

THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN ESSENCE IN THE WORKS OF KARL MARX

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I

This paper is an exposition of the philosophical foundations of Marxism. Its chief concern is to understand : (1) how Marx's materialist conception of history operates, and (2) the relation between Marx's philosophy and the science of history.

I initiate this work with a fundamentally important paradox haunting Marxism : Does one pose the question of Marxism as a singular unity of thought, or are Marx's works structured in terms of aporic thinking? In this sense how does one relate the question of "iron laws" of absolute necessity with the question of radical praxis? What is Marx's philosophy of man and freedom?

It is with these issues in mind that I address Marx's works in terms of *the human essence (das menschliche Wesen)*. We shall use the original German term to distinguish Marx's usage from Feuerbach's and that of the Young Hegelians, and also the incorrect English translations most notably as the "essence of man", "human nature", "man's nature" and the "nature of man".¹

But would Marx's concept of *das menschliche Wesen* imply the emergence of a new meaning? How does this new meaning work in the materialist conception of history? Would the question of the human essence be able to resolve that above stated aporia? Would this aporia be related to the double writing of Hegel where the rational kernel is expressed through the mystical shell?

To claim that the question of the human essence is important is to introduce two terms :

(1) *Idealisation of the Effect* : This is the site that presents the effect of Marx's work, i.e., historical materialism being transformed into a metaphysical discipline. Thus when Marx talks of the *complex*, hence over determined *inversion* of the Hegelian philosophy, a *simple* change of terminology is put to effect. Hence the Hegelian *Geist* (Idea) is replaced with materialistic *matter* in the philosophy of dialectical materialism and with a self-evolving *productive forces* in the science of historical materialism. The auto-movement of the Hegelian *Geist* is displaced for the self-caused auto-movement of the Marxist productive forces. Consequently the Hegelian "phenomenology of the (reified) mind" is transformed into the "dialectics of (estranged) nature". In both cases the human being, central to Marx's concern is predicated on a depersonified transcendent imaginary. This is the teleological historicist interpretation of Marxism running from Plekhenov and Bukharin to Althusser and G. A. Cohen.

(2) *Onto-idealology* : Onto-idealology is not like the spurious hermeneutic of the *idealisation of the effect*, a misreading of Marx. It is an essential aspect of Marx's *Capital* itself. In the doctrine of onto-idealology the metaphysics of idealised Being reaches its universal character. What was the leitmotif of the philosophies of high idealism - namely the *idealist sign system* being devoid of its material referent - becomes the essence of reality itself. This is the second paradox to confront Marx's materialism. Idealism becomes the dominant discourse that organises the historical materialist sites of the base and the superstructure. The Marxist base becomes the 'basic text' in which the discourse of metaphysics is written.

Onto-idealology combines three disciplines of Marxism : (1) theory of value, (2) theory of ideology, and (3) criticism of idealist philosophies. In this combination onto-idealology becomes the meeting place of idealist superstructural philosophy and the real bases of political economy. In this reified meeting place the materialist character of the actual world is displaced. *Capital* presents the "metempsychotic" and "transmigrated" world that has lost its bodily form.² The world is "estranged and irrational" a "complete mystification" and a "false" world.³

Reading the first part of *Capital* vol. I one confronts onto-idealology as an actual historical situation confronting the human condition. Actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is fragmented in the triad of the dissolved "material" and posited

“imaginary” and “hieroglyphic” worlds.⁴ The dominant world becomes the “transcendent”⁵ world that has now a mere “unsubstantial reality”⁶. As “existence as a material thing is put out of sight”⁷, existence is now only “ideal existence”.⁸

In the relation between the material and ideal worlds, the latter becomes the active world, the former mere “material depositories”, the “body” and “form of appearance” of the ideal world.⁹ Onto-idealology not only presents an estranged ideal world, but seeks to explain the mode of production of idealism itself. For Marx, idealism is not only a question of *speculative thought* but a fact of *social being* itself. There are two sites of importance :

- (1) The question of *use-value* and *value* in *Capital*, of which use - value is the material domain and value the idealised domain.
- (2) The young Marx’s reading of Feuerbach where philosophy is understood as onto-theology, hence “another form and manner of existence (*Daseinweise*) of the estrangement (*Entfremdung*) of the human essence (*menschliche Wesen*); hence equally to be condemned”.¹⁰

Since philosophy as the idealist signifier, on the one hand is understood as a phantasmagoria of the estranged human essence, and on the other hand reappropriation of the human essence signals the arrival of the real sensuous world, we locate the importance of the human essence which the young Marx so profusely wrote about in 1844. That is why we locate the tension in Marx’s works and ask : how come Marx in the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, *On the Jewish Question*, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, *Critical Marginal Notes on the Article by a Prussian*, *Comments on James Mill’s ‘Elements of Political Economy’*, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Holy Family* explicitly work on the *menschliche Wesen* as the radical moment in history, and consequently in *The German Ideology* announce the human essence as an “unhistorical abstraction”, as the “realm of dreams” and ideological signifiers devoid of actual history?¹¹

It is at this site that the question of the Marxist production of knowledge is posed. The question of the human essence serves as the nodal point where the evolution of Marx’s thought is understood.

II

There are *two layers* of scientific discourse in Marx's works. One appears in what one can call after *Theories of Surplus Value* Part I as "pure form". The *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (hitherto called the 1859 *Preface*) is an example of discourse appearing in the *pure form*. We shall have a look into it.

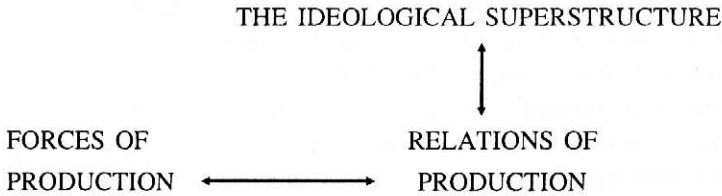
In this work the groundwork of history is laid bare. This groundwork is expressed as the inquiry into the "basis", "real foundation" and "conditions" where by the base - superstructure model is explicated. The model is structured according to the building metaphor whereby the economic comprising of productive forces - relations of production combination becomes the "base", that social being which is the *determinant* whereby the superstructure that holds within it the social consciousness of politics, legality, religion, aesthetics and philosophy becomes the *determined*. Thus we have the pairing of the foundation - founded, determinant - determined, ground - grounded, subject-predicate, primary - secondary, whereby the latter term within each pair unfolds out from the former element. This discourse will immediately relate itself to two sites : (1) the metaphysical doctrine of "first philosophy" (*Ursprungsphilosophie*), and (2) the Cartesian model that visualises the metaphysical Being of all discourse, where "all philosophy is like a tree, whose roots are metaphysics, the trunk physics and the branches which grow out of this trunk are all the other sciences".¹²

To recollect, the ground as explicated in the first chapter of *Capital* vol.I., has been *idealised*. It is this *idealised structure* bifurcated into the two autonomous post - anthropological moments of productive forces and relations of production that presents the reductionist - fatalistic onto-idealological moment in Marxism. One must remember that this idealist moment works "independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence".¹³

Yet there is a *second layer* in Marx's works, the *impure overdetermined layer*. It contains the working out of those concerns which obsessed Marx in his formative years (1839 - 1844), containing the doctoral dissertation on Greek philosophy, to the critique of Hegel and the Young Hegelians. To put it in a nutshell it is about humanity and alienation.

The first layer concerns itself with the mechanisms and dynamics of

history structured in this way :



On the other hand, the second layer is disordered. One may call it after the *Introduction* to the *Grundrisse* as the “chaotic whole”. This layer deals with the *philosophical* aspects of Marxism, whilst the former deals with the *scientific level*. At the chaotic site of the philosophical level the question of the human essence is posed. This level relates Marxism to German classical philosophy, French socialism and English political economy.

Above all it deals with the transformation of philosophical anthropology into historical materialism and the consequent transformation of the philosophy of the human essence to the science of class struggle.

III

It is the question of relating the site of the human essence to the scientific examination of social formations which now becomes the question of critical importance. Because Althusser’s *For Marx* is the classical anti-humanist reading of Marx, we detour into the Althusserian text. For Althusser the terms “human essence” and “class struggle” are mutually exclusive terms. Whilst the former is theorised as belonging to the false register of an ideological Feuerbachian past, the latter is claimed to rest on a scientific problematic evolving out after an *epistemological break*. This Althusserian break is the moment that registers the true science (class struggle) evolving from a rupture with a false ideology (human essence). Consequently there is the *single surface* evident in Althusser: *either* human essence *or* class struggle. This method presents the question of the human essence as idealism where “the essence of man is the basis for history and politics”.¹⁴ Here actual history is presented as unfolding from a Platonic exemplar : “*the ideal essence*”.¹⁵

At a *surface reading*, Althusser seems to be applying the historical materialist method of *The German Ideology* in the critique of humanist philosophies. For did not Marx in the critique of the Young Hegelians : Feuerbach, Bauer, Stirner and Grun critique the concepts "essence of man" and other Young Hegelian categories like "substance", "self-consciousness", etc.? But at the *deep structure*, Althusser fails to notice that the human essence is a complexly structured concept, overdetermined and structured according to the dialectical principle of the negative, hence continuously overreaching itself.

Marx's philosophy of *das menschliche Wesen* does not imply an overarching transhistorical essence that organises the site of existence, nor is it a formal transcendental a priori that attaches onto the real world from the outside. The human essence does not correspond to traditional philosophies of essence and existence. On the contrary the human essence serves as a site whereby Marx is able to give an anthropomorphic response to the Hegelian dialectic in particular and to idealism in general.

In the sixth *Theses on Feuerbach* the relation between philosophical anthropology and historical materialism is made clear : the human essence is an "ensemble of social relations".¹⁶

This thesis clarifies the direction that the Feuerbachian concepts used in 1844 by Marx, "species being", "naturalism", "humanism", "existence", "essence" take.

There are two distinct ruptures evident in 1845 : from (1) Feuerbach and (2) the Young Hegelians and True Socialists. Marx claims in *The German Ideology* that both idealise the human essence and are unable to understand the human essence in actual social formations. Whilst in Bauer, Stirner and Grun, human essence is the "concept of man", in Feuerbach it is abstract ahistorical anthropology that combines spurious biologism, psychologism and morality. The central doctrine of Feuerbach becomes "man", but a transcendentially signified "man", thus ahistorically frozen in a mythical sign system.

On the other hand for Marx, the human essence both in 1844 and 1845 serves the double purpose of (1) construction of the historical materialist category of *relations of production* in general, and (2) de-refied relations of production in particular, where he is able to argue out the case for socialism. At this site

the question of reification (*Verdinglichung*) is posed where relations between people is converted into a relation between things.

Thus the contrast is made between a reified relations of production, where "things" - capital, wage - labour, etc mediate human relations; and de-reified relations of production or society based on human relations. It is at this point where the transformation of Hegel's *abstract historicism* and Feuerbach's *abstract materialism* into Marx's historical materialism takes place.

For Marx, materialism does not signify the philosophy of inert matter, that conceives an autonomous reality existing independent of the human mind. On the contrary Marx's materialism signifies the question of humanity's being-in-the-world defined by labour. Human essence is not essentialisms' abstract universal where we have an "*idealism of the essence*" nor is it an abstract particularism where we have an "*empiricism of the subject*".¹⁷ On the contrary the human essence mediates the concepts of historical materialism : productive forces, relations of production and the superstructure. Thus it defines the conditions of historical materialism actualising itself as the *historical being-in-the-world*. This historical being-in-the- world shall be defined as the *being-in-labour*.

Yet this being-in-the-world is dialectical. It is being-a-part- of-the-world, yet being-apart-of-the-world. In this being-apart- of-the-world, the historical materialist premise of the 1859 *Preface* is articulated as "men inevitably enter(ing) into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production".¹⁸

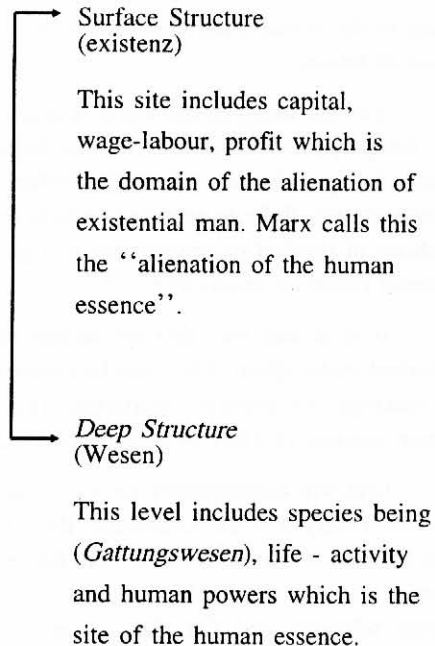
It is in this way that the human essence manifests itself in the site of historical materialism. This transformation is of crucial importance in tracing the makings of historical materialism. Thus the importance of understanding the human essence of 1844 as *complexly structured* having multiple layers.

One will consequently have to observe the multiple layers of the human essence. Firstly it is the *Grundlage*, the "base" of the human condition - "for man the root is man himself".¹⁹ As the sensuous anti-idealist world the human essence takes on the double critique of (1) onto-theology, where God mediates human relations and (3) class society, where exchange-value becomes the

mediator. In this way the problematic of mediation is posed in Marx's works. Marx distinguishes *abstract mediation* where exchange-value mediates, and *concrete mediation* where labour defines the historical character of being-in-the-world.

It is at this stage that the importance of the complexity of the human essence in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is highlighted. The complexity combines the philosophical levels of *substance and subject*. Thus we have man's being (*Dasein*) combining the phenomenal structure of existence (*existenz*) with the deeper level of essence (*Wesen*). Whilst the phenomenal level has within it the estranged domains of capital, wage-labour, profit, where man is defined as *being-in - 'things'*; the deep structure of essence comprises the dealienated moments of labour and life-activity, man's essential powers (*menschlichen Wesenkrafte*) and potentialities, where the essential man is rooted in radical praxis. Consequently whilst the first level is of the *ideal*, the deeper level is of the *real*. To sum it up we have in 1844 :

Mankind's being-in-the-world



Consequently in contrast to the deep level of the human essence, we have the non-human surface level, the level of “things”, for which Marx reserves the term “reification”. The relation between the two levels is that the deep level is treated as “personifications” or “bearers” of the reified level”.²⁰ The relation in *Capital* is treated thus :

Individuals who are personifications of → Class relations

The surface level of class relations of production thus holds the anthropological level of humanity. The human essence of 1844 will incorporate the category of “real individuals” (*Wirklichen Individuen*) of the *The German Ideology*. Combining the building model of the 1859 *Preface* and the depth model of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, we have the model in *Capital* as shown on next page (p. 336).

We thus have a *concretely determined* model. It *unites diverse sites* which *mediates* the concept of human essence to the categories of historical materialism: forces of production, relations of production and the superstructure.

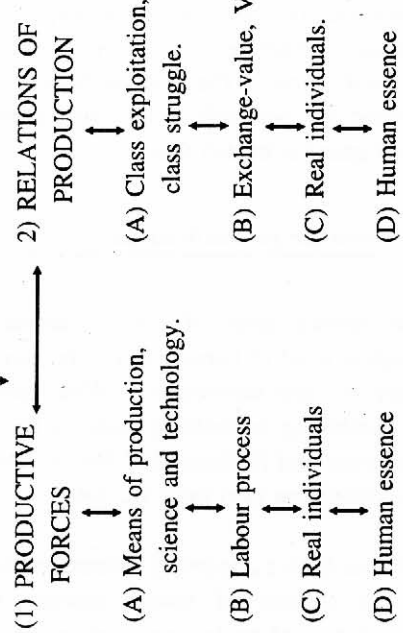
Thus what was thought to be the *real bases*, namely the forces of production and relations of production combination, itself has a *multiply structured base* : from (A) class exploitation and class struggle to (B) exchange-value and value, and (C) real individuals and (D) the human essence. Real individuals/human essence couplet is the “bearer” of the sites : forces of production, relations of production and the superstructure. On the other hand productive forces, relations of production combination is “a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part”.²¹

This “definite form” corresponds to the level of estranged *existenz* of the 1844 model and expressed as reification is dominated in the last instance by the “imaginary” and “hieroglyphic” worlds. In traditional historical materialism as the logic of mediation is ignored the human essence is bracketed to create a single level, empiricist model dominated by economism and teleologism. When the human essence intervenes as radical praxis the “imaginary” and “hieroglyphic” worlds are dissolved.

(3) IDEOLOGICAL SUPER STRUCTURE

- (A) Ideological forms
- (B) Class exploitation, Class struggle.
- (C) Real individuals
- (D) Human essence.

The historical being-in-the-world → Estranging itself as being-apart-of-the-world which fragments humanity into the three levels of :



That is why it is important to state that whilst in the 1859 *Preface* Marx talks of the anatomy of history to be found in political economy, in *Capital* the philosophical anatomy is found in the theory of reification. It is reification that cancels the level of the human essence and projects the autonomous levels of productive forces, relations of production as the dominant mode of production.

Material-historical causality is different from *reified causality*. Material-historical causality is thus not a teleological one way movement from (1) productive forces to (2) relations of production, and (3) superstructure. Being the "chaotic whole" of the philosophical domain of the human essence, material-historical causality is dominated by an *empirical-historical mode of domination* and not a *teleological economistic mode*. Causality thus can be reified (not teleological) or de-reified (understood and inaugurated by conscious praxis). The 1859 *Preface* demonstrates an *analytic displacement* (productive forces, relations of production, superstructure) and consequently presents the reified possibilities of historical materialism. *Capital* operates at the *condensed level* which is *concretely determined* and is not the underdetermination of economism.

To sum it up : the *teleological model of manifestation* is explained by the *de-reified model of explanation*. Thus the real opposition : human essence/reification is understood, when the de-reified level operates, the teleological movement breaks down to condense the three levels each site shifting into the other.

Productive forces cease to be the auto-moving reductionist *active cause*, where relations of production is conceived as the *passive cause* and the superstructure as the *mirrored effect* of the forces of production, relations of production combination. This is evident when Marx says that "theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses",²² and later : "of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself".²³

This is the way the human essence works itself as the historical being-in-the world. The concept of *das menschliche Wesen* was never abandoned by Marx. It merely dissolved itself in the long night of reification to take on the teleological mode of appearance. To reappropriate it in historical materialism is the joyous ode that Marxist philosophy now needs to write.

NOTES

1. Tom Bottomore translates *das menschliche Wesen* as "essence of man" and "human nature". See Bottomore's translation of Marx's sixth 'Theses on Feuerbach' in *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, ed. Tom Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel (London; Penguin, 1990), P. 83. Likewise Louis Althusser reads *menschliche Wesen* as "essence of man" which is equivalent to "the idea of human nature". See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London : Allen Lane, 1969), P. 236. Also see Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature : Refutation of a Legend* (London : Verso, 1983).
2. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), PP.54, 58, 61, 98- 9, 199.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. III, ed. Fredrick Engels (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1974), P. 830.
4. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. I, PP. 79, 94,98-9.
5. *Ibid*, P. 76
6. *Ibid*, P. 46
7. *Ibid*, P. 45
8. *Ibid*, P. 107
9. *Ibid*, P. 44, 50, 89, 181.
10. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1982), P. 127.
11. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1976), PP. 198, 490, 496, 513, 538, 545.
12. Rene Descartes, 'Letter from the Author', in *Discourse on Method and Mediations*. trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (London : Penguin, 1968), P. 183.
13. Karl Marx, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition', *Capital* vol. I, P. 27.
14. Louis Althusser, *op. cit.*, P. 226.
15. *Ibid*, P. 228
16. Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1975), P. 29.
17. Louis Althusser, *op. cit.*

18. Karl Marx, 'Preface', *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1977), P. 20.
19. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York : Vintage Books, 1975), P. 251.
20. Karl Marx, 'Preface to the first German edition', *Capital* vol. I, P. 21.
21. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*, P. 37.
22. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, P. 251.
23. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978), P. 160.

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