

## ***Marx the Fichteian***



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**Abstract:** We ignore the history of philosophy at our peril. Engels, who typically conflates Marx and Marxism, points to the relation of Marxism to the tradition while also denying it. In his little book on Feuerbach, Engels depicts Feuerbach as leading Marx away from Hegel, away from classical German philosophy, away from philosophy and towards materialism and science. This view suggests that Marx is at best negatively related to Classical German philosophy, including Hegel. Yet Engels elsewhere suggests that Marx belongs to the classical German philosophical tradition. In the preface to *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, Engels wrote: “We German socialists are proud that we trace our descent not only from Saint Simon, Fourier and Owen, but also from Kant, Fichte and Hegel” (Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*). In this paper I will focus on Marx’s relation to Fichte. This relation is rarely mentioned in the Marxist debate, but I will argue, it is crucial for the formulation of Marx’s position, and hence for assessing his contribution accurately. One of the results of this study will be to indicate that Marx, in reacting against Hegel, did not, as is often suggested, ‘leave’ philosophy, but in fact made a crucial philosophical contribution.

**Keywords:** Marx’s relation to Fichte; Marx as not philosophy-escapist; Hegel; Engels; Feuerbach; Classical German Philosophy; Lukács.

### **I. Feuerbach and the Marxist Reading of Marx**

Engels depicts the relation of Marx to philosophy mainly through Hegel, whom he allegedly rejects, and Feuerbach, who supposedly makes this rejection possible. If it turns out that Fichte did in fact influence Marx, then it will be necessary to revise the Marxist view of his link to German Marxism.

The argument presented by Engels goes something like this: Marx’s position arose in reaction against Hegelian idealism. Idealism, of all kinds, hence Hegelian idealism, offers a distorted, therefore false, view, based on an inverted conception of the real world as viewed through the lens of bourgeois thought. Marx later freed himself from idealism

mainly through Feuerbach, who enabled Marx to simply throw Hegel aside. Idealism and materialism are incompatible opposites. Idealism in all its forms is false, but at least one type of materialism, the type worked out in Marxism, is true. Feuerbach provides a materialist critique of Hegel, hence of idealism. Feuerbach, whose critique of idealism “overcomes” Hegel, is in turn later criticized by Marx. Marx follows Feuerbach’s lead in ‘leaving’ idealist claptrap behind for materialism, whose dialectical version provides the only correct approach to contemporary society.

This complex claim can be usefully restated as a series of five provocative propositions, propositions which are asserted without proof, which taken together function as the outlines of a supposed refutation of the alternative to Hegel’s position:

i) Marx’s position arose in in a complex reaction to Hegelian idealism. This reaction includes Hegelian realism, natural law as well as quasi-biological descriptions of state and society, and so on.

ii) Idealism and materialism are incompatible opposites of which one is true and the other is false.

iii) According to Marx, materialism is true while idealism is false.

iv) Marx followed Feuerbach’s lead, more precisely his decisive critique of Hegelian idealism, in giving up idealism for materialism.

v) In giving up idealism for materialism, Marx moved beyond philosophy.

These assertions are often, indeed routinely regarded as true but each is ‘false’. By false I mean inaccurate, tendentious, or misleading. There is a widespread tendency to understand Marx in terms of his roots in Hegelian idealism. Now, Marx’s relation to Hegel and Hegelianism should not be denied. He was obviously influenced by Hegel. Marx, who read Hegel’s main writings as a teenager, criticized them in his early writings while still in his mid-twenties. Though clearly critical of Hegel, Marx later continued to rely on Hegel for key categories, arguments and insights throughout his later writings, up to and including *Capital*. The result, which is routinely but mistakenly simply denied, lies in a complex dialectical relationship between Marx, Hegel, the young Hegelians of the right and the left, and so on.

Though himself a Young, or left-Hegelian, Marx was critical of other Young Hegelians. It is initially plausible – but, on reflection, misleading – to understand Marx’s position as arising solely in reaction to Hegelian idealism, if that means it can somehow be adequately accounted for or understood simply in terms of its Hegelian roots. It is plausible that, as Engels reports, if not the origin of Marx’s position, but the position itself lies in coming to grips with Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. But this led Marx well beyond the confines of his understanding of Hegel, towards other economic, political and philosophical horizons and, within philosophy, towards thinkers he regarded as supplementing or even correcting Hegel in various ways.

The second proposition concerns the relation between idealism and materialism. Most observers regard materialism (or realism) and idealism as incompatible, and believe that a simultaneous commitment to both would be self-contradictory. The view that no version of idealism and materialism (or realism) can be combined within a single position is common to objections raised against idealism in different ways by its Marxist other critics. Elsewhere, I have examined 'idealism' in detail in the context of an account of Kantian, hence German, idealism (see Rockmore 2007). This is not the place to rehearse views of idealism such as Kant's transcendental, Fichte's science of knowledge, Schelling's conception of the absolute, and so on. Suffice it to say there are different types of idealism and materialism. It is doubtful that there is a single, shared doctrinal commitment for either idealism or materialism, whose subtypes appear to overlap in terms of family resemblances rather than a single shared essence. In a famous paper, G. E. Moore influentially suggested that idealists of all stripes deny the existence of the external world (Moore 1902/1958). Yet this is a clear error. Moore does not specify any idealist guilty of this mistake and none has ever been identified. Further, the supposed incompatibility between idealism and materialism, though often asserted, is nowhere demonstrated. On a closer look, it appears that, if properly understood and under appropriate conditions, idealism and materialism are compatible.

The relation between these doctrines is long and complex. The philosophical term "idealism" seems to have been invented by Leibniz at the start of the eighteenth century. In responding to Bayle, he objects to "those who, like Epicurus and Hobbes, believe that the soul is material, in adding that in his own position "whatever of good there is in the hypotheses of Epicurus and Plato, of the great materialists and the great idealists, is combined here" (Leibniz 1875-1890, IV, 559-560). Leibniz's usage of the term implies idealism and materialism differ, but can be combined, in a single position. He suggests, as Fichte later appears to suggest, a simultaneous commitment to idealism and materialism (or realism) (Fichte 1982, 3-28).

Marx is often regarded as following Feuerbach's lead in giving up idealism, which he supposedly vanquished, for materialism. Feuerbach, who was an opponent of Hegel, criticizes the latter in various texts from the perspective of the so-called *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Feuerbach 1986). But it is not the case, as the name of his position clearly suggests, that he vanquishes idealism for extra-philosophical materialism. It is further exaggerated to claim that Feuerbach, who is better known for his contribution to religion than to philosophy, "overcomes" Hegel, a true philosophical giant. At most, he can be read as pointing beyond Hegel in other directions.

Fourth, even if Marx were a materialist, it would not follow that he had moved beyond philosophy. There are numerous philosophical materialists, beginning with Democritus, Leucippus and Epicurus, the materialists of antiquity, and continuing up to the present. Even if Marx supported Feuerbach against Hegel, it would not follow that he moved beyond philosophy.

Engels, who did not graduate high school, was an autodidact, with no more than a cursory philosophical background. In inventing Marxism, he was influenced by a short period of study with Schelling in 1841. Another student in the same class was Kierkegaard. In the Munich lectures, held shortly after Hegel's death, Schelling sharply criticized Hegel's position as negative, in advancing his own supposedly positive philosophy, which ultimately became his theory of revelation. Engels and Kierkegaard both later formulated different versions of Schelling's complaint that Hegel was unable to grasp concrete existence. In Marxism, this became the difference between theory and practice, or *Praxis*. Engels developed Schelling's distinction between negative and positive philosophy in substituting the familiar distinction between materialism and idealism. In Engels's revision of Schelling's critique of Hegel, idealism, which is intrinsically abstract, cannot grasp the real social context. It is grasped only by materialism, which, unlike idealism, is concrete. Marxism, which is only distantly related to Marx's own position, is a conceptual amalgam thrown together by borrowing from different sources, including a crude but highly misleading view of the Western philosophical tradition on the basis of a simplistic account of German idealism.

The most influential statement of this theory is found in Engels's little book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Engels 1941). Here and elsewhere, on behalf of Marxism Engels promotes a misleading, simplistic three-fold claim regarding the relation of Hegel to prior philosophy, the relation of philosophy to philosophical problems, and the relation of Marx to philosophy and philosophical problems. According to this view, as the leftwing young Hegelian Heine suggested, philosophy came to a peak and to an end in Hegel.

The idea that philosophy could and in fact has already ended with a particular is not new with the young Hegelians. Kant made a version of this claim in suggesting that the critical philosophy forever solved the problems of philosophy and, hence, could not be revised. Hegel, who never made any version of this claim, contradicted Kant by suggesting that all positions, including his own, belong to the history of philosophy. No philosophical theory, position, position, insight or argument can suffice to bring the philosophical tradition to an end. Earlier theories are either ignored or refuted by later theories, which continually take the discussion beyond any given point. Engels, who made Marxism stand or fall on this fallacious claim, did so in generalizing Schelling's view of Hegel's supposedly negative philosophy to philosophy in general.

According to Engels, philosophy is inadequate to solve, resolve or otherwise dispose of its problems, concerns, or difficulties. His basic insight, the suggestion that reason must be adapted to – or, in another formulation, made congruent with – its object goes back in the early Greek tradition at least to Parmenides. In distinguishing between the way

of error, which is straight, and the way of truth, which is circular, he indicates that the criterion of knowledge is the identity of thought and being. For the cognitive instrument must be adapted to its cognitive object, that which it seeks to know. This idea is later restated many times: for instance, in Kant's so-called Copernican revolution, which centers around the complex claim that, though one cannot represent the real, one can know what one in some sense constructs. Engels suggests that philosophy is inadequate to come to grips with its problems, which are, however, real. These problems are resolved only by Marxism, which is situated beyond philosophy.

Engels's unsupported blanket-claim rapidly became an article of Marxist faith, with roughly the same status as religious beliefs. Such beliefs need neither argument nor demonstration in order to be accepted, and cannot be refuted through ordinary forms of argument. Engels, who did not demonstrate any of his claims, made no pretense of arguing for his interpretations, which remain mere assertions. He did not, for instance, show that philosophy came to an end in Hegel, that it cannot carry out its self-assigned tasks, that idealism goes from thought to being rather than going from being to thought, nor that Marxism can provide an extra-philosophical solution to philosophical problems. It seems doubtful that no formulation of this view can demonstrate the Marxist claim that philosophical questions can be answered from a position "outside philosophy."

## II. Lukács and Hegelian Marxism

In Engels' reading of Marx, Feuerbach enabled the latter to 'leave' philosophy in favor of a scientific perspective situated outside it in order to solve, resolve or overcome its difficulties, problems and concerns. This is tantamount to suggesting that, as Althusser insisted, Marx turned away from an approach based on the actions of one or more individuals, illustrated in German idealism, to instead rely on science, and thus scientific laws. On the contrary, when we inspect Marx's texts, we see that his position relies on rethinking the conception of the subject that does not leave behind, but rather depends on, German idealism, especially Fichte.

Engels's simplistic, unargued account of the relation of Marx to Hegel and German idealism is literally transformed in Lukács' complex, closely argued account. Simultaneously with Karl Korsch (Korsch 2012) Lukács invented Hegelian Marxism. Unlike Engels, and unlike most students of Marx, including Korsch, Lukács had a thorough grasp of classical German philosophy. He did, for instance, early work in Kantian aesthetics before turning to Marxism. His particular form of Hegelian Marxism has two characteristics. First – like Korsch, and like other Hegelian Marxists – he resisted a simplistic, binary reading of the relation between Marx to Hegel, in formulating a richer, multi-dimensional account. Second – unlike Korsch as well as other Hegelian Marxists – Lukács, in emphasizing Hegel, also pointed to the importance of Fichte for Marx's position. Lukács's most significant account of Hegelian Marxism occurred in *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1971), which

appeared in 1923, the same year as Korsch's important study, *Marxism and Philosophy*. Lukács, who employed a Marxist reading of Marx with Kantian and neo-Kantian elements, comprehends Marx's theory as a form of commodity-analysis. According to Lukács, only Marxist political economy is capable of comprehending the economic structure of advanced industrial society.

His Kantian argument for this claim consists of two points. First, non-Marxist political economy cannot know its object, that is, the real structure of the social context. So-called bourgeois political economy, which is limited to grasping false appearance, is implicitly irrational.

Second, Marxian political economy grasps true appearance through the Marxian theory of commodity-analysis, and hence is implicitly rational. It is the only approach that can lead to knowledge of social reality. Marx's theory of commodity-analysis, as Lukács asserted in a dazzling example of Marxist faith, can resolve any and all problems (Lukács 1971, 83).

Lukács's attitude towards Engels was both positive and negative: positive in that he supplied arguments to buttress the latter's simplistic assertions in restating Marxism on a philosophical basis, but negative in that he sharply criticized Engels's philosophical inadequacies, such as his simplistic treatment of Kant's key conception of the thing-in-itself (Lukács 1971, 131–133). Engels simply claimed that philosophy reaches its peak and end in Hegel without being able to resolve its problems. Unlike Engels, Lukács argued for this claim in supposedly identifying a specific flaw in classical German philosophy on the level of the subject, a conception which is allegedly corrected by Marx.

Lukács' argument in favor of Marxism extends Kant's analysis of the thing-in-itself throughout classical German philosophy, which is by definition unable to know its object. According to Lukács, Kant advanced an inadequate conception of the subject, whose difficulty culminated in Hegel's appeal to a mythological concept of the absolute, expressing a manifest inability to understand the real historical subject, the proletarian class, or identical subject-object.

Lukács adduced three reasons, all well-known in the Hegel literature, for Hegel's supposed failure to provide an adequate conception of the subject. First, the relation of reason to history is merely contingent, since reason is not actually imminent to history. This is a version of the familiar Marxist view that Hegel began from an abstract, theoretical perspective, which never grasps the social and historical context. Second, Hegel supposes that history has an end, which lies in the Prussian state. In this context, Lukács restated the frequent claim that Hegel later turned away from the revolutionary ideals of his youth and assumed a reactionary political stance. Third, he complained that in the *Encyclopedia*, in an abstract, contemplative discussion, Hegel separated genesis from history in a merely logical analysis of the transition from logic through nature to spirit. The resultant conception of the absolute only seems to make history. This is a form of the well-known assertion – which Lukács never abandoned, and which formed the basis of his critique

of Hegel in *On the Ontology of Social Being* (German: *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*) that Hegel's philosophy is a panlogism [Lukács 1984-1971]).

According to Lukács, the interest of the German-idealist tradition consists of pointing through its method towards the way beyond these limits. The correct path lies in a return to the early Marx's discovery of the true historical subject. Through the dialectical method as the only true historical method, we identify the real "we" of the historical process in the proletariat, as the identical subject/object of history. Lukács writes:

The continuation of that course which at least in method started to point the way beyond these limits, namely the dialectical method as the true historical method, was reserved for the class which was able to discover within itself on the basis of its life-experience the identical subject-object, the subject of 'action' the 'we' of the genesis: namely the proletariat (Lukács 1971, 148-149).

The claim for the proletarian standpoint as the solution to the problem emerging from the thing-in-itself is, in fact, a transparent restatement of the Young-Hegelian view that philosophy comes to an end in Hegel's thought. In other words, the theory of the proletariat discovered by Marx and continued by Marxism provides the solution for the crucial problem left unsolved by classical German philosophy. In the final analysis, philosophy does not end in the Hegelian synthesis, which, since it depends on an incorrect view of the subject, simply fails. Rather, it is completed and comes to an end after Hegel in the Marxian transformation of absolute idealism, which is seamlessly prolonged in Marxism.

We can summarize as follows: according to Lukács, Marx's key move, which is unrelated to exposing the anatomy of modern industrial society, lies in rethinking the subject in his early writings. In this context, Lukács turned his attention towards Fichte. Lukács was critical of the Fichtean concept of activity, whose importance lies in a prototypical solution of the relation of theory and praxis, subjectivity and objectivity. He followed others in maintaining that Fichte failed to understand the true nature of human activity, which he incorrectly assimilated to mental activity alone.

In the present context, it is not necessary to examine Fichte's view of the active subject in detail. It can suffice here to note that Fichte's conception of the subject as wholly active and never passive is significant as a contribution to the Kantian problem. Kant makes practice dependent on theory since theory includes and hence resolves any and all practical concerns. Fichte responds to Kant in inverting the relation between theory and practice. According to Fichte, theory, which is not disconnected from practice, is not irrelevant, but relevant to practical concerns from which it arises and to which it returns.

It is widely known that Kant deduces a transcendental subject unrelated to human being. Fichte goes beyond Kant in correctly locating the unity of subject and object in activity and by means of it Lukács suggests that, in rethinking the unity of subject and object as activity (Lukács 1971, 123), Fichte showed that so-called given can be understood as the

product of the identical subject/object, that is as the product of the activity of cognizing and knowing something which derives from this unity. The importance of Fichte's view for Lukács becomes clear in his argument that the unity of subject and object, which Fichte allegedly located in mental activity, is, according to Lukács, brought about through the activity of the proletariat.

### **III. Fichte and the Marxian Conception of the Subject**

Western Marxism is with some exceptions a series of forms of Hegelian Marxism invented by Lukács and Korsch, Lukács more than Korsch. Lukács' reading of Marx in relation to German idealism remains incomplete. As the main co-founder of Hegelian Marxism, he provided a richer, better informed, more nuanced account of the relation of Marx to Hegel and classical German idealism than any other observer has before or since.

Two points are relevant here. Though his intention was to show that Marx went beyond German idealism in answering Hegel, Lukács correctly points out Fichte's significance for Marx's conception of the subject, thereby undercutting the claim that Marx left philosophy behind. At the same time, he undercuts his own effort to depict Marx in replying to Engels' suggestion that we must understand Marx through Hegel in pointing beyond him to Fichte.

In the wake of Descartes, the problem of the subject recurs throughout modern philosophy, including German idealism. In reacting against Hegel, Lukács suggests that the Hegelian synthesis is finally completed in the Marxian transformation of absolute idealism, seamlessly prolonged in Marxism. We can summarize the argument as follows: according to Lukács, Marx's key move lay in rethinking the subject, or more precisely in discovering the real historical subject in replacing the German idealist depictions of the absolute by the proletariat in his early Marxist writings after his conversion to Marxism in 1918. In this context, Lukács turned his attention towards Fichte. Lukács was critical of the Fichtean concept of activity, whose importance lies in a prototypical solution of the relation of theory and praxis. We have already pointed out that he followed others in maintaining that Fichte failed to understand the true nature of human activity, which he assimilated to mental activity alone.

Kant's problem lies in bringing together objectivity and subjectivity, theory and practice in, as Lukács says, solving the enigma of the thing in itself, in other words in finally grasping modern bourgeois society. This problem occurs on different levels, including theory, practice, and the unity of theory and practice. On the theoretical level it is the problem of how to know modern industrial society that, according to Lukács, cannot be grasped from the bourgeois perspective and can only be grasped from the perspective of the proletariat. On the practical level it concerns the relationship of theory and practice that Kant resolves in the moral writings in subordinating practice to theory.

The difficulty lies in bringing together theory and practice in a unity that, as Lukács points out, lies in activity. According to Lukács, in this respect Fichte went beyond Kant and “put the practical, action as well as activity in the center of his unifying philosophical system” (Lukács 1971, 123) (and in the center of his conception of subjectivity).

Yet, since Lukács is committed to the superiority of Marxism, his view of Fichte is equivocal. He sees but fails to understand the importance of the Fichtean view of the subject as intrinsically active since he is committed to the view that, as he writes, “*only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat* possesses this ability to transform things” (Lukács 1971, 205).

In fact, the situation is different than Lukács’s depiction of it. Marx does not merely dismiss but rather relies on Fichte’s conception of the subject as wholly active and never passive as an indispensable clue to the solution of the real historical subject. According to Lukács, who follows E. Lask, Fichte shows that the given can be understood as the product of the identical subject/object, which derives from this unity. The importance of Fichte’s view for Lukács’ Marxist reading of the relation of Marx to classical German philosophy becomes clear in his argument that the unity of subject and object, which Fichte allegedly located in mental activity, is in fact, brought about through the activity of the proletariat.

After the above remarks on Lukács’ view of Fichte, we turn immediately to the relationship between Fichte and Marx. In reacting against Hegel, the Young Hegelians, including Feuerbach, turned to Fichte in order to formulate an adequate account of subjectivity. Kant considers the question of what “man” is to be the single most important theme. He worked out his view of the subject in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the transcendental deduction, in isolating the conditions of knowledge in general from psychological factors. Though he accounted types of experience through types of activity, he was unable to formulate a unified theory of the subject. In Kant’s wake, Fichte, for the first time in classical German philosophy, formulated a unified theory of the subject based on its activity. After Hegel, a number of Young Hegelians, including Feuerbach and Marx, if Marx was in fact a young Hegelian, turned to Fichte for a model of subjectivity that they then proceeded to develop (Cornu 1955-1970).

In the very early *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx argues that Hegel substitutes a mere concept or idea for the real historical subject. Hegel’s supposed failure to identify the real historical subject is an important factor in Marx’s turn in the *Paris Manuscripts* from Hegel to Fichte to overcome a perceived deficit in the Hegelian theory of the modern state. The family and civil society in reality produce the state through the unfolding of the concrete social context. Yet, Marx contends, Hegel incorrectly sees them as produced by the idea (Marx & Engels, CW III, 8–9) or, in Hegelian language, by a self-realizing concept. Marx sums up his methodological criticism by accusing Hegel of a quasi-F Feuerbachian inversion of subject and predicate: “The fact which is taken as a point of departure is not conceived as such, but as a mystical result” (Marx & Engels, CW III, 9). In other words, Hegel conflates causes and effects in substituting effects for causes and

conversely.

Marx, who was familiar with Fichte's position, later maintained an interest in the latter's views. This interest in Fichte is clear in his early writings, especially in the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844. In the third Manuscript, in the section known as the "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy," Marx objects to the conceptions of the subject in Fichte and Hegel. It is, he maintained, as much a mistake to consider human being through self-consciousness as to reduce the object of consciousness to a purely mental creation. In an important but little noticed passage, Marx utilizes Fichtean terminology against Fichte in writing:

When real corporal man ... posits [*setzt*], the positing [*das Setzen*] is not the subject of this act (...) An objective being acts objectively .... It creates and establishes [*setzt*] only objects (...) In the act of establishing it does not descend from its 'pure activity' to the creation of objects [*In dem Akt des Setzens fällt es also nicht aus seiner 'reinen Tätigkeit' in ein Schaffen des Gegenstandes*]; its objective product simply confirms its objective activity, with its activity as an objective, natural being (Marx 1964, 206<sup>1</sup>).

Here, we see Marx insisting on the objectivity of the external world, in opposition to Fichte, who was widely but incorrectly understood as believing that reality is wholly a product of thought. Marx further insists that if human individuals are not solely created through mental activity, they also cannot be understood through their mental capacities. It is remarkable how far the view that Marx here insists on – presumably for the most part against Hegel, and perhaps against Fichte as well – resembles Fichte's own conception of the human subject. In order to bring out this point, it is useful to quote the relevant passage at some length.

"Man," Marx writes,

is directly a natural being. As a natural being, and as a living natural being he is, on the one hand, endowed with natural powers and faculties, which exist in him as tendencies and abilities, as drives. On the other hand, as a natural, embodied, sentient, objective being, his is a suffering, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants. The objects of his drives exist outside himself as objective independent of him, yet they are objects of his needs, essential objects, which are indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his faculties. The fact that man is an embodied, living, real, sentient objective being with natural powers, means that he has real, sensuous objects as the objects of his being, or that he can only express his being in real sensuous objects (...) Man as an objective sentient being is a suffering being, and since he feels his suffering, a passionate being. Passion is

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1 In Original: „Wenn der wirkliche, leibliche, auf der festen wohlgerundeten Erde stehende, alle Naturkräfte aus- und einatmende Mensch seine wirklichen, gegenständlichen Wesenskräfte durch seine Entäußerung als fremde Gegenstände setzt, so ist nicht das Setzen Subjekt; [A\*] es ist die Subjektivität gegenständlicher Wesenskräfte, deren Aktion daher auch eine gegenständliche sein muß. Das gegenständliche Wesen wirkt gegenständlich, und es würde nicht gegenständlich wirken, wenn nicht das Gegenständliche in seiner Wesensbestimmung läge. Es schafft, setzt nun Gegenstände, weil es durch Gegenstände gesetzt ist, weil es von Haus aus Natur ist. In dem Akt des Setzens fällt es also nicht aus seiner ‚reinen Tätigkeit‘ in ein Schaffen des Gegenstandes, sondern sein gegenständliches Produkt bestätigt nur seine gegenständliche Tätigkeit, seine Tätigkeit als die Tätigkeit eines gegenständlichen natürlichen Wesens“ (Marx 1968, 577).

man's faculties striving (*strebende*) to attain their object (Marx 1964, 206–208)<sup>2</sup>.

To the best of my knowledge, no other single passage anywhere in Marx's voluminous writings offers a more detailed statement of his understanding of the human individual. This passage is, furthermore, fascinating for the remarkable resemblance between Marx's comprehension of finite human being and Fichte's view. Man is described, in Fichtean language, as 'natural', possessed of 'drives', as 'suffering' because limited, and as 'passionate' due to his awareness of his limitations: this reflects Marx's awareness of Fichte's theory as well as his specific conception of finite human being. Though Marx's overall position differed from Fichte's, he clearly accepts the main lines of Fichte's conception of the human individual as a natural being, hence obliged to meet his needs outside himself, limited by and only able to realize himself in relation to others through transforming the surrounding social context.

#### IV. Marxian Man and Marxian Economics

Marx's position offers a solution to the modern form of the ancient problem of human flourishing in its modern reformulation by Rousseau and later thinkers including Kant, Hegel and others. Marx suggests that in and through its activity human being meets two kinds of needs. They include basic reproductive needs, such as the proverbial food, clothing and shelter, which must be met in order for workers to continue to work in meeting their basic needs and capitalism to continue to function through realizing and appropriating surplus value. They include as well human needs, or the need to realize one's specific capacities as a finite human being, or the need to surpass mere reproductive needs in taking one's place as a fully individual member of society.

The different kinds of human needs are met in practice through different forms of human activity. In skeletal form Marx's position includes a theory of the main forms of activity through which finite human beings meet their basic or species needs, an account

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<sup>2</sup> See also Marx (1968, 578): „Der Mensch ist unmittelbar Naturwesen. Als Naturwesen und als lebendiges Naturwesen ist er teils mit natürlichen Kräften, mit Lebenskräften ausgerüstet, ein tätiges Naturwesen; diese Kräfte existieren in ihm als Anlagen und Fähigkeiten, als Triebe; teils ist er als natürliches, leibliches, sinnliches, gegenständliches Wesen ein leidendes, bedingtes und beschränktes Wesen, wie es auch das Tier und die Pflanze ist, d.h. die Gegenstände seiner Triebe existieren außer ihm, als von ihm unabhängige Gegenstände; aber diese Gegenstände sind Gegenstände seines Bedürfnisses, zur Betätigung und Bestätigung seiner Wesenskräfte unentbehrliche, wesentliche Gegenstände. Daß der Mensch ein leibliches, naturkräftiges, lebendiges, wirkliches, sinnliches, gegenständliches Wesen ist, heißt, daß er wirkliche, sinnliche Gegenstände zum Gegenstand seines Wesens, seiner Lebensäußerung hat oder daß er nun an wirklichen, sinnlichen Gegenständen sein Leben äußern kann. Gegenständlich, natürlich, sinnlich sein und sowohl Gegenstand, Natur, Sinn außer sich haben oder selbst Gegenstand, Natur, Sinn für ein drittes sein ist identisch (...). Der Hunger ist ein natürliches Bedürfnis; er bedarf also einer Natur außer sich, eines Gegenstandes außer sich, um sich zu befriedigen, um sich zu stillen. Der Hunger ist das gestandne Bedürfnis meines Leibes nach einem außer ihm seienden, zu seiner Integrierung und Wesensäußerung unentbehrlichen Gegenstande. Die Sonne ist der Gegenstand der Pflanze, ein ihr unentbehrlicher, ihr Leben bestätigender Gegenstand, wie die Pflanze Gegenstand der Sonne ist, als Äußerung von der lebenserweckenden Kraft der Sonne, von der gegenständlichen Wesenskraft der Sonne“.

of surplus value is created and appropriated by the owners of the means of production, as well as the revolutionary activity through which private property is abolished in the transition from capitalism to communism, and finally the activity through which human beings finally become fully human individuals all depend on his reworking of the central Fichtean insight into human being as basically active and never passive.

If this is correct, then it follows that the Fichtean view of human being as active is not, as Lukács suggests, a bourgeois, hence non-proletarian and incorrect supplement to Marx's effort to rethink the subject in Hegel's wake. It is rather key to Marx's effort, in relying on Fichtean insights to construct a replacement for what he regarded as Hegel's supposedly inadequate conception of the human subject. Marx's effort to respond to Hegel, which Marx rethinks on a Fichtean basis, is, since the conception of the subject is central to all the classical German thinkers, central to Marx's theory as well. For at the end of the day, if we leave aside the Marxist rhetoric to concentrate on the practical problems of modern industrial society, we see that Marx's conception of the human being as active is key to the Marxian conception of the solution to the ancient theme of human flourishing in modern industrial society.

## V. Conclusion: Marx the Fichtean

I began by asking a question about the relation of Marx to Fichte. The answer depends on what it means to be a Fichtean. This question was already controversial in Fichte's time. In the period between Kant and Hegel Fichte was enormously influential. He was still very influential when Marx was a philosophical graduate student. The young Schelling and the young Hegel were Fichteans for a time, though Fichte, who thought he was misunderstood, rapidly rejected Schelling as a disciple and Hegel just as rapidly moved beyond this early phase. If to be a Fichtean means to accept the main lines of Fichte's position, then neither Marx nor, arguably, anyone else was ever a Fichtean. **Even Fichte** was, arguably, never a Fichtean, since he continually altered his position to demonstrate a variety of shapes and manifestations of the originally 'unconditional' and 'absolute' activity, stages in a position that he was never able to state satisfactorily, in some 16 versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. If, on the contrary, to be a Fichtean means to accept one or more central Fichtean ideas, then it seems clear that in an important sense, Marx is a Fichtean, above all with respect to the conception of finite human being as essentially active. At the dawn of modern philosophy, Descartes invented two views of the human subject, the widely-known, 'official' spectator theory, and the little-known, but perhaps more interesting, so-called actor theory, implicit in the famous remark in the *Discourse*, but never worked out, about 'trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies the world displays' (Descartes 1970, 99). The so-called spectator theory of subjectivity has long been popular. But in general, the more interesting views of the subject in the wake of Descartes are different forms of the largely undefined actor view,

through which various thinkers strived to understand knowledge, morality and the social surroundings through the prism of the activity of finite human beings.

Marx belongs to this ongoing effort, arising in the first instance in the reaction to the wholly theoretical subject in Kant and, at least from his perspective, the supposed lack of a historical subject in Hegel, a lack that is initially overcome through the Fichtean conception of the subject as always active and never passive, but whose activity is constrained by its self-constructed social surroundings. Marx is certainly not Fichte, though in some respects the resemblance runs very deep. In Fichte's wake, Marx participated in a Fichtean effort to rethink the subject as defined by work – or, indeed, labor [*Arbeit*] – in modern industrial society. He understood capitalism, communism and, if there is a distinction, socialism through the self-production of finite human beings – within capitalism, in the form of work through which one meets one's basic reproductive or subsistence needs; and in a future form of society, perhaps unrealistically, situated beyond the limits of human needs anywhere one develops one's human potentials through what we can call free human activity.

Marx's entire position turns on working out an understanding and account of the real conditions of human freedom in modern industrial society on the basis of a theory of human activity. This approach to human beings through human activity was formulated by Fichte in reaction against Kant and then appropriated and transformed by Marx in reaction against Hegel.

Marx's position cannot be reduced to Fichte's, but it does resemble it and obviously depends on it as it adopts and works out an approach to finite human being and all the many forms of society through a conception of human activity. This approach goes back in the Western tradition at least as far as Aristotle, who advanced a theory of life as activity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But its proximal version, which influenced the Young Hegelians in the mid-nineteenth century as they rebelled against Hegel, was in Fichte's position. Fichte is, in this respect, the origin of Marx's conception of human being, which is the centerpiece of his entire position. I conclude that, in this sense, and perhaps others as well, Marx is, indeed, a Fichtean.

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