

The transformation of Marx's early thought as seen from his debate with Powell

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Abstract

The transformation of Marx's early thought has long been a focal point of theoretical discussion. However, there remains considerable debate on this issue, primarily due to the lack of a clear and comprehensive depiction of Marx's early intellectual framework. In particular, the influence of Bruno Bauer on Marx's early thought has not received sufficient attention in academic circles. This paper seeks to examine the role of Bauer's philosophy in the evolution of Marx's early ideas, analyzing the polemical texts *On the Jewish Question* and *The Holy Family* to reconstruct the complete schema of Marx's intellectual shift. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate on the transformation of Marx's early thought.

Keywords: Young Marx, Bruno Bauer, philosophy of self-consciousness.

The majority of scholars hold the view that Marx underwent two intellectual transformations in his youth. The first transformation was mainly reflected in his shift from a Young Hegelian to Feuerbachian humanistic materialism, accompanied by a transition from revolutionary democracy to universal communism. The second transformation involved his move from humanistic materialism and universal communism to historical materialism. Of course, there are debates within academia regarding these two transformations. For instance, there are numerous interpretations concerning the timing and stages of the first transformation: some scholars believe it occurred upon the completion of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, while others argue that *The German Ideology* should be regarded as a key milestone in this intellectual shift. In my opinion, these academic debates are all reasonable, but we should return to the theoretical context of the time and examine the specific texts to understand the origins of these disputes, as this is of great significance for uncovering the truth and clarifying ideas.

Returning to the timeframe of the first intellectual transformation, two or three individuals exerted a profound influence on Marx. The first was Feuerbach, whose impact on Marx was the most direct and profound, and thus requires no further elaboration here. The second was Hess, whose influence has been increasingly studied with the introduction of Japanese Marxism and research on the MEGA2 manuscripts. The third was Bruno Bauer. Although several of Marx's important texts revolve around Bauer, academic research on Bauer's philosophy remains

lukewarm, often treating him merely as a remnant of the Young Hegelian movement. This, of course, is inseparable from Marx himself, as he selectively ignored the theories of this former ally. Moreover, unlike Feuerbach and Hess, Bauer was never positively evaluated by Marx in their debates; on the contrary, Bauer was almost invariably positioned as the target of criticism. It is precisely for these reasons that Bauer has long been "unwelcome" in domestic academia. However, this is biased, and it could even be said that Bauer is a precise key to unlocking Marx's early intellectual transformation. This paper intends to analyze the relationship between Bauer and Marx, as well as the transformation of Marx's early thought, based on two major polemical texts: *On the Jewish Question* and *The Holy Family*.

1. On the Jewish Question and Human Emancipation

In fact, Bauer and Marx initially maintained a very close relationship, and in the early stages of Marx's intellectual development, Bauer exerted comprehensive influence on him. Thematically, Marx's doctoral dissertation was significantly influenced by Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness. In practical terms, after obtaining his doctorate in philosophy, Marx even collaborated with Bauer on writing projects. Had circumstances developed favorably, Marx could have become a university lecturer with Bauer's assistance. However, when Bauer was dismissed from his academic position due to unorthodox doctrines, Marx's plan for a university appointment came to nothing. Subsequently, Marx turned to journalism, contributing articles to the *Rheinische Zeitung*.

Engels once remarked: "I have heard Marx say more than once that it was his study of the law on theft of wood and the situation of peasants in the Mosel region that prompted him to shift from pure politics to the study of economic relations, and thus toward socialism." [Collected Correspondence on Marx and Engels' Capital, People's Publishing House, 1976, p.587] Influenced by Hegel's philosophy of law, Marx—like Bauer as a member of the Young Hegelians—initially believed that "a state that fails to realize rational freedom is a bad state," and therefore sought to make "free reason the ruler of the world." However, when Marx engaged with practical issues, he discovered that, contrary to Hegel's conception, the state did not embody free reason and govern both family and civil society, but was instead dominated by "base" private interests. Consequently, Marx redirected his critique toward Hegel's philosophy of law. While Marx focused on critiquing legal philosophy and increasingly engaged with practical realities, Bauer turned to criticizing the Gospels and theological issues. Marx viewed the obstacle to freedom as the division between the political state and civil society, between social forces and individual powers; whereas Bauer believed that realizing self-consciousness required eliminating religious faith, which he saw as inherently exclusive. This fundamental disagreement led to their direct confrontation in two key texts: *The Jewish Question* and *On the Jewish Question*.

Why then did the "Jewish Question" become the focal point of their debate? This was inextricably linked to the contemporary socio-political environment. After 1830, the Jewish Question gradually became a central issue in German society. On one hand, with the rise of

Jewish movements demanding civil rights, calls for abolishing discriminatory treatment against Jews grew increasingly louder, and "Jewish emancipation" was being discussed more frequently. On the other hand, the German ruling class intensified its persecution of Jews. In late 1841, Frederick William IV issued a Cabinet Order that sought to legally bar Jews from participating in public affairs, aiming to completely exclude them from mainstream society.

During this period, Hermes published an article in the *Kölnische Zeitung* supporting this decree, while Jewish newspapers like the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* and the *Rheinische Zeitung* condemned Hermes' persecution of Jewish rights. At the time, Marx wrote to Georg Jung, the legal representative of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, requesting all anti-Jewish articles targeting Hermes be sent to him. Marx promised to quickly submit an article that would "if not completely resolve this issue, at least steer it onto a different track." Regrettably, this article was never written. However, the phrase "a different track" offers some clues, which we will explore later.

By 1843, Bauer published his works *The Jewish Question* and *The Capacity of Present-Day Jews and Christians to Become Free*. Upon reading Bauer's articles, Marx considered Bauer's concept of free will "too abstract." In February 1844, Marx published *On the Jewish Question*, openly engaging in debate with Bauer.

Although the debate originated from the issue of Jewish emancipation, neither Bauer nor Marx confined their discussion solely to this question. Both elevated it to the level of "human emancipation."

Bauer argued that the Jewish problem stemmed from theological contradictions between Jewish and Christian religions. This issue should be examined from two perspectives. Firstly, Bauer maintained that Jews, by their very nature, could never achieve emancipation - their Jewish identity inherently made them unemancipatable. This was because religion possesses exclusive characteristics, with each believer clinging to their religious privileges. Historically, Judaism and Christianity had been fundamentally opposed, making Jewish emancipation particularly difficult in Christian-dominated states.

Secondly, Bauer contended that Christian states, by their nature, would never emancipate Jews. While Germany had formally abolished state religion, this couldn't resolve the Jewish question because the narrowness of particular religions meant political abolition of state religion wouldn't change people's actual religious beliefs and practices in daily life. Thus, Bauer interpreted the Jewish question purely as a religious problem from both angles.

Consequently, Bauer directed his critique at religion itself, arguing that people must first abolish religion to save themselves - liberating not just the state from religion, but every individual from religious constraints. He proposed a dual solution: European states should abandon prejudices against Judaism and Jews, while Jews must renounce their religion and break their isolation to integrate into society with open minds.

"Asking merely who should emancipate and who should be emancipated is never enough. Criticism must go further and ask: What kind of emancipation is at stake? What essential conditions does the demanded emancipation require? Only through critique of political emancipation itself can we achieve the ultimate critique of the Jewish question, transforming it into 'the universal question of our time.'" [Marx & Engels Collected Works, Vol.3, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2002]

Here we see Bauer focusing his theory on abolishing religion to achieve political emancipation. However, he clearly conflated "political emancipation" with "human emancipation," assuming solving the former would automatically accomplish the latter. This became the primary target of Marx's critique.

Marx elucidated the relationship between religion and state reality: "Religion is no longer the cause of secular limitations but merely their manifestation." "Religion is not the cause of political oppression but its expression."

Political emancipation, in Marx's view, was essentially bourgeois revolution targeting two main adversaries: the feudal aristocracy and the church. While liberating the state from religion constituted an important aspect of political emancipation, Marx argued this was insufficient, as "political emancipation" did not equate to "human emancipation."

Marx pointed out that the "human rights," "freedom," and "equality" achieved for citizens in civil society through political emancipation were illusory. "The right of freedom is not based on the connection between man and man, but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the right of this separation - the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn into himself."

This bourgeois freedom meant individuals breaking free from community, becoming "separated from one another." Each individual viewed others merely as means to achieve personal ends. Such freedom didn't recognize others as members of the same community, but as opposing entities - mere objects for free exchange. In this freedom, people became isolated "atoms," leading to the inversion between individuals and species, which essentially reflected the egoism of civil society.

Regarding equality, Marx stated: "Equality, in its non-political sense, means nothing but the equality of the aforementioned freedom - namely that every individual is equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad." This implied everyone had equal rights to practice egoism.

Examining religious issues in politically emancipated countries like North America, Marx found that state emancipation from religion didn't lead people to abandon religion. Political emancipation of religion neither eliminated actual religious devotion nor sought to do so. On the contrary, political emancipation made religion more vibrant and adapted to contemporary needs, as it transferred religion from the state to civil society, from community to individuals, from public to private spheres - exemplified by Luther's doctrine of "justification by faith alone."

Thus, Bauer's advocated political emancipation could neither completely eliminate religion nor achieve so-called "human emancipation."

Following his critique, Marx immediately presents his solution for human emancipation in the second part. Marx points out:

"Let us consider the actual, worldly Jew—not the Sabbath Jew, as Bauer does, but the everyday Jew." "We do not turn secular questions into theological ones. We turn theological questions into secular ones." Here, Marx keenly observes that the Jewish question is indeed closely related to the issue of human emancipation, but human emancipation cannot be reduced merely to political emancipation. Human emancipation must be connected to "reality"—but what does this "reality" refer to? Marx later provides the answer: "The solution to human emancipation lies not in examining the religious Jew but the secular Jew. Theological critique must transform into a critique of political economy."

Thus, we can see that Marx views political emancipation as merely an intermediate stage of human emancipation. The answer to human emancipation lies within civil society (the secular Jew) and in the critique of political economy applied to civil society. Marx then sharply points out that in civil society, humans are not emancipated but are instead ruled by a new god—money. While people have abolished the communal god in the public sphere, they have welcomed a new deity in the private sphere.

At this point, it becomes clear why Marx insists that Jewish emancipation must be linked to human emancipation. He argues that Jewish worship of money is a microcosm of the entire era: the old communal bonds have disintegrated, and the new "community" is merely a collection of atomized individuals held together not by religious faith or feudal lords but by money.

The path to human emancipation thus becomes evident—the abolition of private property. Marx asserts that human emancipation requires, on one hand, the elimination of socio-political forces that alienate humans, and on the other, the reunification of these atomized individuals so that they recognize sociality as their essential nature. In other words, the essence of human emancipation lies in restoring the human world and human relations back to humans themselves.

To achieve true emancipation, humans must transition from the political sphere to civil society, overcoming the duality of their existence in the political state and civil society, eliminating the alienation brought about by political emancipation, and ultimately returning to their true nature—transforming both the egoistic individual of civil society and the abstract citizen of the political state into fully realized human beings.

2. The Holy Family and the Proletariat

Faced with Marx's torrent of criticism, Bauer could not remain silent. In July 1844, Bauer anonymously published "What Is Now the Object of Criticism?" as an unnamed response to On

the Jewish Question. Prior to meeting Engels, Marx had already intended to criticize Bauer again, while Engels also harbored dissatisfaction with Bauer's speculative philosophy. Confronted with this unnamed response, the two decided to collaborate on a critique of the first eight issues of *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, resulting in their joint work *The Holy Family*.

This time, Bauer's critical focus shifted from religion to the masses. He expressed profound anger at the masses' passivity and deep disappointment at their support for religion and conservatism rather than progressive causes. In Bauer's view, the masses were incapable of serving as a liberating force. They required intellectual leadership because they remained in an illusory state regarding the world's essence and ideology, lacking self-awareness - or in Bauer's terms, they were an unconscious mob. This perspective led Bauer to vehemently attack communism.

While Hess and Marx proclaimed the proletariat as the progressive class whose objective conditions would inevitably lead to social emancipation through their own liberation, Bauer rejected this view. He argued that the proletariat, driven by self-interest, shared no common standards with other classes. Moreover, engaged in monotonous manual labor, they lacked universal insight and were actually in a fragmented state. Therefore, Bauer maintained they needed education rather than communist revolutionary slogans, and certainly couldn't serve as communism's main force.

Bauer further criticized communist society, predicting it would exhibit tendencies toward power expansion and coercive implementation. To maintain coordination and unity, particularly to suppress humanity's innate tendency to satisfy its own needs, authorities would arbitrarily employ various intimidating measures. For this purpose, communist society might utilize authoritarian laws, universal bureaucracy, and reinforced police power. Bauer repeatedly cited Weitling's statement: "A people's government is but a peasant fantasy," arguing power would remain concentrated in few hands who would exploit so-called equality principles for their own ends.

Economically, Bauer contended that while communism opposed economic oppression, bureaucratic control over administration and economy would nullify such opposition. In this scenario, socialism might emphasize the masses but failed to recognize the tremendous significance of human spirit, focusing solely on production and material issues.

Regarding Marx's accusation that Bauer equated political emancipation with religious emancipation, Bauer reinforced his position: the existing state is based on authoritarian foundations. He sought not to abolish religion as one of these powers, but to abolish religion as an entire category. This means it was incorrect to say he equated political with religious emancipation, for his aim was not to eliminate people's right to believe in religion, but rather their actual belief in religion itself. Therefore, Bauer considered Marx's criticism unfounded.

Moreover, Bauer viewed Marx's characterization of his concept of human emancipation as aligning with Western bourgeois parliamentary positions as unfair. He countered by citing the example of the French Revolution. Bauer argued that while the French Revolution advocated

atheism, it succumbed to religious principles during Robespierre's reign; while proclaiming humanism, it fell into contradictions when blindly employing methods that led to terrorism. The Enlightenment also had flaws, as it based its foundations on substance while neglecting self-consciousness and its emancipation. Thus, Bauer maintained that his theory was fundamentally different from bourgeois revolution, rendering Marx's critique meaningless.

In response to Bauer's defense, Marx saw it as pure intellectualism and idealism. Bauer believed the main force of revolution lay in reason - independent of the masses and free from material interests. To Marx, this not only demonstrated the impotence of self-consciousness philosophy when confronting reality, but also revealed petty-bourgeois weakness. Marx viewed Bauer's concept of "the masses" as pre-Hegelian - a static, unchanging concept. In reality, the masses during the French Revolution were fundamentally different from those in feudal society. Here, Bauer committed an ahistorical error.

Bauer considered the masses selfish, therefore his theory showed no interest in social life events. The theory didn't seek mass recognition, which ultimately led to the failure of pure theory.

At the same time, Marx believed that the tragedy was actually unfolding in the politically liberated country that Powell had been vigorously defending, but Powell turned a blind eye to it. All he saw was self-awareness and rationality. In Marx's view, under the equality of heaven lies the blatant inequality in earthly life. Similarly, under political equality lies blatant inequality in secular life. Democracy is based on salaried workers, and political equality is based on social inequality. When Feuerbach exposed the truth of religious alienation, alienation did not end; it was merely in a different form. This new form is political alienation. In Marx's view, the cause of political alienation is the division between the state and civil society, or the division between social forces and individual forces. Then, can the state be used to transform civil society and social forces be used to transform individual forces, thereby filling the gap between the two? Not only did the early Marx think this way, but Hegel thought so too, and even Robespierre thought so! The reason why Robespierre, Saint-Just and their party perished was that they confused the ancient realist democratic republic based on true slavery with the modern spiritualist democratic representative state based on the liberated slave, that is, the bourgeois society. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognize and approve modern bourgeois society in the form of human rights, namely, an industrial society shrouded in universal competition, one aimed at the free pursuit of private interests, an anarchic society, and one filled with self-alienated natural and spiritual individuality. On the other hand, it is also desired to suppress various manifestations of life in this society through individual individuals afterwards. What a huge mistake it is to want to establish the political leader of this society by imitating the ancient form at the same time! Robespierre's ideology was a kind of era confusion because they still believed that politics preceded society, and that human rights were no longer a theory but a reality, a form of egoism rooted in the development of capitalist economy. The interests of the bourgeoisie in the 1789

revolution were by no means "unsuccessful". They "overwhelmed" everything and achieved "practical results", even though the "passion" had vanished and the flower of "enthusiasm" that this interest used to decorate its cradle had withered. This benefit was so powerful that it successfully conquered Mara's pen, the guillotine of the terrorist Party, Napoleon's sword, as well as the cross of the Church and the pure bloodline of the Bourbon dynasty. Therefore, Marx wrote: "Once 'thought' departs from 'interest', it is bound to make itself look bad." The birthplace of history lies in the "crude material production of the mundane world", not in the "clouds and mists in the sky". Similarly, the development of the Jewish spirit should be viewed in "industrial and commercial practice" rather than in religious theology, and in connection with "interests" rather than "ideas". So, the Jewish spirit is not a narrow nature unique to Jews, but a universal principle in civil society. This is not determined by thought but by interest. To solve this problem, it is not through theological criticism but must be through the transformation of material life. Powell believes that the failure of the French Revolution was due to the idea of accommodating the mob. Marx believed that what played a decisive role in the French Revolution was not slogans but the material interests of the bourgeoisie. The failure of the French Revolution was not because it aroused the masses, but because it failed to arouse enough masses. It is not because its ideas are impure, but because it does not represent the interests of a sufficient number of the masses. The essence of the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, so it must represent the interests of the bourgeoisie. The proletarian movement represents the interests of the vast majority of people and it will evoke the actions of the vast majority. History lies not outside human actions but within them. It is not difficult to see in the front, on the basis of our Powell criticisms of communism is out of his subjectivism view of the world. In his view, creative intellectuals are the sole force shaping human history because they have a critical self-awareness. Therefore, the relationship between a very small number of intellectuals and the masses is completely confrontational. Powell's self-awareness is a factor independent of the actual person and their social life. Therefore, based on the above view, this stance is very strange. According to Marx's view, the class consciousness of the proletariat is not only a condition for the revolution, but also itself is the historical process in which the revolution tends to mature. People create their own history, but not in disregard of the environment they are in.

3. From self-awareness philosophy to materialism

It can be seen that in the two texts, "On the Jewish Question" and "The Holy Family", and amid the debates between Marx and Powell, we can observe that Marx's thinking has quietly undergone a transformation. The most significant change is that the battlefield of theoretical criticism has shifted from religion back to the secular, and the unfolding of this transformation is mainly due to the criticism of Powell's philosophy of self-awareness. Whether it is religious criticism or political criticism, Powell has never left the philosophical garden of his self-awareness. In Powell's view, history is nothing more than the dialectical development of human self-awareness. It can be seen that this kind of thought is transformed from Hegel's absolute

spirit. In Powell's view, the main object of self-awareness as a struggle that drives the development of human history is religion. The alienation of self-awareness in Christianity at a specific stage actually still denies the essence of human beings and seeks outward. In religion, people have already lost the essence of human self-awareness. "The various artificial contradictions contained in Christianity, such as the contradiction between man and God, the contradiction between domination and freedom, etc., are completely in conflict with the essence of man, eventually leading people into a self-contradictory situation and regarding themselves as slaves to some imaginary alien entity. And this imagined otherworldly entity is merely the product of his own mental and emotional activities. And he pinned this hope of liberating self-awareness from religion and returning to self on political revolution. In terms of his closeness to politics, Powell once again demonstrated his closeness to Hegel, who believed that the state is a stage product of the objectification of the absolute spirit, and that the systems and laws of the state embody a unity of particularity and universality. Based on this, Powell further emphasized that the state, as an entity, can undertake its mission of human liberation. The relationship between the state and its people is no longer about ruling and being ruled, but rather mutual recognition and affirmation. The state is no longer a synonym for centralization but a community formed by every individual. However, what Powell emphasizes here is each individual. That is to say, the liberation Powell advocates is actually a kind of self-liberation and individual liberation. Self-awareness expressed by Powell here is a kind of particularity, a kind of consciousness that belongs only to a single subject. Although in his view, this individual self-awareness can converge into a universality, Powell did not explain. Therefore, this kind of individualism inevitably leads to elitism in political theory and heroism in the historical perspective. This is precisely the contempt for the masses mentioned by Powell in "The Holy Family".

In fact, at the very beginning, Marx was also a member of the Young Hegelians. He believed in the philosophy of self-awareness and held that the state, as the embodiment of reason, was bound to achieve the domination of the family and civil society. However, through observing various practical problems, Marx gradually realized that the philosophy of self-awareness was powerless when facing reality. Powell's criticism of self-awareness merely remains in the spiritual world. However, in Marx's view, the philosophy of self-awareness is nothing more than a mental reaction to what is happening in civil society in reality. In Powell's view, the alienation of religion is merely a product of self-awareness. The way to eliminate alienation is simply to reclaim the self-awareness that people have lost. Therefore, Powell can only point the finger at religious criticism, because in his philosophy of self-awareness, religion is the cause of alienation. However, Marx took a step forward. Marx believed that the most important way to eliminate this alienation was to focus on the emotional life of real people. The state and society could not serve as tools to eliminate alienation. After religious criticism, what followed was the criticism of politics and the state, and the focus of political criticism was civil society. The main body of the revolution is the proletariat who has lost their position and has nothing in civil society.

Moreover, in Marx's view, in this proletarian movement, it was not guided by something lacking in thought, but merely dejected into a carnival of desires. So, in the proletarian movement, what role should philosophy play? In "Introduction to Hegel's Critique of the Philosophy of Right", Marx mentioned, "Philosophy regards the proletariat as its material weapon, and likewise, the proletariat regards philosophy as its spiritual weapon." Once the lightning of thought strikes this simple people's garden completely, the Germans will be liberated as human beings. But what kind of philosophy should the philosophy of the proletariat be? Powell made only one comment on French materialism, but this aroused Marx's lengthy "condemnation". The purpose of Marx's such "making a fuss over nothing" was actually out of his own theoretical needs. Marx was always dissatisfied with Feuerbach's distance from political and revolutionary practice. Therefore, a philosophy linked to political and revolutionary practices is needed to provide spiritual weapons for the proletariat. Therefore, on the basis of the criticism of the philosophy of self-awareness, Marx gradually saw the important position that interests played in real life and the significant role that the proletariat played in the revolution. It was in this process that Marx gradually abandoned the philosophical system of idealism and approached materialism.

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