

An approach to teaching and learning about Marx's 'theses' on Feuerbach using zoom

Colin Waugh

We print here an article version of the the third of six talks given as part of a series of zoom sessions on Kark Marx's Theses on Feuerbach. The so-called 'theses' were in fact short notes written by Marx in Brussels in early May 1845, around the date of his 27th birthday. These notes were first published by Frederick Engels in 1888 in a slightly modified form (see below). The notes criticise a book by the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach but through doing so also set out ideas that would structure Marx's writings and activities for the rest of his life. On p22 we reprint a 'handout' used in the discussion following this third talk.

The aim of this talk is to introduce discussion of notes 2 and 3.

I will start with Note 3, especially the words: 'that the educator himself must be educated'. I will then suggest a way in which this connects to Note 2. Engels's 1888 rewording of the Notes said:

The materialist doctrine that men [sic] are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that men themselves change circumstances and that the educator himself must be educated. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).

So why did Engels refer thus to Owen?

This needs to be understood against the background of two factors: first, that Britain was the world's first industrialising society, and, second, that this industrialisation was accompanied by the development by workers of successive forms of self-organised collective class struggle education. These included, in the 1790s, the reading groups organised by the London Corresponding Society, in 1816-17 the Spencean philanthropist 'free-and-easy' discussion clubs, in the 1820s the struggles over control of Mechanics Institutes, especially economics teaching within them, in the 1830s the struggle for an unstamped press, in the late 1830s the 'really useful knowledge' movement, which in the early 1840s was carried forward into the Chartist movement, for example through *Northern Star* reading groups. In what relation did Robert Owen

stand to these developments? (We are concerned here with Owen himself, as distinct from the rank and file of the Owenite movement.)

In 1816 Owen gave a speech to the workers at New Lanark in the published version of which he famously said:

Facts prove . . . 1st. That character is universally formed for, and not by, the individual . . . 2nd. That any habits and sentiments may be given to mankind. . . 6th. That any community may be arranged . . . in such a manner, as not only to withdraw vice, poverty, and, in a great degree, misery, from the world, but also to place every individual under circumstances in which he shall enjoy more permanent happiness than can be given to any individual under the principles that have hitherto regulated society.

Owen promoted this view for the rest of his life, until his death in 1858. He did so in Britain, in much of continental Europe and in the USA, both in and around working-class movements and to wealthy patrons. Other big name 'critical utopian' socialists (for example Saint-Simon, Fourier and Cabet) played a similar role in the first half of the 1800s.

As well as this, a similar view of education was taken in 18th century bourgeois materialist movements, thereby giving rise to a powerful tradition of bourgeois materialist thinking about education going back to the early 1700s, especially in France. Among prominent adherents of this were Julien de La Mettrie (1709-1751) - author in 1747 of *Man a Machine* and the revolutionary physician Pierre Cabanis (1757-1808), who famously maintained that 'the brain secretes thought in the

2. The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.

3. The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence [*Zusammenfallen*] of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

(Note 2, lines 3-4) Do you agree that the truth or otherwise of human thinking is a *purely* practical question? Or if it has theoretical implications, what are they?

(Note 2, line 4) What do you think the word 'must' implies here?

(Note 2, lines 5-6) What do you think Marx means by 'this-worldliness'? What would be another way of putting this?

Note 2, line 9) What does 'scholastic' mean to you?

(Note 3, lines 11) What do you think this 'materialist doctrine' claims?

(Note 3, lines 13-14) Is it true that all changes to circumstances result from human actions? Can you think of any examples to the contrary?

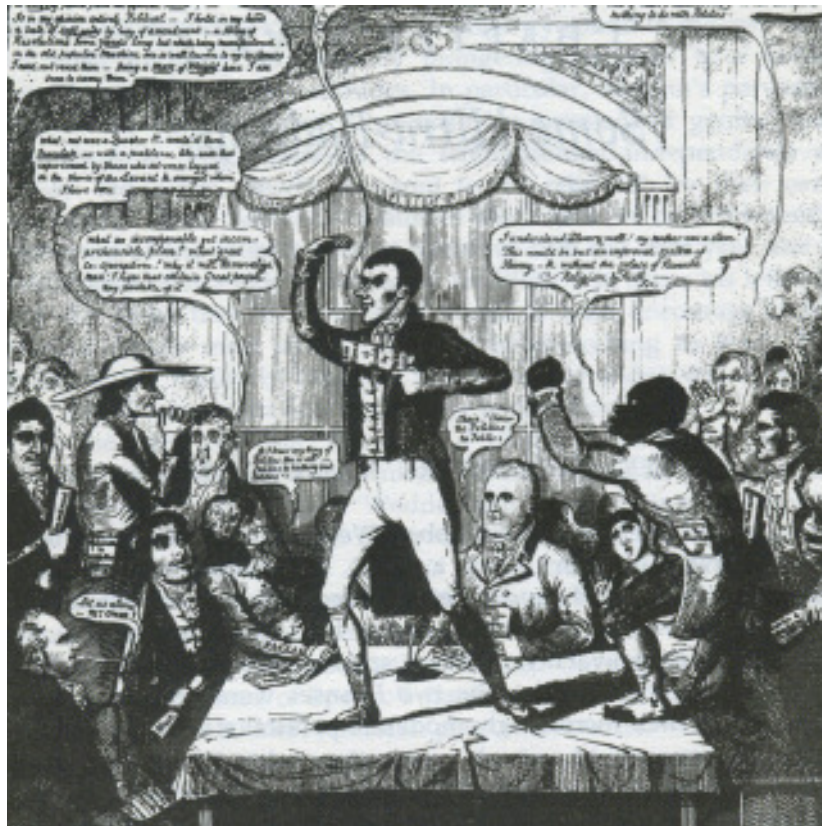
(Note 3, lines 14-15) Who or what do you think Marx had in mind here by 'the educator'?

Note 3 lines 16-17) Why must this 'materialist doctrine' 'divide society into two parts'?

Note 3, line 19) What do you think Marx meant by 'coincidence' here? What would be another way of putting this?

(Note 3, line 21) Why do you think Marx used the phrase 'human activity or self-change (ie as if they were inseparable) Is he right? If not, why not?

The image on p23 is the 1817 cartoon by George Cruikshank, which shows Robert Owen promoting his ideas at a Spencean 'free and easy' discussion. It includes a racist caricature of the important writer and activist Robert Wedderburn.



same way that the stomach secretes bile'. The overall standpoint of such thinkers was that an enlightened person or class in a position of power can reorganise society on a rational basis and thereby eliminate all problems. Their focus, then, was essentially about educating workers to fit into the bourgeois democratic social order that they sought to bring into being. Notes 2 and 3 of the 'theses' on Feuerbach set out Marx's alternative to this model.

His model was centred on a conception of working-class agency, and as such combined two key elements: 'practice', and 'the comprehension of practice' (Note 8)

Note 3 ends by saying 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice'. We need to take this in conjunction with note 2.

The first sentence of Note 2 refers to an argument amongst academic philosophers, for example Immanuel Kant, about whether humans can know the world as it really is or only as it appears to them. The second sentence then says: 'Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice.' This is a way of saying that if humans plan an action based on their experience of the natural world and successfully implement that plan, this proves they can know the world as it really is.

Further, this sentence also implies that we come to know the world through acting in and on it (and on ourselves as part of it) - that is, by work. As Marx later argued, in chapter 7 of Capital Vol. 1, published in 1867:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.

We need also to take account of the historical dimension to this.

Across human history, the vast bulk of productive activity has been done by members of what Antonio Gramsci later termed the 'instrumental classes', for example serfs, slaves, bonded labourers, artisans, industrial workers and other categories of worker. From this it follows then that for much of that history there had been amongst people at the bottom of society a reservoir of informal knowledge handed down by word of

mouth about the material world - for example the soil, timber, stone, minerals and so on.

In their 1846 draft for what became *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels wrote:

. . . tribal consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population. With these there develops the division of labour . . . Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears.

*** From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.

In this draft there was also a footnote in Marx's handwriting which reads 'The first form of ideologists, priests, is coincident.' They thought, then, that as class society emerges from non-class society, a layer of ideologists appropriate to themselves the insights that workers acquire through their experience of production, and, further, these ideologists monopolise the theoretical elaboration of those insights, such that this monopoly then becomes an instrument by which those in power rule people at the bottom of society, both through religion, and sometimes also through the planning of production itself.

So when Marx talks in his 'theses' on Feuerbach about the necessity for 'practical-critical activity' and about 'practice and the comprehension of practice' (Note 8) he's stressing that a key purpose of working-class collective self-education is for workers to take back control of their own thinking.

He saw this as a necessary condition of the working class organising itself as the ruling class, as per the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.



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