

FREDERICK ENGELS

LUDWIG FEUERBACH
AND THE END OF
CLASSICAL
GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

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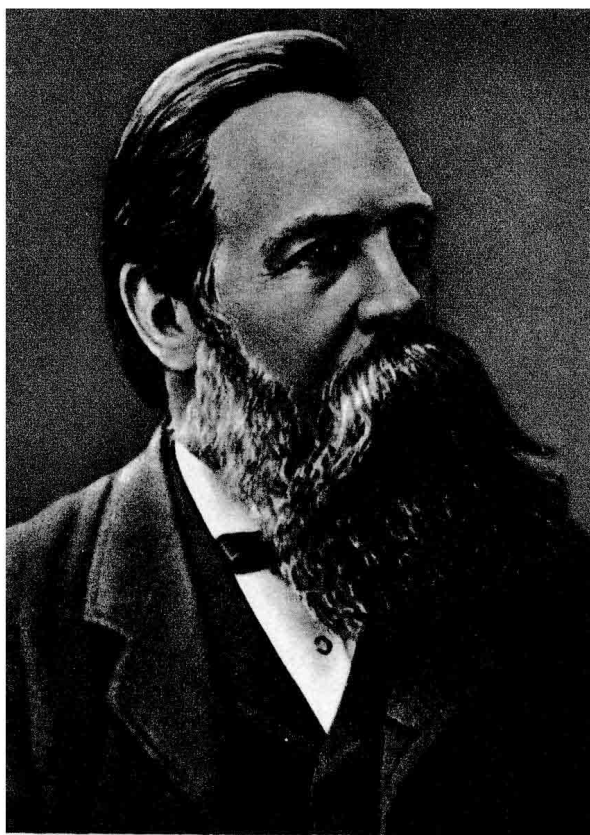
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F. Engels

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The present English edition of Frederick Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* is a translation of the Foreword and text of the German edition of 1888, including Karl Marx's Theses on Feuerbach. This translation follows that of the English edition of *Selected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, Vol. II, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1951, with corrections where necessary on the basis of the original German text in Marx and Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 21.

The Appendices consist of Plekhanov's Forewords to the first and second Russian editions of *Feuerbach* and of his Notes to the Russian editions. The translation of Plekhanov's Foreword to the first Russian edition and of his Notes to the Russian editions follow that of the English edition of *Selected Philosophical Works of Plekhanov*, Vol. I, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, with numerous and often drastic revisions and corrections where necessary. Plekhanov's Foreword to the second Russian edition was translated from the Russian original in the *Selected Philosophical Works of Plekhanov*, Vol. III.

The notes on Engels are based on those in the above-mentioned German and English editions. Those on Plekhanov are largely based on those in the English edition of *Selected Philosophical Works of Plekhanov*, Vol. I and in the Russian edition of *Selected Philosophical Works of Plekhanov*, Vol. III.

LUDWIG FEUERBACH AND THE END OF CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

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FOREWORD TO THE GERMAN EDITION OF 1888

In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in Berlin, 1859, Karl Marx relates how in 1845 the two of us, then in Brussels, undertook "to set forth together our view" — the materialist conception of history which was elaborated mainly by Marx — "as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact, to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience. The resolve was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy. The manuscript, two large octavo volumes, had long ago reached its place of publication in Westphalia when we were informed that owing to changed circumstances its printing was not permitted. We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose — self-clarification."*

* Karl Marx, *Preface and Introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,"* Eng. ed., Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976, p. 5; Marx is referring to *The German Ideology*. — Ed.

Since then more than forty years have elapsed, and Marx died without either of us having had an opportunity to return to the subject. We have discussed our relation to Hegel in one or two places, but nowhere in a comprehensive, connected account. Nor did we ever return to Feuerbach, who after all in many respects forms an intermediate link between Hegelian philosophy and our conception.

In the meantime the Marxist world outlook has found representatives far beyond the boundaries of Germany and Europe and in all the literary languages of the world. On the other hand, classical German philosophy is experiencing a kind of rebirth abroad, especially in England and Scandinavia, and even in Germany people appear to be getting tired of the pauper's broth of eclecticism which is ladled out in the universities there under the name of philosophy.

In these circumstances a short, connected account of our relation to the Hegelian philosophy, of how we proceeded as well as separated from it, appeared to me to be increasingly in order. Equally, a full acknowledgement of the influence which Feuerbach, more than any other post-Hegelian philosopher, had on us during our period of storm and stress, appeared to me to be an undischarged debt of honour. I therefore willingly seized the opportunity when the editors of the *Neue Zeit* asked me for a critical review of Starcke's book on Feuerbach. My contribution was published in Nos. 4 and 5 of that journal in 1886 and appears here in revised form as a separate publication.

Before sending these lines to press, I have once again ferreted out and looked over the old manuscript of 1845-46. The section dealing with Feuerbach is not completed. The finished portion consists of an exposition of the materialist conception of history which proves only how incomplete our

knowledge of economic history still was at the time. It contains no criticism of Feuerbach's doctrine itself; for the present purpose, therefore, it was unusable. On the other hand, in an old notebook of Marx's I have found the eleven theses on Feuerbach which are printed here as an appendix. These are notes hurriedly scribbled down for later elaboration, absolutely not intended for publication, but invaluable as the first document in which the brilliant germ of the new world outlook is deposited.

Frederick Engels

London, February 21, 1888

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LUDWIG FEUERBACH AND THE END OF CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

I

The present work* carries us back to a period which, although chronologically no more than a generation or so behind us, has become as foreign to the present generation in Germany as if it were already a full hundred years old. Yet it was the period of Germany's preparation for the Revolution of 1848; and all that has happened in our country since then has been merely a continuation of 1848, merely the execution of the last will and testament of the revolution.

Just as in France in the eighteenth century, so in Germany in the nineteenth, a philosophical revolution ushered in the political collapse. But with what a difference! The French were in open combat with all official science, with the church and often also the state; their writings were printed beyond the frontier, in Holland or England, while they themselves were often on the point of landing in the Bastille. But the

* *Ludwig Feuerbach*, by C. N. Starcke, Ph. D., Stuttgart, Ferd. Encke, 1885. [Note by Engels]

Germans were professors, state-appointed instructors of youth; their writings were recognized textbooks, and the system rounding off the whole development — the Hegelian system — was even raised, in some degree, to the rank of a royal Prussian philosophy of state! Was it possible that a revolution could hide behind these professors, behind their pedantically obscure phrases, their ponderous, wearisome sentences? Were not the liberals, the very people who then passed as the representatives of the revolution, the bitterest opponents of this brain-befuddling philosophy? But what neither governments nor liberals saw was seen by at least one man as early as 1833, and indeed by a man called Heinrich Heine.^{[1]*1}

Let us take an example. No philosophical proposition has earned as much gratitude from narrow-minded governments and wrath from equally narrow-minded liberals as Hegel's famous statement:

"What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational."²

That was tangibly a sanctification of all things as they are, a philosophical benediction bestowed upon despotism, the police state, arbitrary justice, and censorship. That is how Frederick William III understood it, and his subjects too. But according to Hegel everything that exists is in no wise also real, without further qualification. For Hegel the attribute of reality belongs only to that which at the same time is necessary:

"in its development reality proves itself as necessity."

* A bracketed numeral in the text indicates a note written by Plekhanov for the Russian editions and appearing on pp. 103-80 of this book.
— *Ed.*

Therefore a particular governmental measure — Hegel himself cites the example of “a certain tax regulation” — is by no means real for him without qualification. However, that which is necessary proves itself in the last resort to be rational too; and, applied to the Prussian state of that time, the Hegelian proposition, therefore, merely means: this state is rational, corresponds to reason, insofar as it is necessary; and if it nevertheless appears evil to us, but continues to exist in spite of its evil character, then the government’s evil character is justified and explained by the corresponding evil character of its subjects. The Prussians of that day had the government they deserved.^[2]

But according to Hegel, reality is in no way an attribute which applies to any given state of affairs, social or political, in all circumstances and at all times. On the contrary. The Roman Republic was real, but so was the Roman Empire which supplanted it. In 1789 the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say, so denuded of all necessity, so irrational, that it had to be abolished by the Great Revolution, of which Hegel always speaks with the greatest enthusiasm. In this case, therefore, the monarchy was unreal and the revolution real. Thus in the course of development all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right to existence, its rationality; a new, viable reality takes the place of the moribund reality — peacefully if the old is sensible enough to go to its death without a struggle, forcibly if it offers resistance to this necessity. Thus the Hegelian proposition is transformed into its opposite through the Hegelian dialectic itself: All that is real in the domain of human history becomes irrational in the course of time, is therefore already irrational by definition, is infected in advance with irrationality; and everything which is rational

in the minds of men is destined to become real, however much it may contradict existing apparent reality. In accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition about the rationality of everything real resolves itself into this other proposition: All that exists deserves to perish.

But the true significance and the revolutionary character of the Hegelian philosophy (to which, as the close of the whole movement since Kant, we must here confine ourselves) lay precisely in the fact that once and for all it dealt the deathblow to the final validity of all products of human thought and activity. With Hegel truth, the cognition of which is the task of philosophy, was no longer a collection of finished dogmatic propositions which, once discovered, had merely to be learned by heart. Truth now lay in the process of cognition itself, in the long historical development of science, which mounts from lower to ever higher levels of knowledge, but without ever reaching, by discovering some so-called absolute truth, a point at which it can proceed no further and at which it would have nothing more to do than to fold its hands and gaze admiringly at the absolute truth it had attained. And what holds good for the realm of philosophical knowledge holds good for that of every other kind of knowledge and also for practical activity. History is as little able as cognition to reach a final conclusion in a perfect, ideal condition of humanity; a perfect society, a perfect "state," are things which can only exist in the imagination. On the contrary, every successive historical situation is only a transitory stage in the endless course of development of society from the lower to the higher. Each stage is necessary and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But it becomes decrepit and

unjustified in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb. It must give way to a higher stage which in its turn will also decay and perish. Just as in practice the bourgeoisie dissolves all stable, time-honoured institutions by means of large-scale industry, competition and the world market, so this dialectical philosophy dissolves all conceptions of final, absolute truth and of absolute states of humanity corresponding to it. Nothing final, absolute or sacred can endure in its presence. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything and nothing can endure in its presence except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascent from the lower to the higher, of which it is itself the mere reflection in the thinking brain. Of course, it has a conservative side too: it recognizes that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances; but only up to a point. The conservatism of this outlook is relative, its revolutionary character is absolute — the only absolute which dialectical philosophy allows to prevail.

It is not necessary here to go into the question of whether this outlook is completely in accord with the present state of natural science, which predicts a possible end for the very existence of the earth and a fairly certain one for its habitability; which therefore recognizes that for the history of mankind, too, there is not only an upward but also a downward phase. At any rate we still find ourselves pretty far from the turning point at which the history of society will enter a decline, and we cannot expect Hegelian philosophy to be concerned with a subject which in its time natural science had definitely not yet put on the agenda.

But what must in fact be said here is that the above exposition is not found with such clarity in Hegel. It is a