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THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRAXIS

1 The Philosophical Studies of Karl Marx

In the preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx remembered waiting with Engels in Brussels in 1845 to take final action on their plan to define the direction of their thinking – especially in relation to the materialist conception of history, as Engels later noted¹ – as against the ideological theories of German philosophy, to settle accounts, so to speak, with recent philosophical thought on ‘the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy.’ The result of this would be a manuscript for two large octavo volumes. Sent to a printer in Westphalia, it would remain in the shop until unforeseen events no longer prevented in its publication. ‘We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the rats,’ Marx concluded, ‘all the more willingly because we had already reached our goal, which was to understand ourselves.’²

Friedrich Engels, referring to a long review of a study of Feuerbach that he had written two years earlier, mentioned in 1888 that he had picked up those old papers of 1845-6 and looked at them again. Engels said that “the section on Feuerbach in the manuscript was not finished. The finished part is an exposition of the materialist conception of history, which only shows how incomplete our understanding of economic history was at the time.”³

This is valuable information on the studies that the two socialist writers undertook around 1845. In my opinion, it provides an answer to a question debated in the recent literature on historical materialism, including the Italian literature, which asks whether the vexed materialist conception of history arose in the minds of Marx and his Metrodorus⁴ with all the hallmarks of a philosophical theory, internally coordinated with a special new system of philosophy in the true and genuine sense.

It would be useful to publish this manuscript because, more than any other work by Marx, it would support historical reconstruction of the origin and development of his thought. For better or for worse, the manuscript expressed the new concept of history, which had to be perfected later and formulated in the *Manifesto* and then advocated more thoughtfully in the *Critique of Political Economy*. This conception was expressed with the aim of getting oriented among the various directions of contemporary philosophy and thereby working out a nucleus of guiding principles that would be the skeleton of the new system. Marx says that this work clarified his own philosophical thinking, and Engels adds that their new historical insight already appeared there. Putting these two pieces of

¹*L. Feuerbach*, etc, preface, p. 3.

²*Critique*, p. 6; cf. A.Labriola, *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia, lettere a Sorel* (Rome: Loescher, 1898), pp. 74ff.

³Op. cit., p. iv.

⁴Metrodorus (*e*).

testimony together, it seems there can be no doubt about the scope of the notion of historical materialism already present in Marx's thinking in '45.

But I also agree with Croce that in dealing with Marx's writings, more than those of any other thinker, "the reader must proceed with weights on his feet, pursuing the task case by case, book by book, proposition by proposition, relating these various productions to one another, to be sure, but also taking account of the different times and circumstances of creation, the fleeting impressions, the mental and literary habits, which means that the reader must be resigned to acknowledging uncertainty and incompleteness where it exists and must resist the temptation to correct and complete as he sees fit."

While gladly accepting these prudent warnings, I believe that on the basis of the new information one point has been established beyond all doubt, and it must be the point of departure for our inquiry. At this time and on this topic, the task is not to ask what may be critically acceptable in the end for historical materialism – a question of great importance, but essentially a critical question and therefore extraneous to the history of Marx's thought, which, in any case, that question must follow and not precede. Instead, the task is to ask how Marx really conceived of this theory that he [*da lui messa a leva d'una*] put at the service of a social doctrine of immense importance. And if both Marx and Engels reflected on their enormous labor and their writing as the theory emerged and formed in their thoughts, and if they stated explicitly that it took shape as a philosophical system – indeed, out of their opposition to systems then current – it would not then be prudent for an interpreter to cast doubt on the philosophical scope that the authors themselves actually attributed to historical materialism from the start. This is not a case of unconscious thinking where one needs to be wary about committing trust; we are dealing with deep mental effort taking shape in a vast body of writing.

I agree entirely with Labriola, however, who supports Georges Sorel's notion of putting the problem of philosophy in general [*rimettere in campo*] back into play when he reflects that 'historical materialism may seem to be feeding on air as long as it stands opposed to other philosophies not in harmony with it yet has still not found a way to develop a philosophy of its own, one built into its assumptions and immanent in its premises.'⁵ Therefore, Labriola wants to work out the concept of this philosophy – actually, the concept of historical materialism in Marx's thought itself. This is what he has tried to do in his letters to Sorel, in fact, attempting at the same time to define Marxism's orientation in the context of modern trends in philosophy.

But since there are many, even "inside the walls of Troy,"⁶ who believe that Labriola has enlarged the scope of the materialist theory of history contrary to Marx's understanding and with no solid basis, it will help to bring forward the evidence for what Marx himself really thought.

⁵*Per l'interpretazione e la critica di alcuni con cetti del Marxismo*, a paper read to the Accademia Pontaniana, in the session of 21 November 1897 (Naples, 1897; translated in *Devinir social*, 4 (1898), 22.

⁶Walls of Troy (*e*).

2 Marx's Critique of Feuerbach

Friedrich Engels, in an appendix to his study of Feuerbach, has published eleven theses or fragments on Feuerbach's philosophy written by Marx in Brussels in January, 1845, and found by Engels in an old notebook that belonged to his friend.

'These are notes for a work in progress,' he writes, 'certainly not meant for publication but priceless as the first document in which the productive seed of the new view of the world (*der neuen Weltanschauung*) was planted.'⁷ These notes by Marx refer to the *Essence of Christianity* by Feuerbach. They show how the disciple had evolved in relation to the master, and therefore they also reveal the historical relations between Marxism and the degenerate Hegelianism of the left, represented especially by Feuerbach. It will be useful, then, to review the features of that philosophy briefly, using the work just cited.

For Hegel, philosophy and faith can and must develop in harmony; they have the same content but take different forms. It has often been observed that in this way Hegel ended up contradicting one of the basic principles of his logic, which is that form and content are always perfectly parallel. The criticism is unjust because Hegel certainly did not deny the transformation of content into various forms nor, therefore, that content and form in philosophy and content and form in religion went hand in hand and were perfectly correlated. I maintain that he did not deny the diversity of concrete contents as actuated in two different forms but that he affirmed the identity of content when treated abstractly, when treated as transcendently separate both from the philosophical form and from the religious form.⁸ According to Hegel, moreover, 'the form of feeling (that belongs to religion) is the most inadequate form for spiritual content. In its reality, that content, God himself, is only in thinking and as thinking.'

In the *Essence of Christianity* (1841), in any case, Feuerbach opposes this view, maintaining that philosophy and religion are diametrically opposed, like sickness and health, the one being a product of thought, the other of imagination or feeling. Faith and science cannot agree on a friendly settlement, then. Hegel had said that man recognizes himself in his God. One should say instead that God is recognized in man. In other words, man certainly does not want to understand himself in religion, not even to understand himself incompletely (by representing himself). He wishes instead to satisfy himself in his physical needs.

⁷Op cit., p. iv.

⁸Hegel in fact writes that "the content of consciousness, what ever it may be, must be determined as feeling, intuition, image, representation, purpose, obligation, and so on, as a thought and a notion. Sentiment, notion, image, and so on are, in this sense, different forms of one and the same content, which stays the same, whatever the feeling, intuition, intuition, wish ... or thought.... But to that objectivity of the content are added the determinabilities of those forms, whence it happens that some particular object appears according to each of those forms, and the content, which in itself is the same, can appear to be differentiated." *Logic*, section 3 of the introduction, which I cite in the translation of Vera (2nd ed., Paris, Bailliere, 1874), which is only one I have and which does not suffer, as far as I know, from errors of inaccuracy.

For man, what really is his own individual essence? It is the continuing satisfaction of his own organic needs. And he wants to find this again in God. The feeling of egotism, unsatisfied that real life is finite, pushes man to exalt himself as an infinite power, a divine power, the omnipotence that can satisfy all his needs. In the medium of religion, then, man does not recognize himself as spirit, as absolute, as universal in God. What is absolute, spiritual and universal must instead be recognized in a particular individual which, as a physical organism, lives by means of the incessant cycling of needs as they arise and are satisfied. The truth of the individual is not in the universal, then; the truth of the universal is in the individual. Matter does not [*s'invera*] in spirit, but spirit in matter. Hegelian idealism upside down.

And since he looks for the root of religion in the human being as a physical individual, theology turns into anthropology, which is essentially materialistic. The needs that stimulate fantasies about the deification of human powers raised to infinity are actually physical needs, and the essence of man thus comes to be determined as purely physical and organic.

The critique of religion, therefore, is based on materialism. In fact, in the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843), Feuerbach teaches that true philosophy can only be empirical, having sensible reality as its object. The deepest and most important truths are learned only by means of the senses. Philosophy must not treat man as thought or reason but as what he is in reality, a concrete sensible existence, a living body. The *I* is the body, precisely. Philosophy itself, since man is its object, turns out to be physiological anthropology.

As with religion, all facts about human life and society treated as lofty and nobler are products of man as an organic body that lives by the continuing satisfaction of its needs.

The outcome of this philosophy is plain to see.⁹ For all of history there can be no explanation based on anything but materialism. Search out and study the needs of the human body in its actual existence, and you will find the reason behind all human actions, small or large, individual or social. This means that one seeks the explanation of individual acts in the immediate physical needs of the individual as such, while the explanation of social acts must arise, on the other hand, from the analysis of the individual's needs as a member of society – of a specific society, in fact. And if Feuerbach formulated his materialism in a typical remark by saying that man is no more or less than what he eats (*der Mensch sei nur das, was er esse*), and if the explanation of man's activity as a pure and simple individual is thus to be provided only by the needs of his stomach, the explanation of his historical actions can come from no other source than his economic needs.

This is how historical materialism emerged by clear and obvious inference from Feuerbach's materialism. With the exception of materialism, then, no other philosophy will be able to remain immanent in the materialist conception of history. But let us see

⁹See the *Grundriss* by Ueberweg and Heinze, 8th ed., Part 3, Vol. 2, pp. 148-51; cf. F.A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus*, 3rd ed., Iserlohn, 1876, II, 73-80.

what observations Marx made about this philosophy as he was preparing to write about his own philosophical orientation in 1845. For this purpose, let me provide the best translations I can of the fragments printed by Engels.

1. The chief defect of all materialism in the past – including Feuerbach’s – is that the object of thought (*Gegenstand*), reality, the sensible, has been conceived only in the form of an *object* or of an *intuition*, certainly not as a sensory human activity, as a *praxis*, and subjectively. Thus it happened that out of opposition to materialism idealism developed the aspect of activity– but only in the abstract, because idealism naturally knows nothing about real sensory activity. Feuerbach wanted sensible objects to be really distinct from the intelligible but he did not conceive of human activity itself as *objective* activity.¹⁰ Therefore, in the *Essence of Christianity* he treats only the theoretical content as clearly human, while praxis gets conceived and defined only in sordid Jewish forms. Therefore he does not understand the meaning that the ‘revolutionaries’ give to practical critical action.
2. The question whether human thought attains objective truth is not a theoretical question but a practical question. In praxis, man can test the truth of his own thought – its reality and power (*Macht*), its positive character (*Diesseitigkeit*). Isolated from praxis, any discussion of the reality or unreality of a thought is a purely scholastic question.
3. The materialist doctrine that humans are the product of environment and education, varying as environment and education vary, forgets that it is just humans who change the environment, and that the educator himself must be educated. Of necessity, then, this doctrine leads to dividing society into two parts, one of them conceived as standing above the other (in Robert Owen, for example). The convergence of environmental variation with human activity can be conceived and understood rationally only as praxis in reverse.
4. From the fact of religious self-projection (*Selbstentfremdung*), Feuerbach arrives at a doubling of the world into a religious world of representation and a real world. And this is his task: to reduce the religious world to its substrate. It escapes him, however, that when this task is done, the main problem still remains to be solved. Still to be explained is the very fact that the substrate of this religious world ascends to the clouds and sets itself up there as an independent realm of its own, and this can be explained only by the doubling that the substrate works on itself and also by the self-contradiction that it contains. Its contradictory character must first be understood, therefore, and then by the resolution of this same contradiction it is depleted [*scalzato*] in practice. Thus, for example, after using the family on earth to unveil the mystery of the holy family,¹¹ the former must be criticized in theory and overturned in practice.

¹⁰Namely, as an activity that makes, posits and creates the sensible object (*gegenständliche Tätigkeit*).

¹¹Showing, in other words, that the holy family is nothing but a duplication and a hypostasis of the earthly family.

5. Not content with abstract thought, Feuerbach appeals [*si appella*] to sensory intuition, but he does not conceive of the sensory as a practical, human-sensory activity.
6. Feuerbach reduces the essence of religion to man's own essence. But there is no human essence as an abstraction inhering in the particular individual. In its reality, it is nothing but the totality of social relations. Never getting to the criticism of this real essence, Feuerbach is therefore forced, first, to abstract from the historical process, set up religious feeling on its own and present an individual human to us as an abstract-isolate; meanwhile, in the second place, the human essence for him can be understood only as a 'species' (*Gattung*), as a mute, unexpressed (*innere* [*non dispiegata*]) universal, which links the many individuals together only *naturally*.
7. Feuerbach, therefore, does not see that 'religious feeling' is itself a *social product*, and that the abstract individual that he analyzes is really part of a specific social form.
8. Social life is essentially *practical*. All the mysteries that push theory into mysticism find their rational explanation in human praxis and in the understanding of this praxis.
9. The highest level attained by intuitionist materialism – the materialism that does not conceive of the sensory as practical activity – is the intuition of particular individuals in 'bourgeois society.'
10. The point of view of the old materialism is *bourgeois* society; the point of view of the new materialism is *human* society or humanity as a group.
11. Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, but the point to is to change it.¹²

In these thoughts, carefully translated, it is not hard to discern the plan for a whole new theoretical system with its history geared to a prior philosophy and with clear hints of a practical program following from it logically – the whole framework, in short, of that philosophy which is supposed to be inherent in the materialist conception of history on which the doctrine of communism is based. With the help of these thoughts, I will attempt to sketch this new way of philosophizing here.

3 A Sketch of the Philosophy of Praxis

The keystone of this philosophical construction is the concept of 'praxis.' As Marx himself knew very well, the concept was new to materialism, but to idealism it was old since idealism itself was actually born along with it at the same time, and it has certainly

¹²See Engels, *Feuerbach*, Appendix, pp. 59-62.

existed since Socrates formulated his subjectivism. Socrates could not conceive of a truth that was already well formed and transmittable by tradition or teaching. Instead, he thought that all truth was the eventual outcome of a personal labor of inquiry in which the master can only be a companion or collaborator for the disciple who wants the truth – hence the famous comparison of his art to the midwifery of his mother Phenarete. He was not the one who produced knowledge in the minds of his disciples; he only helped them shape themselves to *make* this knowledge – helped them in praxis, as Marx would say. Hence, knowledge certainly implied productive activity for Socrates; it was a subjective product, an ongoing and progressive praxis.

Nor did Plato let this exceedingly important doctrine pass him by. He defined it better, in fact, and developed it in his dialectic of ideas, all supplied by creative energy. And up to Hegel's time there has been no idealist who has not understood knowledge, more or less adequately, as the work of the human spirit – with the exception of a few proponents of intellectual intuition.

Our Vico, customarily praised as the only inventor of the philosophy of history, had deep insight into this problem. The whole basis of his implacable criticism of Descartes was in this concept of cognition as praxis. The philosopher of Naples could not forgive Descartes for positing the direct consciousness of thought as the point of departure and basis of all science (*cogito ergo sum*). When we do science, according to Vico, we must justify the fact of consciousness by reconstructing its emergence and development, not beginning with the pure fact, but, as we now say, starting with the explanation of the fact itself by enacting it again for ourselves. *Verum et factum convertuntur*, and truth thus reveals itself when we make it. Since this is the result, not the given, of scientific research, science cannot proceed by analysis, as Descartes claims – an analysis that would presuppose the concept of the truth to be analyzed – but rather by synthesis, which is the productive activity of the mind. Hence the inestimable value of the brilliant insight, of the happy intuition that somehow creates knowledge [*più che fare, lo scibile, di così difficile acquisto*]. Making is the indispensable condition of knowing, according to Vico. Hence the certainty of mathematics – on this he agreed with Descartes – where the objects of our knowledge are not given but constructed.

These principles, already announced in his work *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* (1710),¹³ then had to be admirably applied in his *New Science* to construct his historical philosophy. And really, if what can be known is one's own work, Vico thinks that the natural world must be entrusted to the knowledge of God, who is its only maker. But the historical world, a product of human activity, is the object of which humans can gain knowledge because they have made it. For Vico, however, this human activity is an activity of the human mind, which is the reason for his view that history has to be

¹³ There are also hints of this in the inaugural oration published the year before: *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*. On this doctrine of Vico's, see two articles by Professor Tocco: 'Descartes jugé par Vico,' *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, (1896), 568-72; and 'Rassegna filosofica,' *Rivista d'Italia*, (1898), 762-3; also the study, *Kant in Italien*, by Karl Werner, *Denkschrift der philosophische-historische Classe der königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Vienna, 1881), section VII, pp. 350 ff., which cites all prior bibliography.

explained entirely by studying the modifications of the mind and thinking them through. Marx changes the principle of activity: instead of modifications of the mind, the needs of the individual as a social being are the root of history. But the concept of praxis that Vico calls on remains the same.

It admits no criticism or correction. Labriola puts it very well when he says that ‘to think is to produce. To learn is to produce by reproducing. We understand well only what we ourselves are capable of producing – by thinking, working, trying and trying again, always by means of powers which are our own in the social context and from the perspective in which we find ourselves.’ Why do we establish laboratories if not to re-make nature and make progress in the science of nature? What is an experiment but a re-doing of what nature does, doing it over in conditions that assist nature and make observation reliable? Clearly, this making or re-making is not always a material or causal making; more often, in fact, it is simply making or re-making by thinking. But might the material and causal making or re-making not also help us understand the fact simply by way of its mechanism, or perhaps by thinking through each part of the mechanism, piece by piece?

The answer is easy for anyone who recognizes that the mind has no eyes or hands or tools, except metaphorically, and that one can enter into the mechanics of external making only through a sequence of representations. This original activity that must be developed as an attainment of science is quite evident, for example, in mathematical calculation. You have the factors, and you want the product. This product is not something that you glimpse by intuition; it is the result of an operation that you must perform. And what is true of this mathematical product is true of every product of knowing, of all knowledge. It is not given but must be attained by a laborious act of the mind. Knowledge given is not true knowledge. It is not understood unless it is re-constructed, and then it is no longer a given but a product or a re-production.

Is science generally to be had at one stroke, just by looking around and taking everything in with a penetrating glance? Re-making will be easier than making, and reading a scientific book is a much simpler thing than writing one. But if our spirit wants to prosper, even in reading it cannot remain inert and passive. In fact, it must stay with the author’s thinking every step of the way and thereby develop an energy of its own – its own making. Language already shows traces of this enormously important concept of the knowing or understanding which is a making. The Latin word for ‘easy,’ *facilis* (which survives in all the romance languages), comes from the verb *facere*, and therefore it would mean ‘what can be done’ etymologically, whereas in Latin and all the romance languages it also means ‘what can be known or understood.’¹⁴ Hence, making an action happen is *easy*, but is also *easy* to know a truth or understand a theorem.

This notion that knowledge goes along step by step with activity, with praxis, is the heart of Froebel’s pedagogic method. ‘His point of departure was the making that precedes knowing, and knowledge is nothing more than the genetic development of the same

¹⁴*Facilis, facere, agevole, facile (e).*

making.’¹⁵ Froebel did not derive that principle from a materialist philosophy, however. It has been noted, in fact, that “*thun* (making), as well as the *genetisch-entwickelnd* (genetic-developmental) method so much promoted by Froebel, readily call to mind that doctrine (of Fichte’s) which attempted to derive all our science for the primitive making of the *I*.¹⁶

Marx wants to move this principle over from abstract idealism into concrete materialism. In his judgment, the neglect of this principle until his time was a most serious failure – indeed, the chief failure.

This is an idea that demonstrates the author’s philosophical insight. In the final analysis, what charge did he bring against materialism in the theory of knowledge? This one: treating the object, the sensible intuition, the external reality as a given rather than as a product, and forcing the subject who comes into a relationship with it to confine himself just to looking – merely mirroring, in fact – and to remain in a state of passivity. Briefly, then, Marx charged that the materialists, Feuerbach among them, thought of the subject and object of knowledge in an abstract and therefore a false condition.

In such a condition, the object would have been opposed to the subject and would have lacked any intrinsic relation with it – this thing that the subject encountered, saw and knew accidentally. Without its object, however, this subject is a subject of what? And of what is this object an object if likewise it lacks its subject? Subject and object are really two correlative terms, one following necessarily after the other. Hence, they are not independent of one another. They are inseparably bound to one another, in fact, so that their real effectiveness comes from their being related within the organism in which and through which they find the completion that they need and outside of which they are just abstractions. The life of the subject lies in its intrinsic relation with the object, and vice-versa. Cut this relation off, and you will no longer have life, only death, no longer two real terms of making and knowing, but two abstract terms.

One must think of them, then, as related to one another. The nature of this relation is clear from what has been said about the activity which is proper to knowing. When the object is known, it is made, it is constructed. And when an object is made or constructed, it is known. Therefore, the object is a product of the subject, and since there is no subject without an object, one must add that the subject itself is made or constructed as the object is gradually made or constructed. The moments of the subject’s progressive formation correspond to various moments in the progressive formation of the object.

They say that someone who has not known much has not developed his ideas or thinking very much. And as his knowledge (the object) gradually grows, there is a corresponding growth in the power of his comprehension and understanding (the subject). Knowledge, then, is a development that continues. Since in essence it is only a relation between two correlative terms, it is equivalent to a progressive development of these two terms in parallel. But the root, the enduring cause of this development lies in the activity, in the

¹⁵F. Fiorentino, ‘F.Froebel,’ *Giornale napoletano di filosofia e letteratura*, (1878), 220.

¹⁶Ibid.

making of the subject that shapes itself by shaping the object: *crescit et concrescit*; §p€dosiw §fÉaÈt“ (Aristotle).

But when materialism says that the spirit is a *tabula rasa* on which images of the external world are written, one by one, by the action of the senses, from one perspective one thinks of this table, ready to receive images from the external world. From the other perspective, one thinks of objects in the world, all ready to go and complete in themselves, such that, if their job is putting images on the table, they put them there, but if not, they remain just as they are, losing nothing of what they are, just as they would have gained nothing by delivering the images.

This is the abstract position of materialism, which does not stand up to the most elementary criticism. Who describes the images on the *tabula rasa*? Is it the subject that shapes them or the object? And if subject and object exist without these images – a product of the relation that they can enter into – if they thus exist independently of one another, what is a subject as pure subject, and what is an object as pure object? There is no way for materialism to answer these questions without contradicting its assumptions since, as we know, an abstraction can have no determination unless it is conceived in conditions wherein and whereby it is concrete – without being negated as an abstraction.

But one must recognize the legitimate motive that suggests such a position – the so-called objectivity of knowledge that requires the object to be an object, a pure object, with no mixture of subjectivity. If knowledge acquires value from the object that puts us in possession of knowledge, it no longer keeps this value when the object is changed by the influence of the subject or contact with the subject, which must be the principle of knowing as opposed to the known. From this comes the theory of intuitions, those pure visions that make the sensible image pass from external objects into our minds without the least modification. For this reason, a pure object and intuition are features of the objectivism – idealist or materialist – to which Marx wishes to oppose his subjectivism. Until now, he says in Fragment 1, reality has been conceived as *object* or *intuition*, not as human activity, not as *praxis*, not *subjectively*.¹⁷ According to him, then, reality is a subjective product of mankind, but a product of sensory activity (*sinnliche Thätigkeit*), not of thinking, as Hegel and other idealists believed.

Turn back to Hegel from Feuerbach, then, for Hegel certainly understood one incontrovertible truth – that knowledge is a continuing act of production, a making that never stops, a productive praxis. But transfer this principle of his from an abstract, idealist notion of the spirit to real, concrete, sensory human activity. Idealism certainly did not deny sensation, yet it did not recognize it as such, only as a moment of thinking which is not active or productive as sensation but only as thinking.

Now what has Feuerbach done in his *Essence of Christianity*? He has distinguished the Jewish forms of Christianity from its theoretical content. The former is a product of praxis, the latter a pure product of human thought – an absolute duality of fact and theory,

¹⁷above, fragments

praxis and knowledge, though they are really one and the same. In short, Feuerbach was not self-consistent: he gave a materialist explanation for the practical part of the history of Christianity, but he stopped short at the ideology, the theoretical part, the final fortress of idealism that stood opposed to him and which he did not seize.

On this point, facing the same problem, Labriola makes the following observation:

It is the difficulty of understanding how all ideologies arise from the material ground of life that gives force to the arguments of those who deny the possibility of a complete genetic (*materialist*) explanation of Christianity. In general it is true that religious phenomenology or psychology – say what one likes – causes great problems and brings up some rather obscure issues of its own.... But is it possible that this psychological difficulty is a privilege of Christian beliefs? Does this not happen in the formation of all mythical and religious beliefs and ideations? ... The fact is that these psychic products of people of past centuries present special difficulties to our understanding. We cannot easily reproduce in ourselves the conditions that then prevailed in order to bring ourselves closer to the internal state of mind that corresponded to those products.... But Christianity (and here I mean the belief, doctrine, myth, symbol and legend, not the mere association in its organizational sense)¹⁸ is rather simpler for us because we are closer to it. We live in its midst, and we must continually consider its consequences and effects in the literatures and various philosophies known to us. Every day we can observe the wholesale agreement of the masses with superstitions, both primitive and recent, and their middling or barely imprecise acceptance of the more general principle that unites all the confessions – fall and redemption. We see the Christian organization at work, both in what it does and in the struggles that it supports, and we are in a position to recover its past by combinations of analogies that we rarely get to use interpreting beliefs remote from us. We stand present again at the creation of new dogmas, new saints, new miracles, new pilgrimages, and, as we rethink the past, we have good reason to say *tout comme chez nous!*¹⁹

And yet do we not see these cathedrals [*dommi*] rising every day out of interests, out of material needs? These practical interests, these material needs have as their object the sensible reality which they strive to capture and make. But their object is not really distinct and separate from the object of thought – as Feuerbach believes and supposes it is (*sinnliche, von den Gedankenobjekten wirklich unterschiedene Objekte*) – because, if it were, materialism would not be able to explain all of mankind's activity. That activity can appear to be double in nature, practical and theoretical, to someone who has not understood the concept of knowing as making. But when making is united with knowing,

¹⁸nella sua oikonomika

¹⁹*Op.cit.*, pp. 123-5 (pp. 163-6 in the French translation). Note that in the end Professor Labriola thus reproduces the position for which Marx criticized Feuerbach: he sets the history of primitive Christianity apart within the history of two independent processes, each of them autonomous – the history of doctrine (an ideological process); and the history of the church (an economic process, p. 127). He warns, however, that doctrine is not “the most primeval formation” but a transformation or a novel derivative of ingredients already present in Christianity.

the objects that belong to knowing are also the objects of making, and vice-versa, so that finally there is a single class of objects related to praxis (which is making and knowing together) and, as it happens, produced by it. And if materialism is good enough to explain objects that are made, it must also be good enough to explain objects that are known, whose nature is basically identical with that of the former objects. Feuerbach explains his doctrinal constructions by the abstract activity of the spirit, which, for him, is the real human activity, thus plunging back into the idealism that he wished so firmly to deny.

Again according to Feuerbach, human activity is therefore not properly objective (*gegenständliche Tätigkeit*). It does not produce objects that stand opposed to man, only objects which are, so to speak, subjective – cognitions, not facts. And with respect to knowing, the true object – sensible reality – remains absolutely extraneous to thinking and independent of it. Inconsistency is Feuerbach's leading error, introducing a duality into the very heart of materialism, which is essentially a monist philosophy, when he was unable to recognize the productive character of the sensory activity that shapes all reality.

In conclusion, we need to complete the materialist intuition with the very fertile concept of practical-critical energy, the energy that unfolds as that which produces simultaneously produces and knows – the new concept of the 'revolutionaries.' ...

9 A Critique of the Philosophy of Praxis

... We may define the philosophy of praxis sketched by Marx in the fragments of 1845 as as materialist monism that differs from any similar system in its concept of praxis applied to matter.

But what does Marx mean by matter? Praxis, he answers, which leads to *historical* materialism. This implies a system that does not conceive of matter as fixed and stable, but as always in the process of being made, always in becoming. But where is the principle of activity? Praxis in Marx is synonymous with *human sensory activity* (*menschliche sinnliche Tätigkeit*).²⁰ The activity of matter thus resides in man. *Sensibility* is just practical activity, human-sensory activity.²¹ Hegel said that the idea, the spirit is hard-working, and that its dialectical development is the reason behind the becoming of reality.

²⁰Labriola's words, pp. 83-4, p. 109 in the French translation.

²¹Cf. fragment 1.