukács, who was not only the first authoritative critic of traditional Marxism but also the last definite advocate of a truly revolutionary theory, attempted to refresh Marxist thinking in order to help bring about a revolution he with good reason thought would still be imminent. Hardly anyone today would share those expectations, neither as to the working class nor as to any other predestined historical subject. Accordingly, Schmieider's critical engagement with Feuerbach pursues a different purpose. Unlike Hegelian dialectics, Feuerbach's concept of sensuous immediacy offers no prospect of subversion. On the contrary, as Schmieider shows, it is more likely to describe the uncanny state of profane religiousness, in which we are living these days.