

# Marx's quasi-Pragmatism in dialogue with an improved, Practical-Poietic Materialism

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**Abstract:** This is an immanent critique of Marx's background philosophy, his historical transcendental materialism. It weighs up its basic assumptions and dilemmas against 'pragmatism' construed as a general practical-detranscendentalized turn in philosophy, and especially against elements of an alternative philosophical position to both pragmatism and historical materialism: a more historical, 'Hegelian' pragmatism, and a philosophy of praxis as poiesis, a reconstructed 'paradigm of production'. This philosophical position reveals its conceptual contours throughout the development of that particular, critical reading of Marx, in a double movement of approximation and appropriation at it on one side, and of immanent critique and divergence on the other. Our interpretation of Marxism will revolve around its virtues and vices, such as reality conceived as practical, material, historical vs. Marx's theorist depreciation of common practices and of social initiative for democratic transformation. Also, such as truth and knowledge conceived in connection with practice and power, and a pluralist social-material perspectivism in opposition to a transcendental, normative 'Perspective of all perspectives'. Finally, such as the idea of scission and dispersion between individuals in society bringing about a consequent 'religious' doubling of the world in our minds, and then Marx's own transcendental normativity/ideality, his idea of a human essence (in favor of his particular normative foundationalism) and of his communist 'categorical imperative'. In the end, our philosophical journey here will have offered a series of elements for the above-mentioned philosophical alternative as a productive, material, non-representationalist, non-relativistic position, also civil, transformative and favorable to material-democratic, political consequences – albeit only succinctly mentioned here.

We are living in times of a general pragmatist turn in philosophy and social theory, which is particularly remarkable in contemporary Critical Theory, that is, in the most prominent philosophical development of Marx's thought for several decades now. However, we do not seem to find here anything near a close, detailed review or reconstruction, pace Habermas, of Marx historical materialist paradigm, as critically measured against pragmatism or a different, philosophical development along practical-material lines. That is something to which this paper would like to give a small contribution and be a timely invitation.

## 1. Marx's practical-normative materialism, and pragmatism as a detranscendentalized philosophical terrain.

I take pragmatism<sup>2</sup> here to be a position situated among a set of related positions that are characteristic of contemporary philosophy, that is, as an interesting case of a post-metaphysical turn,

of an anti-Cartesian, anti-solipsistic, non-foundationalist transformation of philosophy. Or better yet, not to limit ourselves only to negative expressions, as a kind of practical and social turn in philosophy, reconciled with time, becoming and contingency in the world. One of the specificities of such pragmatism, in relation to the so-called post-metaphysical positions of our days, is precisely its openly constructive and reasonable character, in addition to its supposed practical, criterior, detranscendentalizing approach. At the same time, such philosophy should not be taken as a point of view devoid of normative and critical (though not transcendental) potential, appearing to be relativist, subjectivist or narrowly utilitarian only to those who don't know any better. Along these lines, when I speak of pragmatism, I think of its developments which, in one way or another, allow us to connect knowledge to action and to social concerns, to a certain idea of democratic community, the *Leitmotiv* of the present essay.

What I refer to as Marx's pragmatism here are an ensemble of notions that appear throughout his work, yet are particularly condensed in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). He resorts there to a practical-activist, social-communist perspective, meant to modify Feuerbachian humanism/materialism, this one a position which also has some affinities with pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> However, these Marxian ideas are already compromised, throughout his works, by other, non-pragmatist elements, that I call platonic and transcendentalizing, also Cartesian and subjectivist, which unfortunately end up emphasized and dominant in his theory. Such elements have had, in the end, negative consequences for the practices that take inspiration in Marx's work, at least as we see them from today's vantage point, more specifically, in terms of democracy as the form of community we want.<sup>4</sup>

My approach here is meant to be, simultaneously, one of revisitation, interpretation and critique of fundamental Marxian formulations that may constitute, in the *Theses*, a contradictory philosophical germ that remains undecided and undeveloped within them.<sup>5</sup> In respect to their pragmatist side, those are formulations from which Marx seems to have moved away, distancing himself from very valuable insights of his early non-contemplative practical-historical materialism. I say 'very valuable' here because, on the other hand, although abandoned by Marx and Marxism, they may offer advantages in comparison to some of the philosophical positions that claim to be or are recognized as pragmatist proper. That is, they may have advantages over formulations of classical pragmatism and over some of pragmatism's more recent developments (e.g. Habermas, Rorty, Brandom). I believe, moreover, that the same may be true in comparison with semi-pragmatist formulations of authors such as Quine or Wittgenstein, these apparently embroiled either in a certain idea of natural science as the paradigm for knowledge, or in a 'linguistification' of a supposedly practical point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Actually, what I mainly intend to do here is to sketch out an alternative and contemporary practical position, one that is 'pragmatist' and contemporary, democratic and novel, as well as a sort of philosophy of praxis as poesis. I focus on the examination of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, although I also refer to other Marxian texts, given the synthetic nature of the former, their practical-philosophical tone, and the fact that they are a germ and a core, a set of elements that are susceptible to a poetic-pragmatic or a more practical, productive, materialist interpretation and development. Such elements make up a powerful interweaving and a single conception of basic formulations about knowledge, action, reality, subjectivity and normativity (or ideality), which in my opinion represents amounts to all that a good and typical practical/pragmatist position, or even simply a good philosophical position, should develop and offer. It seems to me that the best that can be derived from Marx today is precisely a sort of practical materialism, or rather, a practical-poietic materialism, which is my own philosophical position.<sup>7</sup> I also argue that pragmatism itself can be taken today not only as a particular North American current or

tradition, but also as a de-transcendentalized 'terrain' of philosophical interlocution and development, one to which I here try to bring Marx closer. This is the case not only because the classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Schiller, Dewey and Mead) were themselves, from the start, a highly heterogenous group ("a house divided against itself", Peirce said), but also because its more recent members (like Rorty, Putnam, Habermas, Honneth or Rahel Jaeggi) continue to be heterogenous among themselves in the debates they sustain with one another and with their shared heritage. Pragmatism can thus be considered a terrain that brings together – that's why a "pragmatist turn" – relevant expressions of contemporary philosophy, coming from different backgrounds, in confrontation and dialogue, as a veritable work-in-progress, a live and open field<sup>8</sup> which I believe should assert itself as the contemporary mode of doing philosophy rather than constituting a bunch of systems as finished macro-pronouncements of individual supra-human monads, speaking from a transcendental place where the language of ordinary human beings is not spoken. To provide further support for such a perspective, I invoke here other respectable testimonies, in quick brushstrokes, yielding temporarily to what Peirce referred to as the method of authority. Jürgen Habermas, who comes from Marxism and German Idealism, understands today's pragmatism as a "transatlantic bridge [between Europe and the Americas] for lively intellectual exchange." According to his view (already considering himself in a position to correct, from a supposedly more pragmatist point of view, the neo-pragmatism of Deweyan Richard Rorty),<sup>9</sup> it is to pragmatism that lead today the combined processes of self-criticism of Kantianism and Hegelianism.<sup>10</sup> This need not sound strange, as pragmatism, Habermas argues, is simply rooted in "German Idealism and in Marx himself", and can in some cases be considered "a democratic variety of young Hegelianism and philosophy of praxis". In this regard, we know that Peirce, who acknowledges his later convergences with Hegel, "admits having come to philosophy through Kant's door", while pragmatists Dewey and Mead were initially trained as Hegelians, and William James developed his thoughts in direct contact with the philosophical environment of Germany and France of his day.<sup>11</sup>

From the side of analytical philosophy, Hilary Putnam, converging with Habermas, understands pragmatism as "an open question," as "a way of thinking that is of lasting importance," and "an option for today's philosophical thought." Preceding him, Quine, another analytic philosopher who contributed to the anti-dogmatic turn of analytic empiricism that moved it in a pragmatist direction, attempted to find a place for what for him were its two major findings: 1) that the meaning of an assertion can be found in the willingness to act in accordance with it, and 2) that truth is, at least to some extent, created, not simply discovered, by humans. Putnam, with whom Habermas shares a kantianized pragmatism, expressly adopts from the pragmatist tradition, among other things, its rejection of modern philosophy's traditional dualisms. Putnam does so in favor of an idea of "the interpenetration of fact, theory, value and interpretation" which erodes "metaphysical realism", "postmodernisms" and "fashionable anti-realisms." Finally, Habermas (who admits his and Karl-Otto Apel's affiliation to pragmatist Charles Peirce) appropriately characterizes pragmatism not only as a cosmopolitan, contemporary road to detranscendentalization and a path to overcoming the 'philosophy of consciousness' and 'reason as centered in the subject', but also as involving an "anti-elitist, democratic, egalitarian attitude" in philosophy.<sup>12</sup> With all that we now have elements we presently need to start with a reasonable notion of what pragmatism is, and to under such light engage in critical dialogue with Marx's point of view through the Theses that summarize it.

Let us now focus on what most directly concerns us here. What do the *Theses on Feuerbach* ultimately tell us? What should we take as their main pillar and most valuable contribution? Where lies their pragmatism and their practical materialism? Well, in short, what Marx does in his Theses is, in his own way, to introduce action (as well as human purposes and evaluation)

into being and knowing, thus constructing a practical relationship between the real and the ideal. To begin with, our scientific socialist, in constructing his practical-normative (practical-critical) materialism and in trying to speak not 'scholastically' or 'metaphysically' but practically of reality and knowledge, does not in his Theses make any express allusion to 'science' or 'scientific' (not, in any case, in a positivistic sense), nor does he seem inclined to present things as they are 'in themselves', according to some traditional conception of objectivity.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Marx insists on notions like practice and sensuous (material) human activity, as well as on notions like perspective (*Standpunkt*, standpoint, he says) and interpretation, seeming to further deflate the very notion of Theory. Another trait that suggests that the practical materialism of the Theses seeks, as do many pragmatisms, to escape the traditional realist-empiricist point of view is their reiterated use, in relation to knowledge, of words such as 'apprehend', 'capture' (*fassen*), 'conceive' (*begreifen*), 'consider' (*betrachten*), in addition to 'understand' (*verstehen*), 'interpret' (*interpretieren*) and even 'want' (*will*). For, while this still does not satisfactorily characterize a practical-active perspective, it emphasizes an active role for the knowing subject, even if only as mind or consciousness – or individual subject. Finally, in the Theses, Marx, like certain pragmatists, seems to bring closer together fact and value, reality and normativity, description and prescription, thus relegating the rigid dualism of part of the "earlier philosophy" to which he refers (British empiricism and French materialism).

I thus propose that the *Theses on Feuerbach*, as well as a significant part of Marx's historical materialism, initially formulated in *The German Ideology*,<sup>14</sup> be read as basically embracing a few interpenetrated moments: a) a refusal of dogmatic, passive, sense-intuitionist, mentalist empiricism, as well as of subjective idealism, which for Marx are both abstract and impotent; b) an overcoming of the conception of the world and the human subject as basically static, irrevocably 'exterior' to one another, thus relinquishing the 'spectator's point of view' and an objectivist-representationalist fixation of the real; c) the abandonment of the isolated and abstract individual of empiricist perception, the dereliction of the "fiction" of the individual dissociated from the ensemble of her "social relations" and from a determined "social form" (of what Marx elsewhere calls a 'Robinsonade').<sup>15</sup> These first points should then serve d) the critique of present social reality as, at the same time, both viciously split in two and lamentably atomized in many by the 'bad' social relations prevailing within it, what causes the radical unfolding of the world in two on the ideal realm, that is, both in religion and in philosophy. That Critique supported by e) the deduction/construction of a strong normative foundation which determines/prescribes the practical suppression of the essential contradiction of society (division of labor and private property), and the material restoration or reconciliation of a full social unity – bringing about the end of human "Self-Alienation". The Theses accomplish all that while clearing a path, beyond the empiricist-individualist-liberal point of view of civil society, to the communist point of view of a "Human(e) Society", together with the need and the categorical imperative of its realization. All that involving the supposition of a congruence between points of view about knowledge and social positions within society – which makes us wonder, as we are interested in doing, what a democratic epistemological point of view could be in comparison to the communist and liberal-empiricist ones to which Marx refers. Finally, we can close by saying that Marx's central concern in all that, in the Theses as in the rest of his work, is the community of humans, rather than the community of inquiry of the pragmatists. But why suppose that this is not the final concern for pragmatists too?

Before moving straight into an extended pragmatist and practical-poetic reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and other texts by Marx as well, let it be clear that we are not trying to measure those by an external, previously fixed yardstick. All the more so because, as I have already made clear, I do not see pragmatism (nor do I see Marx, for that matter) as a uniform body

of thought, nor will I embark on abstracting from it a minimum common core in the manner of an *essence*. I prefer, in this vein, to invoke for its several voices only a certain Wittgensteinian *family resemblance*, which I will then try to put in relation with Marx. A resemblance which flows from common sources and motives, as well as from occasional intersections, which allow those who organize anthologies and introductions to pragmatism to decide, albeit with some degree of variation and caprice, who they include among its possible main exponents.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the text that follows suggests a reading of the Theses from a pragmatist point of view but also from one of my own, which reveals its contours over the course of my exposition. The text is developed through a double movement of approximation and immanent criticism, in which pragmatist authors and their formulations can be invoked in an illustrative way, without this meaning that I am using them eclectically through juxtaposition or superposition.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, as additional aid to the non-specialist reader, I will add to what has already been said what could be taken as a ground zero of pragmatism. To begin with, there is Alexander Bain's definition of belief as a – successful – habit of action, a judgment “on the basis of which one is willing to act”, thus a practical judgment. This definition appears as an article of faith invoked with equal approval by a variety of pragmatists, from Rorty, at one extreme, to Peirce at the other, who claims that pragmatism is “little more than its corollary.”<sup>18</sup> This leads us to the so-called maxim of pragmatism, Peirce's own, according to which – when properly understood – the conception of an object is that of its effects of practical reach. Much of the development of the pragmatist tradition can be understood as involving derivations from this maxim (with different versions successively present by Peirce himself), which, as a corollary of Bain's definition, implies ‘translating’ our ideas both in terms of the behavior of things in relation to us and vice-versa, as two sides of the same coin. Finally, and furthermore, there is still, for pragmatism, not only the reciprocal implication of knowledge, action and human purposes, but two other related elements, a bit difficult to quickly explain here: the implications of knowledge with interpretation and intersubjectivity, and of action and knowledge with normativity.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Reality as material activity and history, vs. the theoretical depreciation of ordinary practice and social initiative.

In *Theses on Feuerbach* – in the first thesis, and then the fifth – Marx understands that reality (*Wirklichkeit*) must not be apprehended in a contemplative or passive manner, that is, simply as “sensuous object” or “sensuous intuition (*Anschauung*)” as in “earlier materialism.” Nor should it be captured – reality or the “sensuous realm” (*Sinnlichkeit*) – simply as matter or nature but as “sensuous human activity”, “practice”,<sup>20</sup> which means, for Marx, that it should also be apprehended as “subjective” (*intersubjective*, we might prefer to say today).<sup>21</sup> As an activity that is at the same time *objective* (sensuous, material) and *subjective* (human, historical), reality is the practical-social activity of human beings, which, on the other hand, constitutes their own environment (material but historical, not natural, not given, not separated from them), i.e., it constitutes the context into which all human things and phenomena must fit. *The German Ideology* refers to this always unfolding reality also as *history* and *vital process*, which Marx further associates with notions such as “way of life” (*Lebensweise*) and “mode of production” (*Produktionsweise*), the former's *hard core*, suggesting the idea of a context which is not only a constant *becoming* but also one that exhibits some sort of *structure*, since through practice human beings establish relationships – sometimes rigid ones – among themselves. These are all notions that approach a materialist conception of culture, also a Hegelian-like idea of “objective spirit” and “social sub-

stance”, which point to moving beyond the rigid subject-object dualism (in terms of reality as well as knowledge), in its most classically modern, Cartesian form. The first section of *The German Ideology* goes as far as defining reality and humans in the same way, that is, both as sensuous (material, sensible) activity, as two faces of a single vital Process (ultimately, production and the relationships it entails) – which seems to dissolve, in its general course, all particularity.

This is the practical materialism introduced by the Theses as a blow, informed by German idealism, against intuitionist-representationalist, Cartesian, Lockean empiricism,<sup>22</sup> to which Marx refers as ‘earlier materialism’, close in this respect to that which Dewey sees and criticizes as the spectator’s point of view – that of human beings situated as if outside the world, a world that which would also be external to them, constituted by fixed relations. Analogously to the Theses, and with similar concerns of bringing philosophy into the world without giving up the ideal, William James understands his pragmatism as a third path between empiricism and rationalism, between realism and idealism.<sup>23</sup> The fact of the matter is that, simultaneously engaging with both facts and ideal, Marx’s new practical materialism enables us to understand the human context as process and history (of relations between human beings), with a strong reference to the future – which makes it something akin to a historical pragmatism. This, however, is questionable since history for Marx (see *The German Ideology* again) is a largely closed process, pointing toward a closed future, one in which the acceptance of contingency must be overcome by the conscious recognition of a prevailing rational-dialectical necessity, something that at the same time aspires to constitute the framework that gives each particular event its true historical meaning. Thereby, in Marx’s consecrated materialist conception of history, human activity, oriented towards the future, does not find a field of open possibilities, nor does it carry out any *creation* worthy of the of the name, as pragmatist positions traditionally would have it, but it is rather merely *negation*. On the other hand, such a historical conception manages to provide Marx’s value-judgments with incomparable force, by offering a *Telos*, Ideal or absolute Good: the ‘Human(e) Society’ or ‘Social Humanity’, which must give an ultimate meaning to human actions, or at least, in the case of Marx, those of communist activists.<sup>24</sup> Something comparable is similarly sustained, in a weaker, perhaps Kantian version, solely as a reasonable hope, within Peirce’s pragmatism.<sup>25</sup> At any rate, Marxism and pragmatism are ways of thinking that attempt to inject into philosophical thought not only a practical-active sense, but also one that is practical-normative. Yet, it is not simply history that for Marx has prominence in this role, but, in association with it, in his Theses, the idea of an essence of the human being that will find its constitution in the social relations in their development. This is a notion that reappears in *Capital*, in a purely ‘scientifically’ reworked way, however with the same, strong, transcendentalized, normative results.

Marx understands the material, social activity of human beings, an activity that is both subjective and objective at the same time, as economic production (his Practice of practices), and human labor over nature. In other words, as his critics argue, this activity is understood only as *instrumental action*, and not duly appreciated in the specificity of its dimension of human interaction, that is, the interaction amongst human beings as subjects, that is, human activity in its intersubjective dimension. Yet I believe there is a more relevant problem to address here, from a ‘pragmatist’ point of view, in the Marxian understanding of reality as practice. The problem is that, after defining the real as objective-subjective, as sensuous human activity or practice, and seeming to thus turn more flexible the binary oppositions and rigid dualisms of typically modern philosophy, Thesis One establishes a rigid distinction of value and a stiff opposition and hierarchy between two types of practice. There is on the one hand a superior, critical, universal practice, and on the other a fetishized practice that bears the marks of separation and particularity and is the activity that the majority of human beings engage in. This second kind of practice refers to

the activity of humans as members of civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), in their dispersion and mutual opposition, an activity ultimately determined by the division of labor (and the market), taken as an evil and a perversion of things. It is this second practice, which Marx regards as false and corrupt, which he refers to as “dirty-Jewish” (selfish, in the Feuerbachese of *The Essence of Christianity*, a book with which Marx is engaging here), as well as *fixed and phenomonic* – as opposed to the other, the first one, a free and genuinely human (*echt menschliche*) activity.<sup>26</sup> In the last analysis, it is to the sphere of ordinary practice (Marx tells us further ahead, in theses nine and ten) that sensuous-intuitionist materialism, proper to Civil Society, belongs.

The Theses envisage to describe both that materialist-empiricist conception and that narrow practical activity as belonging to the level of appearance or surface, while the other practice, by opposition, is presented as belonging to the level of essence and fundament, as being critical and in some sense also theoretical. Hence, the latter conforms to reason, is enlightened and justified by ‘German theory’ (expression used in *The German Ideology*, for historical-critical philosophy), and is thus comparable to intellectual practice (idealized, naturally) as disinterested and universal. Here Marx had the opportunity to associate the supposed universality and rationality of this good practice to broad political interaction between human beings and to the authority of an agonistic intersubjectivity within the public sphere, rather than to his personal, transcendental Theory. The Theses, however, have good reasons not to take this route, which for Marx meant precisely getting caught up on the surfaces and appearances of the fetishized sensuous world of Capitalism (ultimately, the world of mercantile exchange), that is to say, it meant abandoning the path of what is critical and revolutionary – and theoretical. *Capital* also notoriously and constitutively sustains this same opposition between essence (the underlying) and appearance (the surface, even if in the paradoxical form of a “real appearance”).

In any case, the *Theses on Feuerbach* here try to isolate and depreciate in its entirety, as ‘alienated’, a social sphere that includes the common, everyday practice and life of ordinary human beings, oriented towards the achievement of their particular, private ends, precisely that activity which can most easily be seen as mundane and ceterior. The other, superior type of practice, better referred to by the Greek and German theoretic-sounding word *Praxis* (with a capital letter, of course), can be understood as the labor of humans while conceived as fully social, as a cooperative and universalized activity, but in fact is first and foremost the alleged revolutionary activity – understood as generous, idealistic, theoretically enlightened, philosophically sanctioned.<sup>27</sup> It is an activity that somehow ‘mimics’ the productive, cooperative socially-oriented activity of human beings, an activity that somehow mimics the essentially, although, under the conditions of the (antagonistic) division of labor, hidden and alienated, social character of material labor. A social character that will only be universally revealed and carried out, according to its truth and in the open, in another, wholly different context, that of future communist, socialized production, once division of labor and privatistic bourgeois civil society are abolished. Marx, on the other hand, does not seem to consider that, while the lesser, practical activity is guided by private interest, the greater activity, as *practical-critical* and *revolutionary*, is not only oriented by and towards the virtuous transformation and self-transformation of human beings in the ways of universality. Instead, it is also and in the final analysis oriented towards the seizure of power and therefore liable to later turn into a bureaucratic State activity, set separate from and above the rest of society, as the supposed ideological bearer of a supposed general human – or proletarian – essential, historical interest.

For such reasons and still others, a good pragmatist or practical poietic, detranscendentalizing standpoint would not wish to disqualify ordinary human practices and their corresponding

ways of thought, in the name of another, extraordinary practice taken as completely superior and distinct, established by Theory or Science and allegedly prescribed by Reality itself. Nor would our philosophical standpoint, for similar purpose, take the risk of assuming, with a new face, the traditional philosophical essence/appearance dualism in which Marx increasingly entangled himself and culminates in his final work *Capital*.<sup>28</sup> At any rate, his Theses take off from a conception of reality as sensuous activity, a conception that tries to correspond to the need for a radical transformation of society and to the potentialities that emerge through the dynamics of this new reality, Modernity, as it is theoretically (in a dialectical, Hegelian way) read by Marx. And it is the practical-normative materialism (Marx offers 'Communism' as a synonym for it, in *The German Ideology*) developed with such conceptual, Hegelian tools that little by little abandons a really practical character to become increasingly essentialist and transcendental throughout the development of Marx's thought, as we will see more clearly further ahead.

Still in his Theses, however, more exactly in thesis three, Marx attacks a division between practices somewhat similar to the one he made (and I have been criticizing), believing he can prevent its consummation precisely through the virtues of his notion of "practical-critical revolutionary activity". Marx speaks, on thesis three, surprisingly, of the problem brought into reality and into practice by a mistaken way of thinking – and not the other way around, as he usually would (thought being usually an effect for him, not a cause). Criticizing the permanence of vices of earlier philosophy even in a 'materialist doctrine' that aims to transform reality and human beings, Marx claims that materialist social reformers of his time, who believe in "transforming circumstances" in order to "change" and "educate" human beings, end up placing themselves above society and people as a whole, which in turn are simply taken as objects or products. Instead, Marx says, such reformers should understand that, while human beings are transformed by the social environment, "it is they themselves who transform it"; therefore, reformers should understand that "educators" like themselves must also be included in that transformation. Although Marx here seems to accept a problematic, paternalistic, pedagogic division of roles (educators, on the one hand, and learners, on the other, albeit concluding with his famous saying that "the educator must also be educated," i.e., must also be 'socialized', we would say), he believes to be able to solve the problem of this rigid and onerous hierarchy by making three dimensions of sensual/material practice/activity coincide: 1) the practice of "the transformation of circumstances" (in other words, the intervention of 'reformers'), with 2) "human activity" (the spontaneous activity of common humans, or at least of workers), with 3) the movement of "self-transformation" of Reality itself (which for Marx already objectively has the virtuous historical direction of constituting humans as fully social beings), within which reality, as a sensible and historical activity after all everything unfolds. Marx imagines he finds this happy, absolute coincidence (*Zusammenfallen*) precisely in his superior "critical revolutionary practice" as "rationally understood" – guided by his Theory.

The third thesis is, then, about the "materialist doctrine" of the social reformers of Marx's time, who have in mind the idea of humanized society and of a social/socialized human being, and who attempt to make them happen through "education" and "the transformation of the circumstances" in which human beings are living. Marx thus believes that, through such efforts, their doctrine, albeit materialist and in some sense practical, ends up "separating society in two parts". On one side (or on top) are those who think, those who have knowledge, agents who know/educate/conduct (like Plato's Philosopher King, Saint-Simon's College of Sages, or any other type of clergy or priesthood, I would say). On the other side (or down below), are ordinary human beings, the people, lay people, engaged in ordinary human affairs and in the empirical materiality of the world (in 'fetishized practice', Marx would say). That way, such a doctrine ends



up placing some people (transformers of society) above other people, the many, indeed “above society” as a whole. The former thus become a kind of new and ‘scientific’ (or ‘technocratic’) *theocracy*, a government of those who hold privileged access to Theory, Truth, the Ideal. In this case, we would have here something comparable to what Marx himself condemns as typical of the human condition under Capitalism: an autonomized, ‘un-human’ stance (here possibly the State, taken over by ‘reformers’) becomes a false, separate Subject, standing against and above ordinary human beings, now reduced to the status of non-subjects, of objects or things. It is significant that Marx denounces here, in this third thesis, a kind of division and hierarchization of society into two estates, yet resulting not from private property, division of labor and economic exploitation, but from knowledge as ‘private property’ of a particular estate. That is, Marx denounces a form of domination that, unlike the economic, capitalist one, emerges out of the very attempt to eliminate this latter.

While in the third thesis it becomes evident that it is not this type of hierarchical/reifying social arrangement that Marx intends to promote (an enlightened despotism and a statization of social initiative, to which we would be frankly averse), it is nonetheless unclear whether his new and corrected practical-historical materialism would really preserve his Social Ideal and his Critical Theory entirely from falling into the vicissitude that he is criticizing. For it seems that Marx will soon place his own Theory in a position far above – and even in opposition to – the perceptions and understanding of ordinary people, as a superior Vantage Point, one which *by definition* eludes the latter, ordinary people. Faced with a Truth that lies at such distance from themselves and their practices, ordinary people find themselves relegated to a condition similar to the one Plato conceives for them of in his Allegory of the Cave, in his *Republic*. To such ‘theoretical men’, the common people are ignorant, alienated from true reality and from themselves, they take the mere appearance of things (things perceived through the senses) as real truth, which in reality would be – according to Marxist Louis Althusser, for example – simply the *inverse* of the true, *intelligible* Real.

Marx, indeed, on his part, has his own reasons for claiming that he does not really make such a mistake, precisely because what he has in mind is a desired convergence of only apparently different stances: the transformative intervention (on the “circumstances”) and the spontaneous activity of the human masses involved in the objective dynamics (“self-transformation”) of the Real itself (albeit theoretically apprehended), of what he calls “revolutionary practice” (as a true making of/by History itself... as conceived by Marx). The Theses thus assume that their practical-normative materialism accounts, as a sort of transcendental theory, for what Marx ‘scientifically’ deciphers as the Movement (objectively endowed with a Meaning and Direction) of Reality itself, a movement with which the practice inspired in Marx simply seeks to and will *coincide*. In fact, Marx, at the beginning of chapter two of *The Communist Manifesto*, declares that “the theoretical propositions of communists do not rest on ideals discovered by this or that reformer of the world; they are only general expressions of the historical Movement before our eyes.” It is significant that Engels, when he edited Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* decades later, in thesis three, suppressed the ‘spontaneous’ self-transformation which was part of the triad that Marx proposed, changing the nobler expression “*revolutionäre Praxis*” to the apparently more modest “*umwälzende* (turning, subverting) *Praxis*”<sup>29</sup>. As for us, we would like Marx to have simply understood that a transformation of society would be true ‘self-transformation’ through a more effective, radical, material democracy, and that only in this way would it be, as Marx suggests, “rationally [rationell] understood.”

### 3. Truth, practice and power. Beliefs and social context vs. Transcendentalized Perspective of perspectives.

After staking out a point of view in relation to the ‘nature’ of reality (practical but alienated) and of our relation to it (Marx here deals with practices and points of view, rather than with reality ‘in itself’), the *Theses on Feuerbach* turn to the question of truth and knowledge (thesis two as well as thesis five), for which Marx has already laid some ground in his first thesis. If reality is sensuous/material activity<sup>30</sup> as we ourselves are, insofar as knowers (albeit not limited to it) we are ‘always already’ engaged in it, through our actions and our bodies and senses,<sup>31</sup> and also through both thought (it would be foolishness to imagine human activity without thought, or thought dissociated from practice) and language.<sup>32</sup> We are not completely ‘external’ to reality, nor is reality ‘external’ to us, nor are we ‘external’ to one another as if we were abstract individuals without relationships and also disembodied minds.

On the other hand, sensuous, material reality, insofar as it is also ‘subjective’, is always impregnated with human activity, therefore with thought, belief, meanings and purposes. Feuerbach, as thesis five tells us, “dissatisfied with abstract thought,” wants to assert sensuous reality as irreducible to thought, hence “he appeals to [the truth of sensuous] intuition”, for “he wants sensuous objects differentiated from thought-objects” (thesis one). In other words, Feuerbach wants objects that are not reduced to ‘representations’, i.e. to their images in our minds. However, from the perspective of Marx’s Theses, Feuerbach will not completely abandon mentalist/subjectivist representation (nor, therefore, his ‘idealist-individualist’ taint inherited from “earlier materialism”) and its problems, unless he also completely frees himself from empiricist, sensuous intuitionism, moving on to apprehend the real as sensuous human practice, as history, therefore including the – historically understood – relationships established within practice and world (of which all human subjects of knowledge also take part, as Marx himself should understand).

From this all, stems the position of thesis two on knowledge and truth, a position that Marx names ‘anti-scholastic’ (non-intellectual/verbalist, non-theorist, I suppose), according to which the question of the objective truth or untruth of human thought can only be decided “in practice”.endnoteIn pragmatism, the notion of belief is often preferred to what is here called thought. Belief is that which we have good reasons to hold, what we are willing to act on, that we do act on. It is the best knowledge we have, although in principle always fallible and provisional. For “truth” (Marx could have said objective-subjective truth) is only a name for “effectivity” (*Wirklichkeit*), “power” (*Macht*) and “earthliness” (*Diesseitigkeit*, ceteriority) of thought “in practice” (material practice, we should keep in mind). That would be a material-practical understanding of truth and objectivity in thought, an anti-skeptical and realistic understanding.<sup>33</sup> We would say today: one that is not compromised by problems of traditional *correspondentism* or *representationalism*, nor by skeptical mentalist perplexities as to whether access to ‘reality in itself’ (that is, to supposedly immediate sense-data, to self-evident certainties) is possible.<sup>34</sup> With thesis two, we can understand that for the active, practical materialist it is not simply a matter of taking practice as a criteria of truth, but of giving to truth a *practical* sense, bringing it back into the horizon of sensuous-material human activity, always awarding it (truth) a practical-material implication, within the practices and conducts it sustains.<sup>35</sup> This way, knowledge becomes a matter of associating the truth *value* of a thought with its power and expedience to accomplish something in active, practical-sensitive dealings in the world – as a tool rather than mental portrait of reality. “It is in practice that human beings must demonstrate the truth [the power, the reality] of their thought”, says thesis two, whence we could further ask: demonstrate to whom? – since Marx is speaking of the practice involved in overcoming a dispute (*Streit*) over truth. The answer could

only be 'to other human beings' – with which the earthly and practical-humanity of thought would be completed, there being no other truth for them, as human beings, than this one.<sup>36</sup> All of this should lead, we propose, to an experimentalist, fallibilist attitude towards knowledge, characteristic of a practical-active, productive materialism. However, it might also be worth asking where – if at all – this attitude appears in Marx's work, in the Theses or elsewhere; where does Marx talk about experience or experimentation in such terms?<sup>37</sup>

In *The German Ideology*, Marx refers to non-practical, contemplative (*Anschauungen*) deviations in knowledge, not only within the materialism that was prior to his own, but also within the whole 'Platonism' of traditional philosophy, supposedly originating in the class division of hierarchical, pre-modern societies (the Greek world included), similarly to what Dewey says in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*<sup>38</sup>. Marx sees the social division between the intellectual work of the ruling aristocracy and the practical-mundane work of the common people as that which underlies conceptions of true knowledge as pure intelligibility, i.e. as 'theoretical man's' – a philosopher or priest – access to supersensible 'essences' and the like. On the other hand, however, Marx himself relegates the supposed (mis)knowledge of ordinary men, the impure practical-sensible knowledge involved in human affairs and in the materiality of the world, to the superficial, the inessential, the apparent. Nonetheless, he admits that it is through such above mentioned social-hierarchical division that thought has imagined itself as 'emancipated' from the world, separated from practical human activity, and people have "passed on to the formulation of pure theory and pure philosophy" – to ideas of permanence and essence, to transcendental notions of truth and reason. Similarly, Dewey criticizes the Greek paradigm of knowledge as non-experimentalist, non-practical, also condemning the traditional model of philosophy as system and its contemplative notion of reason. For Dewey, all of this corresponds to the pre-democratic situation of the world, that of static hierarchical societies, as well as, in modern societies, to a remnant intellectualist culture, deprived of experimental or transformative sense. Those are leitmotifs throughout his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.

Thesis two (together with thesis eleven, that calls for the "transformation of the world") is probably that which appears, in any superficial reading, as the most pragmatist statement in Marx's the Theses – as Bertrand Russell evoked them in his debate against Dewey's 'instrumentalism' for which knowledge is above all else a practice and a tool.<sup>39</sup> Thesis two, in fact, reminds us – in relating truth to the power or effectivity of a thought – of the most common, characteristic opinions on truth coming from within the field of pragmatism, usually attributed to William James,<sup>40</sup> but also to Dewey himself: truth and knowledge as that which works, that solves problems, functions in practice, ensures success. True as that which is useful or expedient, or even, at the extreme, the quality that a belief has in spawning subjectively good – agreeable, comforting or interesting – existential consequences.<sup>41</sup> From a traditional Marxist point of view, the most common retort to pragmatism is that, while for it what works is true (and of course, one could not help but ask for whom it works), for Marxism, instead, that which is objectively true works. Which leaves the practical materialist with the task of 'practical-materialistically' accounting for the distinction between these two supposedly opposite claims (functioning in practice versus being objective), i.e. the difficult challenge of establishing objective truth in isolation from successful practice – that is, doing it outside the horizon of (successfully) dealing with the world and with other human beings. Anyway, ultimately, the fact is that both pragmatism and practical materialism (Marx's improved) will speak of thoughts and ideas not as simple assertions disconnected from life, but as beliefs that guide us in practice, and which could also be verified by others. Both pragmatism and Marx would speak of doubts and discrepancies regarding the truth and meaning of a thought as socially decidable in exchange (*Streit*) with others, as well as

established in practice, through practice, and enacted in practice.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, further on the *Theses on Feuerbach*, and still about knowledge, attempt to extend the association of 'rational' not only to the practical but also to the social – in opposition, this time, not only to what is 'scholastic' but also to what is 'mystical'. No longer dealing with truth but now with error and illusion, Marx adds in thesis eight that the complications that can mislead theoretical thought, in his words "the mysteries that seduce theory towards mysticism" (in the Germany of his times), find their correction – "their rational solution" – "in human social practice and how it is understood". We might assume that here the Theses are advocating not only a practical-social translation of the problems in which philosophy/theory gets lost, but also suggesting its recovery in the social, public sphere, not only through an involvement with its real problems but also finding there the measure of its rationality. After all, as we have already suggested, Marx, in his desire to be 'epistemologically' more of a communist than of a 'Robinsonian individualist', should have awarded to the social and the public, as pragmatists in general do, a central role in the production/correction of a healthy understanding of things, avoiding a relapse into the solipsistic Cartesian paradigm,<sup>43</sup> that is, into an individualist-subjective understanding of knowledge. Yet this is not what Marx does in his thesis eight, since for him, as we know, the existing social, in its present state, distorted and alienated, harms thought more than helps it, which must send thought back, then, for its salvation, to the transcendental, Cartesian-individual, theoretical mind (Marx's own), for the sake of its critical task. There may remain, nonetheless, a tension in Marx's thinking on this matter, even if he cheerfully believes that it is his own theoretical understanding of things that reveals the social roots of the complications that plague German Theory in the hands of others who also represent it, his rivals in the Left Hegelian Movement, such as Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner.

Another aspect to be noticed, of thesis one in relation to thesis two and eight (and then thesis ten) is that thought and knowledge, for a good practical-historical materialist, as well as for a good pragmatist, must not be referred to their practical *consequences* alone, but also to their practical precedents and social-historical *circumstances*. After all, for Marx, in his famous formula "existence determines consciousness", beliefs and representations have to do with the practical contexts within which they develop and, more generally speaking, with circumstances and the problems they raise and to which beliefs and representations try to respond. With regard to such worldly rootedness and entanglement for thought, Marx suggests, in the first part of *The German Ideology*, that even so-called "pure science" is inseparable from the purposes and practices that promote or sustain it, as well as from the social context that provides its materials and purposes. Such social context and such practical determination for knowledge, even knowledge of the natural-scientific type, are essentially represented, according to Marx (who unfortunately does not conceive of the notion of a 'community of inquiry')<sup>44</sup>, by modern industrialization and more generally by the material dynamics of capitalist Modernity – precisely "reality as the material human activity" of Marx's time.

With respect to such rootedness for thought, for knowledge and representations, however, perhaps the most interesting point is suggested by Marx in theses nine and ten, where he argues that the empiricist-intuitionist point of view, even in its materialist version, is unable to see beyond "isolated individuals of civil society", that this is as far as such paradigm can go, and – *nota bene* – that civil society is actually both the 'object' and the 'subject' (also standpoint) to which it corresponds. In other words, Marx proposes that this is how 'empiricist individualism' manages to 'objectively' see human beings, and that, in turn, it is from that very sphere, civil society, that it has emerged – from human experience within it and from the fragmented practices that consti-

tute it. We can now understand, going back to thesis one, that the practices and relations of civil society are those that Marx see and criticize there as egoistic, fixed, fetishized, and we can also understand now, considering what we know from his mature critique of political economy, in *Capital*, that they correspond to the sphere of competition and circulation as a false, superficial, only apparent, human community and free human association. And finally understand that this is the intrinsic individualistic flaw of empiricism (or, in our days, 'positivism' and 'neo-positivism') as ultimately a bad, distorted materialism. In fact, considering that the practical normative/critical materialism of the Theses perceives plurality and multiplicity in the realms of society and of thought as reducible to only two opposing standpoints (one of which is Marx's and the other is civil society's or liberalism), we can assume that "the abstract idealism that does not recognize the sensuous activity" (still thesis one), just as all other forms of thinking besides Marx's own, ultimately belong to that sphere and simply corroborate it – and that is a point to which we will return.

At any rate, what most interests us here is that the *imbrication* of knowledge, beliefs and conceptions in social-sensuous human activity (not just in a specular mind of detached individuals) as it unfolds in multiple practices and circumstances, would be able to sustain, at the political and social levels, a perspectivism that is at the same time pluralist and realist (that is, neither subjectivist nor relativist), capable of connecting representations and beliefs to social practices and positions through the notion of *Standpunkt* as a social-material position/positioning. For the practical-normative materialist, our views and perspectives are 'grounded' in society, where, for that very reason, some could be shown to be preferable, e.g. more inclusive, more interesting, more productive, freer, more viable, more connected to real interests, etc., than others, without the need to appeal to speculative essentializations or transcendent foundations. This is a perspectivist way of looking at things that only leads to the absolutization of a single perspective/position as a 'Perspective of perspectives' or 'Position of positions' through the adoption of the dogmatism of a sole, closed reading of social reality as a whole, or – let us admit – by virtue of an objective 'closing up' and a rigid 'polarization', transitory or not, of reality itself<sup>45</sup>. It is precisely such Perspective, supposedly supported by a such corresponding diagnosis of Reality, that Marx is looking for, which amidst Modernity's apparent pluralism, not to say nihilism, allows one to re-establish a single point of view (Marx's) from which all things and especially all other perspectives will be judged.

Things now start to get more complicated, for Marx and for us, more strongly normative and transcendental in a way that is apparently alien to any form of possible pragmatism or practical materialism. For actually, as thesis ten says, "the standpoint of old materialism is civil society", while "the standpoint of the new materialism is human (*menschliche*) society or social humanity".<sup>46</sup> Well, Marx's 'human(e) society' does not even exist, as a real, social place or position, while 'civil society', which exists, is for Marx simply its opposite, so that the 'human' standpoint really appears in the Theses as a sort of transcendental standpoint, a 'view from nowhere', from no – existing – place or position, a sort of 'God's eye point of view' then (to resort to expressive critical metaphors of some pragmatizing contemporary philosophers), and not as coming from within society itself, i.e. from the actual aspirations of empirically existing human beings. Yet, real human practices and movements, aspirations, and idealizations, born empirically and empirically verifiable, might be the only properly materialist-practical, perhaps pragmatist, true foundation for any and all normativity that intends to be neither metaphysical nor theological. And, in this case, a possible, contingent 'Perspective of perspectives' might simply be some kind of democracy, provided that it involves debate (which is always political) regarding its 'true' understanding and also a struggle for its experimental development or continuous realization. For there would be no

way to compare perspectives outside perspectives and practices, no way to establish a superior, entirely neutral Stance or Perspective for that. Hence, we would have an inevitable agonistic (that is, political) relationship between perspectives, something apparently not foreseen by either the old or the new materialism (of Marx) as presented in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. As we shall see, Marx does not want to pursue such a path; on the one hand he tries to offer human beings a single normative foundation, such as a human essence, or a single determination inscribed in the movement of an 'essential Real'. On the other hand, always conceiving himself as entirely supported by empirical reality, Marx tries to advance his perspective in such a way that his theory can be validated above and beyond the heads, ideas and desires of other, existing human beings. In his favor, however, one might ask: Has this not been, historically, the purpose of every good path for knowledge, the dream of classical, metaphysical philosophy since Plato, which Marx now intends to finally take on and make happen in practice?

In the end, nonetheless, Marx's Theses seem to offer two other suggestions for a non-relativistic pluralism of perspectives and vocabularies, not for dogmatism. Marx's terms in the Theses seem, for instance, to restrict his refusal of the intuitionistic empiricism of earlier materialism, in thesis one, as well as, in thesis eleven, and of the limited interpreting (*interpretieren*) of 'philosophers' (thesis eleven), by claiming that such philosophical attitudes "only" (*nur*) do less than he would like for his practical-transformative purposes and less than what would be required for a revolutionary, communist transformation of society. We could understand that Marx here does not in principle deny that the empiricist paradigm can serve other, more limited, practices and purposes (perhaps, for instance, research in the field of natural science, or the solution of more circumscribed material problems in society), nor does he likewise deny that the hermeneutic, interpreting attitude of philosophers can be always presupposed, and make sense sometimes (perhaps in the field of culture and for the critique of ideas, for instance). That tolerance, on the other hand, would not relativistically preclude the critique or improvement of those two 'insufficient' (for certain purposes) philosophical paradigms, or any other philosophical paradigm for that matter. Multiple philosophical paradigms would only be a problem if any of them (Marx's included) had the pretention of representing an absolute vocabulary, valid for all practices, contexts and purposes, the ambition of being universal, neutral, superior in comparison with any other vocabulary. Unfortunately, however, that is what Marx actually claims for his own 'human(e) point of view', i.e to be a Perspective of all perspectives, to be an empirically grounded Position or Standpoint, with a social base within Civil Society itself, represented by a *universal* class with a *universal* point-of-view, the Proletariat (not by chance entrusted by Engels as heir to classical German philosophy). In fact, if the workers who make up the Proletariat were all communists and actually had the very special place and role that Marx attributes to them in the objective social dynamics that he purportedly reproduces in his own thought and mind, that would be sufficient grounding for his Standpoint, allowing him to sustain his thought-monopolist pretensions without becoming a simple preacher of a new Religion or a speculative-dogmatic Philosophy

#### **4. Practical and social deduplication of the religious duplication of the world: Essence, foundation and transcendental normativity**

We have thus far seen, in the exposition of Marx's practical-normative materialism, primarily from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the argument of social reality as material practice, reality itself split

into two, and we have seen thought and knowledge as endowed with practical-social meaning and embeddedness but necessarily deformed by that social context that is *essentially* unfolded/split in two too. Thus, Marx's practical-productive materialism goes on now to deal directly with the problem of this supposed or constructed radical unfolding of the world, posing from there the activist imperative of a practical-material deduplication of that objectively split and fixed real. The Theses now move on – say, from epistemology to ontology – to the whole of society and to what would be *essentially* wrong with it (which Feuerbach, for Marx, was unable to see clearly), and curiously the argument now starts from nothing less than the Christian religion as the universal, alienated human Ideal and a *symptom* of that supposed essential Division. For it is here that the practical materialism of the Theses directly faces the problem of *normativity* and *ideal* (of an ultimate end for human actions, as we mentioned in the beginning), looking for an intra-mundane foundation for them, which seems to be placed by Marx way beyond what can be found empirically in present society or as manifest perceptions and aspirations of existing humans.

The Theses go on to endow *social relations* (of production) with the character of the essence of the social real and of humans themselves, tacitly subjecting them to the measure of an ideal “authentically human”, in opposition to the present, existing division and fragmentation of society and humans, where that *authentic human*, according to Marx himself, is not present yet.<sup>47</sup> That is the essentialist formulation of the Theses and their transcendentalizing construction of a particular normative Foundation that in the end transform Marx's practical materialism into a ‘transcendental historical materialism’. A materialism for that reason now seemingly involved with a tacit rejection of real politics, a rejection somewhat comparable to the one brought about by liberalism (that Marx criticizes) and by the ‘Platonism’ that Marx seems to move close to, while also epistemologically relapsed into a so called ‘point of view of the Subject’, ultimately to a hegelianized version of Cartesian mentalism<sup>48</sup>. It is all of that that apparently undergirds the terse conclusion of the Theses, that is, Marx categorical imperative to change the world rather than to merely ‘think’ about or ‘interpreting’ it – in thesis eleven, which later turned out to be by far the most popular one.

Feuerbach, says Marx still in thesis four (but not only there), does not go further than simply *deciphering* the ‘secret’ of Christian religion, that is, does not go further than discovering the ‘fact’ of “man's religious self-alienation”, the fact of the “duplication of the world between mundane and religious”, that is, between a *real*, depreciated side, and an *ideal*, transcendentalized one, a duplication that was taken by Marx and Feuerbach (also Nietzsche) as the great, historical Evil and Misdirection inherited and aggravated in our times.<sup>49</sup> Feurbachian ‘Critique’, however, limits itself to then taking the step of ‘translating’ (the Theses say “resolving” or “dissolving”) Christianity “in its mundane foundation” (into ‘real humanism’, Marx could also say)<sup>50</sup>, by revealing that God (the Celestial Ground) is only a projection of humans themselves (“of Man”), a distorted projection of true human essence, the earthly Ground. With his supposedly deciphering interpretation, Feuerbach believed he had solved, with a generous humanism, the problem of the impoverishment of human life and of relations among humans as promoted by Christian alienation/religion, then perpetuated in modern Protestantism and also in modern liberal secularism. Yet, for Marx, Feuebach still failed to do what was most important: to understand why the human foundation “separates itself from itself and fixes itself in an autonomous Kingdom, in the clouds”, as a hypostatization confronting finite, isolated human beings in general, thereby then lost and impoverished.

Religion (Christianism) thus becomes something like a *symptom* and a *sign*, as a *fact* that “can only be explained” – thesis four attempts to move ahead on this – “by the cleavages and

self-contradictions” within this secular, social basis here on Earth.<sup>51</sup> It is this earthly Foundation/Ground that must be now “understood in its [material] contradiction” (for Marx, his crowning theoretical accomplishment, in *Capital*) and mainly it is that which (here the Theses begin to introduce the activist anti-capitalist ‘categorical imperative’ of change) “must now be revolutionized in practice.” In thesis four, Marx does not specify yet the direction he believes should now be taken, yet one way or another this revolutionary move is to represent the veritable end of earthly/material alienation (therefore also of religious alienation, its symptom), and it is this “categorical imperative” (to which Marx refers in *The German Ideology*) that the Theses have to tacitly offer us in their famous thesis eleven.<sup>52</sup> I can reiterate, then, regarding that which Marx defines as the basis for his Prescription (for his communist Ideal), that it will not come from the perceptions or aspirations of real existing human beings (not even of workers) the way they are – as pragmatists and non-transcendentalized practical materialists, even if somewhat normative and critical, would have it. Rather, such a theoretical base establishes itself as, in principle, transcending such perceptions and aspirations, as something separate from them, appearing as what human beings only unconsciously and distortedly express in Religion. For it is in fact through the ‘bad’ relationships that are established in practice within the realm of production that human circumstances and creations (human reality) become autonomous in relation to their human producers, subjugating and determining the latter even as it moves ahead towards Communism.<sup>53</sup>

The fact that thesis four resorts so often to the prefix ‘self’ is explained by its peculiar German-theoretical perspective of presupposed totality and unity for the human world as a kind of macro-subject. This perspective is such that, for this thesis, if human beings are separated and society divided, “Man” is separated/estranged “from himself”, is in contradiction with himself, and society (or the human world) is *torn apart* and *opposes* itself. Thus, man/society (here, one and the same), under present conditions, literally contradicts him/itself, negates him/itself, from what, at the same time, over and above the apparent dispersion of isolated human beings, a dialectical reduction is established, of social differences and oppositions to *one sole* contradictory *pair*. For German Idealism (with which help the Theses struggle here against Modernity as empiricism/liberalism), Unity (or Totality) is presupposed, and Division is a mistake and mere transition from a simple, original unity, to a rich, complex, final one – unity is at the beginning, and at the end it must be resumed. What remains then is the theoretical-practical task of eliminating that great, transitory Contradiction, through a big dialectical Leap, Revolution, thereby reconciling Society with itself, as a We in strong sense, a substantial One.

On the other hand, thesis four not only takes for *a fact* the alleged religious self-alienation of ‘Man’ as revealed by Feuerbach; it also posits the Feuerbachian critique of religion (in Marx’s reading) as the presupposition for the Marx’s own move from the critique of religion to the critique of society, and to the categorical imperative of the practical-active suppression of alienation. In this sense, it is opportune to emphasize that that Feuerbachian hermeneutic diagnosis refers not to something like religion in general but to Christianity in particular. Secondly, it is worth noting that Feuerbachian atheism has the declared intention, not of denying, but of rescuing, strengthening it, leading to its fulfilment, now as something human, the core of values of Christianity – only now stripping them of their original subjectivist-individualist deformation.<sup>54</sup> After all, then, it is Christianity that is presupposed by Marx in the Theses and in his Critical Theory in general; it is from Christianity that comes his normative Foundation, although he takes a step forward in relation to Feuerbach as to the practical-material conditions of its origin and realization. There is then in Marx philosophical construction an original dependence on Christian Religion and Feuerbachian interpretation of it, for *normative* Foundation or Presupposition, that Marx and Marxists would probably not like to confront.<sup>55</sup>



This all becomes clearer in thesis six,<sup>56</sup> which takes up the Feuerbachian translation-transformation of Christianity into 'Real Humanism' as a return to the true essence of 'Man', as the real, deciphered religion. "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence [God] into the human [generic, collective] essence," thus bringing Heaven to Earth, Idea to World. The question faced now, however, is no longer just that the religious duplication of the world is caused by a division in the real essence or essential reality of human beings, in their *social* relations down-here on Earth. Such division-duplication also implies the dispersion of 'Man' or 'Mankind' into the separate, abstract, non-social, 'robinsonic' individuals of modern civil society. That is why the *ideal* 'human essence' (or the human ideal recovered from Christianity in a communitarian translation), returned to the earthly world by Feuerbach, finds humans "here on Earth", in present society, thesis Six points out, as its *opposite*, as an atomized bunch of atomized individuals competing with and opposing one another under the current "ensemble of social relations" (that is, under capitalist production and its corresponding division of labor)<sup>57</sup>, "in whose criticism", that is the point Marx wants to add, "Feuerbach does not enter". True human, social essence (supposedly externalized/distorted/disguised, but present, in Christian Religion) which is the opposite of that atomization, cannot, according to Marx, properly *fit* such individuals, thus remaining, in their present conditions, an 'abstract Ideal' for abstract individuals – all that Marx does not want to happen. This, however, says Marx here, is as far as Feuerbach can to go because he "abstracts from the real [in Marx's representation] course of History" – precisely because Feuerbach does not perceive the real as a split-off material activity, and thus still "presupposes the abstract and isolated individual" of contemporary society, whom (Thesis Seven) he "does not see belongs to a particular [warped] social form" – modern civil society, Capitalism.

Et-voilà, then, case closed, the reason for Marx's central critical concern in the Theses from the start, beginning with Thesis One, with the empiricist sensuous intuition, the reason finally expressed in thesis nine: "The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, a materialism that does not comprehend sensuous reality as practical activity, is the sensuous intuition of single individuals of civil society" – appearing as detached, at the 'superficial' level of 'appearance', even if a 'real appearance', as we have already seen (see *Capital*). It is to such an appearance, then, that thesis ten, the penultimate one, will oppose the communist standpoint, that of the – still non-existent – 'Human(e) Society'. As we have seen, this sets for us, among other things, a question of 'political epistemology', that is, the question of what could be a politically better epistemology, superior to old empiricism but also not 'communist' either: one that could correspond to the constitution of a, perhaps in some way more human, hopefully materially democratic, society. Whatever the answer to this question might be, and one of them seems to me to be our practical-poietic materialism, I believe that the practical-active materialism of the Theses can conceive knowledge too as practical-social, together with the real as a relational material activity too, as opposed to the individualism of traditional liberalism,<sup>58</sup> but in a better and more complete way than Marx ultimately achieves with his privileged Standpoint of a 'humane society' in the shape of Communism. Such new practical materialism should obtain better normative and solidary, political, social results, without having to embark on a communist essentialization/substantialization of the human and on a transcendentalization of the Ideal, which Marx insists on inheriting and 'translating' in his understanding and transformation of 'Classical German Philosophy'. Such Marxian pretensions might be happily replaced with an increased interest in the aspirations and renovating practices of real existing men and women, and in their real demands in development, for an increasingly democratic society, also in a material sense, starting from present, existing society itself.

Perhaps Marx could have thought of a sort of democratization as an answer to the problem of alienation in a less German transcendental/speculative way, a generic and essentializing one.<sup>59</sup> He could perhaps have imagined that, in a more effective and pluralist democracy than his communism, empowered (individually and socially, politically and materially) human beings would gain greater autonomy and make the human reality (whether State, society, institutions, etc.) that surrounds them more truly theirs. In bringing the economic, political, social, cultural, etc. circumstances that are, in the end, their own creation, closer to people, they would acquire greater control over their own lives. Marx, however, only believes this possible – and then in a more complete, ideal, utopian way – in a society without contradictions (made up of fully social beings who would have everywhere overcome division of labor and private property, as well as legitimate political conflict), in other words, in his ideal, final Human(e) Society. Hence, when he brings his Theses to a conclusion and crowning, asserting that the point is to *change* the world, he is indeed referring to a *German philosophical* manner of change, a philosophical-communist change, the end of the self-alienation ‘of Man’ or anything as final and equivalent.

Preparing himself for his Great Conclusion, that is consummated in thesis eleven, the last one, Marx's theses six and seven, all things considered, still introduce a ‘pragmatist’ element that may deserve some attention, by mentioning the *feeling* (*Gemüt*: heart, spirit) that is present in religion. A consideration that should not be frowned upon by pragmatists and practical-poietic materialists, for whom, in knowledge as in action, that is, in our involvement and interaction with the world and with other human beings, we are always a complex ensemble of intellect, affections, emotions, taste, etc. After all, just like Feuerbach, we are talking here about social solidarity, even love, among humans. Feuerbach's philosophy is avowedly an altruistic philosophy of love and feeling, and the essence of Christianity – therefore, the essence of ‘man’ – is for Feuerbach indeed, in the first place, *heart* and *feeling*. In thesis six, Marx asserts that Feuerbach, due to his disregard for the course of History, “fixes religious feeling” as a characteristic of abstract human individuals in general, despite the kind of society in which they live, with the sort of social relations it might be based upon. Feuerbach does not see, completes thesis seven, that this *religiöse Gemüt* is also “a social [and historical] product”, in individuals who “belong to a particular form of society.” So, religious sentiment is precisely that which, under conditions of human self-alienation, is, because of prevailing, warped social relations, oriented in the first place towards God. Only under new social circumstance would it, instead, be duly directed towards fellow human beings themselves.<sup>60</sup>

Anyway, the ‘categorical imperative’ of the Theses, with which they conclude, that is, to change the world instead of only re-interpreting it, would not have to be left devoid of feeling and of spirit, to be satisfactorily carried out. After all, for pragmatists and certainly also for normative practical materialists, the meaning of a belief can be understood as the corresponding disposition to act, which implies and embodied will. In Marx, the Supreme Being moves out of religion so that “Man” himself may now become “the Supreme Being for man”, so that the ‘religious’ imperative of solidarity, compassion and collective belonging, will now effectively turn itself to our fellow human beings (for Marx, in Communism), a notion which is not alien to pragmatism either, in a broad sense. The idea of converting the religious feeling, usually oriented towards God (or towards other humans only through the mediation of God), into a more effective human solidarity, fulfilled through social bonds that have been transformed, and referring to a new Ideal of human community somehow inscribed in the own movement of reality itself, might not be foreign to some representatives of traditional pragmatism. But that stripped of radical, speculative German metaphors, such as those referring to taking the sky by storm, putting an end to human prehistory, etc., for which Marx insists on finding ‘theoretical’ and ‘scientific’ translations. William James, insisting that “men will no longer give religion two thousand years to

waste their time”<sup>61</sup>, introduces pragmatism to the American public by denouncing the indifference of idealist-rationalist philosophy, and implicitly even of traditional religion, to material human afflictions, which James exemplifies with unemployment and the despair and hunger of Cleveland workers. Peirce, on his part, piously denounces the “Gospel of Greed”, of classical political economy in general and of Wall Street in particular, to which he opposes his ‘loving evolutionism’ and ‘logical communitarianism’.<sup>62</sup> John Dewey, more secularized and politicized than both, seeks to give to religion a human-natural scope (in his *A Common Faith*) linked to the realization of a greater human ideal, democracy, while his late follower, Richard Rorty, makes ‘solidarity’ the central normative core of his work.

A year or two before writing the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote that Feuerbachian critique of religion leads to the idea of man as the Supreme Being for man, which has as its consequence “the Categorical Imperative of changing all the relationships in which man is a humiliated, subjugated, abandoned and despicable being”. That is something most people would not remain indifferent to, and is indeed what in the end lies behind thesis eleven, the last one, that concludes with the task, for “philosophers”, to no longer “merely” interpret the world, but “to change it”. In Marx, that presupposes a closed historical essentialist Script, a very philosophical/ theoretical one, both transcendental and virtuous, built as largely determined by Reality itself, that may still deceptively seem practical and empirical, but is certainly not very pragmatist. A poetic-pragmatic materialist point of view must do a whole lot better than that.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Crisostomo is a senior professor and researcher in the field of socio-political and general philosophy, in the Philosophy Department of Federal University of Bahia, Brazil, where he teaches both in the undergraduate and graduate philosophy courses. He got his PhD in political philosophy in Sao Paulo, and did postdoctoral research visits, in the area of contemporary philosophy, to UC-Berkeley, New School-NY and Humboldt University. His published work, largely still in Portuguese, has mostly to do with Left Hegelianism, Marx and Pragmatism, with philosophy in Brazil and with the development of his own practical-poietic, materialist point of view. Crisostomo sees philosophy nowadays not as Theory but in dialogue with time and circumstance, with the national and international philosophical communities, as well as in continuity with regular citizens' discussions in the public sphere.

<sup>2</sup>This paper constitutes a sort of trilogy together with Souza, J. Crisóstomo de. 2019. “Towards a Practical-Poietic, Material Point of View”. *Transcience* 10(1), 16-33, and Souza, J. Crisóstomo de. 2020. “A World of Our Own: A Pragmatic-Poietic Perspective, Conversationally Developed”. *Transcience* 11(2), 1-27. It is a revised and improved English version of my 2012. ‘Para um Crítica ao (não-)Pragmatismo de Marx’, *Cognitio* 13(1), 115-144 .

<sup>3</sup>Feuerbach’s philosophy is a humanism not only in an ethical sense (insofar as it favors an altruist stance) but also because it intends to overcome the vices of previous German philosophy through a focus on ‘the human’ – a corporeal, affective, communitarian human. The German-British thinker Ferdinand Schiller, one of the founding fathers of pragmatism, also characterized his philosophy as humanism by invoking the well-known Protagorean maxim that ‘man’ is the measure of all things, while pragmatist William James repeated that “the trail of the human serpent is over everything”.

<sup>4</sup>I have drawn my citations directly from the German original, published in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1958. *Thesen über Feuerbach*. MEW, v. 3, Dietz Verlag: 533.

<sup>5</sup>In spite of this, it is in the Theses that, according to Friedrich Engels' words, we are able to find the embryo of the whole brilliant theory of the mature Marx.

<sup>6</sup>Despite the way it highly values experimentalist science, I do not believe that pragmatism as a philosophical tradition should be characterized as necessarily scientific (nor should it be reduced to an epistemology) in the manner of neo-positivism or logical empiricism, nor, on the other hand, should it be swallowed up by the contemporary linguistic turn deriving from them, as in neo-pragmatism.

<sup>7</sup>Sidney Hook, John Dewey’s favorite disciple, intended to develop a pragmatist interpretation of Marx in his *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* (John Day Co., 1933), but failed on this account. About his attempt,

see: Souza, J. Crisóstomo de. 2004. "Karl Marx como John Dewey: O Marxismo Pragmatista de Sidney Hook." *Veritas* 49, n.1: 49.

<sup>8</sup>Habermas openly avows his pragmatism in 2004. *Verdade e Justificação*. Loyola. Regarding Albrecht Wellmer's, see his 2004. "The Debate about Truth: Pragmatism without Regulative Ideas." In *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy*, Egginton & Sandbothe (eds.), SUNY. On the 'pragmatist turn', see Bernstein, R. 2010. *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press. On Hillary Putnam, see 1995. *Pragmatism, An Open Question*, Blackwell. Dewey's influence on Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi are avowed and well-known. My consideration of pragmatism as a 'terrain', on the other hand, may be taken as a reference to its ceterior, de-transcendentalized, thereby worldly nature.

<sup>9</sup>Claude Piché, in his article 2003. "A passagem do conceito epistêmico ao conceito pragmatista de verdade em Habermas" in Araújo, L. (org.), *A Filosofia Prática e a Modernidade*, UERJ, p. 25 comes to the conclusion that "Habermas is pragmatism's true heir". For further discussion on this matter, see Aboulafia, Bookman, Kemp (eds). 2002. *Habermas and Pragmatism*, Routledge.

<sup>10</sup>This is Habermas's understanding in 1989. "A Filosofia como guardador de lugar e como intérprete." *Consciência moral e agir comunicativo*, Tempo Brasileiro. Pragmatism, I believe, is where the self-criticism of Marxism could lead; in fact, Habermas himself can be considered an example of that, but we ourselves are interested in promoting another type of practical reconstruction of the so called 'paradigm of production', moving beyond philosophies of consciousness and the subject while also reaching beyond the linguistic and merely intersubjectivist turn in which Habermas got himself embroiled.

<sup>11</sup>'Continental' influence certainly does not exclude a British, empiricist, utilitarian and socially progressive counterpart, from Alexander Bain and Stuart Mill. On the other hand, Ferdinand Schiller's pragmatism is marked by a Nietzschean kinship, as G. Stack argues in 1982. "Nietzsche's influence on pragmatic humanism." *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20(4).

<sup>12</sup>For Habermas's assertions – and others of the same sort – see *Filosofia, Pragmatismo e Democracia* (p. 38 ss.), introduction to our own *Filosofia, Racionalidade, Democracia* (Unesp, 2005). On Putnam's argument, see the preface to his *Pragmatism: An Open Question*. About what Quine says, see De Waal, C. 2005. *On Pragmatism*. Belmont: Wadsworth, p. 148-9. Peirce recognized Kant's influence and convergences with Hegel in his *Conferências sobre Pragmatismo* (pref., p. 8, conf. I, p. 15), in Peirce & Frege (col. Os Pensadores), Abril, 1983, also recognized by Robert Brandom in relation to Kant: 2011. *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, Harvard U. P., and by Robert Stern regarding Hegel: 2011. *Hegelian Metaphysics*, Oxford U. P..

<sup>13</sup>Marx has an appreciation for science that is similar to pragmatism's, but the notion of science predominant in Marxism tends more towards a dogmatic positivism, epistemologically magnified by German conceptual resources, than towards the hypothetical, experimentalist, fallibilist, abductive science of Peirce, Dewey or James In *As Três Espécies de Excelência* (op. cit., p. 39), Peirce argues that "all ideas of science come through abduction which consists of studying the facts and inventing a theory to explain them: the only justification is that, if we are to understand things, this is the way to do it". He goes as far as asserting that abduction is pragmatism's main point (p. 57).

<sup>14</sup>Although I focus the present paper primarily on the Theses (1845), I make complementary references to *The German Ideology* (1845-46) and Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, as well as to Marx's *Capital* and other lesser texts, extending my suggestions of interpretation to them.

<sup>15</sup>Marx deplores the 'Robinsonian', abstract-individualist, way of understanding human beings in society, while, when it comes to epistemology, he himself understands that in his critique of political economy he presents the total movement of reality as reflected in his own *individual* mind.

<sup>16</sup>In addition to the above-mentioned introduction by De Waal, other good examples can be found in Jean-Paul Commetti's excellent *Filosofia sem Privilégios* (Asa, 1995) and *Qu'est-ce que le pragmatisme* (Gallimard, 2010), as well as in J. Murphy's *Pragmatism from Peirce to Davidson*, Westview Press, 1990, and Rosenthal, Hausman and Anderson's *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality*, U. of Illinois, 1999.

<sup>17</sup>Our text is nothing more than an indirect way of presenting some of the elements of the point of view to which I am referring, more directly discussed and developed in a variety of ways in texts such as, among those written in English: 2019. "Towards a Practical-Poietic, Material Point of View". *Transcience* 10 (1), 16-33, and 2020. "A World of Our Own: A Pragmatic-Poietic Perspective, Conversationally Developed". *Transcience* 11 (2), 1-27.

<sup>18</sup>For a full consideration of Peirce's surprising claim, see Max Fisch's 1954. "Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15, 413-444. There the author registers all of Peirce's relevant references to "Bain's sentence".

<sup>19</sup>Curiously, characterizations of pragmatism have frequently resorted to suggestive images and metaphors even when their intentions are to defend it as very scientific. De Waal (op. cit., p. 175 ss) refers to pragmatism as "a restless doctrine," that "passionately denies we can be mere spectators", as a philosophy with a "pioneer" New World mentality for which "old rules no longer work," for which "we ourselves make our world", although always in a "realist" manner. Marx in *The German Ideology* declares that the United States was built "by the most advanced individuals of the Old World" and "by their most advanced forms of interaction" – might we then understand that in his *Theses ad Feuerbach* he opened up to a 'new world' spirit, for its practical activist materialism?

<sup>20</sup>Reality is *practical* and *subjective* for Dewey too. See his "Does reality possess practical character?" republished in Goodman, R. (ed.). 1995. *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, Routledge. See how in his critique of the

conception of experience of empiricism, in his 'The need for a recovery of philosophy', he moves close to positions expressed by Marx in his Theses (See Dewey. 1917. *The need for a recovery of philosophy in Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*. Holt.

<sup>21</sup>Where the term 'practices' is used, for Marx that also includes the relationships which the latter establish. Nonetheless, he prefers to use the term in the singular, most of the time referring to labor and economic production.

<sup>22</sup>For Marx, the point of view of sensuous intuition is that of isolation, whereas that of sensuous activity is based on relationships. Marx, in other texts, uses the term 'robinsonade' (in allusion to Defoe's Robinson Crusoe) to denounce the illusion, for him characteristic of the bourgeois political economy and political theory, in the 18th and 19th centuries 19th, of conceiving individuals (within economy and society) as independent realities, as if existing prior to society and history (see theses six and seven). Here I try to extend the critical use of this metaphor to 'epistemological individualism' (possibly also applicable to Marx), a point to which I'll return later on in this text.

<sup>23</sup>See James's first conference, "The present dilemma in philosophy", in his 1995. *Pragmatism*, Dover. James, like Marx, attempts to offer a point of view marked by the practical, realist spirit of Modernity, but one that at the same time sustains, rather than excludes, the dimension of the ideal. In order to do so, James invokes – against the alternative of rationalist-metaphysical sublimation of the real world, as in Leibniz's 'best of possible worlds' – 'the street', the real lived and contradictory world of human finitude, and above all the crudeness of the social question of his time, in the shape of hunger, unemployment and the drama of the lives of workers in Cleveland.

<sup>24</sup>Marx's historical framework of successive modes of production may be made more flexible, beyond the limited stages and unyielding determinism that Stalin encased them in, yet not to the point of abandoning its transcendental, universalist, normative reach that allows for strong normative judgements, in binary terms, about the meaning of positions and events taking place within it.

<sup>25</sup>On Marx and history, see Souza. 2006. "A filosofia marxiana da história como *Selbsterzeugung* do homem", in Santos, A. C., *História e Ação*, Ed. UFS, Peirce, in turn, maintains the idea of an illimited community of inquiry as the true subject for the construction of science, guided by an immanent ideal of final consensus – a real community in which each researcher acts as the member of an ideal community or as the member of his community idealized. Nonetheless, I refer here to something different: the *Peircian* notion of an ultimate and absolute Telos, an admirable Ideal "which resides within the evolutionary process itself," which must be an ethical reference for all human action (op. cit., p. 5 a 38 passim; Peirce. 1893. "Evolutionary Love." *The Monist* 3(2), 188). In Dewey's terms, "democracy is the supreme, ethical ideal of humanity" (in Anderson, Douglas. 1993. *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61(2): 383).

<sup>26</sup>When Marx or Feuerbach refer to 'human' (*menschlich*), the adjective generally has a positive connotation, of a true human, with ethical implications, as opposed to 'selfish', etc. The German term *menschlich* can also be translated as humane.

<sup>27</sup>In this respect, Feuerbach is less essentialist and more pragmatist than Marx. For him, positive human practice is above all affective, does not depend on theory and is based on the natural solidarity of human beings within existing society. For Feuerbach, moving beyond religion, fraternal human essence should not be again separated from human beings (as in religion), or placed anywhere other than in their present existence. See Souza, J. Crisóstomo de. 2006. "Marx and Feuerbachian Essence", in Moggach, D. (ed.), *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, Cambridge U. P.

<sup>28</sup>As I understand it, *Capital* strives to consolidate this separation, found in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, between foundation and surface, essence and appearance, even if not refraining from suggesting the curious notion of a 'real appearance' – that of the level of circulation, where common men may, even if deceptively, "imagine themselves" to be free. It is there, says Marx ironically, "the Paradise of the rights of man, where inhere only Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham". About this, see Souza. J. C Crisóstomo de. 2004. "A teoria marxiano-althusseriana do desconhecimento no *Capital*." *Ideação* 1. UEFS.

<sup>29</sup>In 1845, German social-democracy was already a full-blown political movement, challenged in practice on how to deal with anti-hierarchical 'spontaneism' and 'anarchism' within the workers' movement and within society in general.

<sup>30</sup>Marx's emphasis on the sensuous/sensible seems to resonate in Peirce's anti-Cartesian text "How to make our ideas clear", in Mota and Hegenberg (eds.), 1975. *Semiótica e Filosofia*, in which Peirce insists not only on "practical bearings" but also on "sensible result", "sensible effects", "sensuous characteristics" that an object may present. Later on, Peirce adds that he sees practical consequences as "results of the truth of a conception" (preface to 'Conferências', p. 7).

<sup>31</sup>People's concrete involvement in the world is also necessarily aesthetic – as much as operative, cognitive, etc. – according to thinkers such as Dewey and Nietzsche. Yet, in his Theses, as everywhere else, Marx gives no particular emphasis to the aesthetic and creative dimensions of our basic experience of such involvement.

<sup>32</sup>The inseparable imbrication of thought and reality as social sensible activity also occurs in language and through language. For Marx, in *The German Ideology*, language is the real, practical consciousness, "that which also exists for other men." See Marx and Engels. 1958. *Die deutsche Ideologie*. MEW, v. 3, Dietz Verlag: 30.

<sup>33</sup>The pragmatist field, maintaining a practical-social notion of knowledge (unlike dogmatic empiricism and metaphysical realism), must face the challenge of establishing another type – anti-dogmatic – of realism. I believe that the notion of reality as sensible activity and of our practical-productive engagement with the world offers

the best direction, away from the old dogmatic realism as well as from the relativism of recent 'linguocentric' contextualism.

<sup>34</sup>'Correspondentism' here refers to the traditional definition of truth as correspondence between thought and thing, or between judgments (fragments of language) and the facts (fragments of reality) to which they refer, a notion (which pragmatism seeks to avoid) that must struggle against the difficulty of equating such heterogeneous things (thought and world), as well as against the problem of accessing the position from which such comparison could be established.

<sup>35</sup>Marx uses the term 'conduct' (*Verhalten*, also behavior) only once in the Theses, when, in the first thesis, he refers to a 'theoretical' behavior that Feuerbach approves, in opposition to ordinary, utilitarian practice, which he sees as inevitably selfish and subjectivist. The criterion of practice, of the translation of thought/belief into behavior, also seems to have, in both the Theses and in pragmatism, a therapeutic character for thought, eliminating mentalist dilemmas and nebulous speculative deviations.

<sup>36</sup>There may be a problem of circularity in what we can claim as true about truth. In pragmatism, however, as I understand it, there is no such problem in traditional terms, for there it is not a matter of pretending that a notion is entirely demonstrable or verifiable beyond considerations of a practical nature and references to intersubjectively shared presuppositions.

<sup>37</sup>The fact is that notions of empirical verification and of scientific (experimentalist) spirit do not seem to be much at home within Marxism, nor within traditional philosophy generally speaking.

<sup>38</sup>See chapter one in Dewey, J. 1959. *Reconstrução em Filosofia*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional.

<sup>39</sup>I find it philosophically more sophisticated to associate Marx's Theses with the anti-Cartesianism of pragmatism, which many do not bother to get acquainted with. At any rate, Dewey, a staunch critic of passive-intuitionist empiricism's abstract notion of experience, readily lends himself, through his socially engaged, politically progressive pragmatism, to an approximation to Marx, as Georges Novack develops in his 1975. *Pragmatism versus Marxism*. New York: Pathfinder.

<sup>40</sup>See James, "Concepção da Verdade no Pragmatismo" (6<sup>a</sup>. conferência), *Pragmatismo*, in William James, Abril Cultural, 1979. About James's understanding of truth, more prejudice than knowledge usually prevails; for a fair assessment of his position, see Putnam, *The Permanence of William James*, in the above-mentioned book.

<sup>41</sup>On the other hand, also characteristic of pragmatism is the notion of truth as warranted assertibility, justified on the basis of available evidence, as accepted by the concerned audience. Or as the belief around which members of a community of inquiry must necessarily converge further ahead.

<sup>42</sup>The pragmatist notion of belief has a meaning which in part is close to the Marxist notion of ideology, both taking thought as their practical, social, action-orienting, interested content. But, symptomatically, for the term ideology, the implication of distorted or false knowledge has prevailed, taken in opposition to the honest truth of science. Regarding the Marxian identification of truth with *power* and *effectiveness* in practice, it seems to me that, once reality is established as material-human activity, knowledge tends to acquire the connotation of know-how (of a capacity to satisfactorily *deal with* something) – rather than simply thought experimentally proved.

<sup>43</sup>Pragmatists and practical materialists, in relating knowledge and truth to practice, try to include in them a social dimension. Peirce and Dewey identify the true and the reasonable with what is publicly established, and error with what is merely individual or private, while inevitably arbitrary and capricious.

<sup>44</sup>As I have suggested, we could expect from a communist a more emphatic stand than the Baconian (of Francis Bacon) or even the pragmatist for the social character of knowledge, and even more for the social character of the production of social and political representations (even if not dissociated from conflicts posed by social contradictions, which pragmatism takes little account of). Marx's problem is that he seems to imagine himself solipsistically rising to the highest level of knowledge, as if pulling himself up like the Baron of Munchausen by his own bootstraps (or something like that) rather by the conceptual straps of Hegelian logic and German idealism.

<sup>45</sup>Indeed, if this reduction to a single perspective is determined by reality itself, Marx could be justifiably dogmatic without having to be metaphysical, transcendental and anti-pragmatist. However, he would not want to leave that simply to the empirical consideration by other, ordinary human beings, without adding a *deciphering* dimension to his Theory, one which 'uncovered' the true, necessary, real Movement, hidden from other humans, found by Marx beneath the superficial, empirically given 'reality' experienced by them in their lives. The fact is that *Capital* seems entirely devoted to the establishment of that above mentioned *reduction* (to a single Perspective) and, in order to complete the job, of the impossibility of the apprehension of this determination by the social agents in general, who must be misled by it while taking part in it.

<sup>46</sup>The terms *humanitarian*, *humanized* or *humane* society may be often preferable, for a translation from the original, to simply 'human society', given the theoretical context and the particular normative connotation of the German word *menschliche*. Really existing civil society, insofar as it is made up of real people, is of course also a human association, however, it appears in the Theses with a negative valence and as the opposite of a true human society, as it is clearly the case in thesis ten. One of the challenges for Marx's practical materialist point of view is its involvement with the idea of a normative *foundation*, normative in a very strong (transcendental) sense, yet this is exactly what Marx seems committed to offering and may very well be the basic presupposition of all his German-theoretical effort and idea of Critique (of Political Economy).

<sup>47</sup> Gradually, Marx's humanist-communist normativity ceases to be explicitly based on *Gattungswesen*, on the 'naturalness' of 'man' as species-being or generic-essence (and on the explicit Feuerbachian vocabulary), to be increasingly based on a determined, immanent negation of the essential individualism of classical political economy and capitalism, most solidly construed and unveiled/criticized in *Das Kapital*, as at the same time normatively and materially condemned. That is what Hegelian dialectical logic is all about.

<sup>48</sup> As I have mentioned, Marx's idea that the individual theoretical mind alone, all by itself, can adequately reflect/ reproduce the whole of the social Real and its all-encompassing Movement seems to be in dissonance with his critique against abstract intuitionist-contemplative XVIII century materialism, as well as with his social-contextualist approach of everybody-else's formation of beliefs and consciousness (as ideology). But that is a topic we do not have room to further develop here.

<sup>49</sup> German philosophical Critique, developed since Hegel, gave philosophy the curious transcendental role of deciphering for all Humanity its great historical enigma or secret, which, without the help of philosophers, would completely escape them. Marx prefers to speak of the secret of our representations as actually being a secret – and a concealment – constituted by alienated Reality itself, and that is his critique of political economy and capitalism, which apparently leave ordinary humans even more at the mercy of critical-theoreticians.

<sup>50</sup> 'Real humanism' is what Feuerbach puts in place of Christianity, and which Marx adopts and uses as a synonym for Communism up to *The German Ideology* (1845-6).

<sup>51</sup> For Marx, it is – present – reality itself that is "religious", not only because it 'produces' religion but also because it does so by keeping us in a material condition of subjection-dependence-alienation (ideally replicated/ expressed in religion), a condition which capitalist reality half-hides and for which the *realization* of Communism (also of Philosophy and actually, well understood, of Christian Religion itself) is the only possible, complete suppression/overcoming.

<sup>52</sup> The notion of 'man's' self-alienation is one of German Idealism's interpretative keys (interpretative of reality) that for Marx can lead philosophical doctrines astray, to mysticism and confusion (thesis eight). Marx, however, thinks that his own doctrine dissolves that mysticism by finding a real, practical-material translation for it (thesis four). Marx assumes that German Idealism does not exactly introduce speculative and theological elements into reality, but that, as idealism, like religion, it merely apprehends – represents – them in a 'mystical', deformed way, for reality has indeed in itself, such as in commodity fetishism, misleading 'speculative' and 'theological' aspects. That is why Marx thinks that German Idealism is still superior, as a starting point, to English empiricism or French materialism as reductionist realisms.

<sup>53</sup> Marx, it seems, reaches a higher elaboration of that idea in *Capital*, but he provides an approximate formulation of it as early as 1845: "It is not a question of knowing what end a proletarian or even the entire proletariat thinks he/it has for the moment (...), [but] of what he/it will historically be obliged to do." (MARX K, ENGELS F. *La Sainte Famille*, Éditions Sociales, p. 48.

<sup>54</sup> See Souza, J. Crisóstomo de. 2009. "Feuerbach, Crítica da Religião, Crítica da Modernidade", in Chagas, Redyson and de Paula (orgs.), *Homem e Natureza em Ludwig Feuerbach*, UFC: 241-270. Feuerbach actually takes issue with the lack of true Christianity in the modern world, that is his particular problem! He sees Modernity as maintaining the superficial belief in the existence of the individual Subject of religion, the Personal God, but not the effective belief in Christian values, that is, in the divine Predicates, the qualities which for him constitute the true Essence of Man, projected in God: Love in the first place, but also Reason and Will, as human-species attributes, and as such infinite – as they are in Religion).

<sup>55</sup> After the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx continued to resort to the language of essence, à la Feuerbach, but increasingly preferred more explicitly – also strategically, I would say – the language of the hidden (inverting) determination of appearance by essence in Capitalism, that is by that which lies underneath (labor, our species-activity, as essentially social). Marx assumes his point of view of the 'human(e) society' (from which he criticizes Capitalism) the quality of a Science, and defines science, oddly enough, as the knowledge of essence (cf. *The German Ideology*).

<sup>56</sup> Thesis five, to which we have already referred, only reiterates Marx's concern with Feuerbach's supposed fixation on the – ultimately still individualist – empiricist paradigm of sensuous-intuition, as opposed to that of human (material) practice or activity. That shows how central this point, which we can understand as belonging to a sort political epistemology, is for Marx in the Theses.

<sup>57</sup> Here Marx follows the prescriptions of Hegelian logic: the Hegelian definition of Substance is 'Essence introduced into actuality/ reality', and this is how he understands the social real, that is, human beings' sensuous activity, in its relation to individuals: more than just their essence, their substance – fortunately on in its transition to Subject, to be consummated in Communism naturally. Here again Marx flees from nominalism taking the point of view – recurrent in Peirce's pragmatism – of the reality (even materiality) of human relations and continuities in the world that we experience (as opposed to Locke and Hume).

<sup>58</sup> Peirce draws on Duns Scotus to develop an anti-nominalist point of view and an epistemological communitarianism (or even communism). For more on this, see for example, Hoopes, J. 1998. *Community Denied: the wrong turn of pragmatic liberalism*, Cornell U. Press. The 'wrong turn' to which the title of the book refers lies, for Hoopes, in the Deweyan approach which is less communitarian and less anti-nominalist. In general, against empiricist atomism, pragmatism seeks to sustain, as we have already said, the (sensible) reality of the relationships

and continuities that ordinary people believe they experience in their interaction with the world. Yet, we can still say that, in this respect, pragmatism proceeds in a way that is much less radical and utopian than Marx's.

<sup>59</sup>We can see that Feuerbach removes from religion its alienated human ideal in order to return it, in a material, embodied form, to really existing humans, more or less deflated to their measure (their actual reason, feeling and aspirations), in the form of a sensuous and affective humanism, tied to non-individualist inclinations already manifested by humans in the lived world. Marx, on the other hand, thinks that such an ideal (or its real basis) will still, inevitably, transcend existing humans by material injunctions, as long as the relations between them are not radically – that is, 'communistically' – transformed.

<sup>60</sup>As we have already insisted, Feuerbach's atheism is intended as a passage from what for him is concealed 'Judeo-Christian selfishness' (where one loves God for one's own advantage), rooted in the subjectivism of monotheist religion, now strengthened in Modernity, towards a more effective feeling of community among all human beings.

<sup>61</sup>See James, William. 1995. *Pragmatism*, N.Y.: Dover: 12.

<sup>62</sup>See Peirce. 1893. "Evolutionary Love." *The Monist* 3(2): 176-200)

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