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Feuerbach ni tsuite: Dai Ichi Tehze no Ichi Kaishaku
[An Interpretation of the First Thesis on Feuerbach]
Kato, Tadashi (1989)

in: *Kato Tadashi Chosakushu* [Collected Works of Tadashi Kato], Vol. 1,
Nagoya: Unite (first appeared in *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu*
[*Studies in Materialism*], Nos. 42 and 43 [1936])

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Section 1

According to Mr. Hunayama (Shinichi Hunayama, 1907-94), Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach —“The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively”—has often encountered adversity.¹⁾ The interpretation by Mr. Seinosuke Nakajima (born Tatsuro Ishihara, 1904-1986) that “things [*Gegenstand*] are . . . conceived in the form of the object” contradicts and negates “things [*Gegenstand*] are . . . conceived subjectively.”²⁾ It cannot be said, however, that people who have pointed this out have overcome this difficulty. For me, their failure is tied to the meaning of “conceived subjectively,” on which they bestow a meaning that differs from that of the thesis, thus changing its focus.

The above interpretation of the thesis by Nakajima is found in a text that criticizes the

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1) *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu* [*Studies in Materialism*], No. 18, p. 44.

2) *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu* [*Studies in Materialism*], No. 29, p. 93; Cf. *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu* [*Studies in Materialism*], No. 24, p. 221.

interpretation of Ohë (Seishiro Ohë, 1898-1992) that appears in the second section of his article “Ontology and Materialism.”³⁾ I should like to cite the longer text here for later use.

Mr. Ohë does not understand “practice” used by Marx, which means objective activity. Objective activity premises the objective being independent of consciousness, so only the materialists, who accept “the objective being independent of consciousness,” can understand it. This objective being obviously premises the sensuous subject. Marx, therefore, writes, “Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was set forth abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.” “Conceiving things subjectively” means most of all that the reproduction of things is given by practice, and human beings not only contemplate things but also act actively on things. Marx also emphasizes in the thesis the inseparability of material and movement and demands that materialism be applied to history. Marx develops materialism and reproduction theory here and does not discard them.⁴⁾

Mr. Hunayama’s interpretation, given above, is plausible for those who are followers of the dialectic as an epistemology or of the practical copy theory of knowledge, but I doubt whether this interpretation gets to the point of the thesis. It would be better for us, first of all, to analyze the thesis as such, since it was written before a particular kind of epistemology was offered by the Mitin school a few years ago.

I find it easier to grasp the phrase “things [*Gegenstand*] . . . are conceived . . . subjectively,” which has often been cited but which, to my knowledge, has not been clearly and certainly interpreted. Plekhanov says something extremely inappropriate⁵⁾ about it in *Essays in the History of Materialism*⁵⁾ and fails to understand it. Mehring also cites the phrase often but does not explain it at all. In his books, Hukumoto (Kazuo Hukumoto, 1894-1983) mentions it very often, but he does not explain how he understands it. I do not think Mr. Hunayama properly comprehends the thesis, however clear his explanation in the above quotation.

Before I analyze the thesis, I would like to explain some difficulties that arise because of the Japanese language. (Specifically, “subject” can be translated into Japanese in two ways.) About ten years ago, the thesis was translated into Japanese by Hukumoto and Sano (Manabu Sano, 1892-1953). They selected the word *shutai* (Japanese translation 1) for “subject.” *Shutai* has been commonly accepted since then, but it has gradually come to have a meaning that *shukan* (Japanese translation 2) cannot express. It goes without saying that *shutai* is not exactly equivalent to the

3) *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu* [Studies in Materialism], No. 18.

4) *Yuibutsuron Kenkyu* [Studies in Materialism], No. 18, pp. 44-45.

5) Plekhanov, G. V. (1934) *Essays in the History of Materialism*, London, (trans. by Ralph Fox), pp. 242-243.

scholastic word *subjectum*, the concept lying before us when we set about determining something about beings. Some select *shutai* for the active subject and *shukan* for the cognitive subject, but this approach is unhelpful in interpreting the thesis and only causes misunderstanding. I find it useless to differentiate between *shutai* and *shukan* and prefer *shukan*, which is more commonly used in Japanese. *Shukan* sometimes refers to abstract, idealist, and super sensual speculation, but I do not mean that here. The meanings of subject and object must be understood in the analysis of the thesis.

I present here the full text of the thesis for later use:⁶⁾

1. The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively.
2. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was set forth abstractly by idealism — which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.
3. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive of human activity itself as objective activity.
4. Thus, in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance.
5. Hence, he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary,” of “practical-critical,” activity.

From the organization of this thesis, it becomes clear that “things [*Gegenstand*] . . . are conceived . . . subjectively” (first sentence), “know real, sensuous activity as such” (second sentence), and “conceive human activity itself as objective activity” (third sentence) have substantially the same meaning. This is the key to understanding this thesis. If you substitute “things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness” (first sentence) for “real, sensuous activity” (second sentence), you will get the phrase “objective activity” (third sentence). Feuerbach is no idealist. He does not seek speculative, ideological things but sensuous things. Nonetheless, he fails to comprehend human activity as sensuous, real, and “objective activity” as such. He becomes, therefore, an idealist (as in second sentence) when faced with “activity”; he sees human activity as speculative activity (reflection and interpretation), that is, a theoretical attitude (as in the fourth sentence). Marx’s new materialism conceives of things

6) Marx, Karl (1976) *Theses on Feuerbach*, in Marx, Karl and Fredrick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 3.

subjectively, as sensuous human activity (first sentence). It comprehends the subjective and active side of things (second sentence) realistically as such, not abstractly. Human activity as such is apparently objective activity in the third sentence. To conceive things subjectively means to conceive objective activity, while to conceive of them subjectively means to conceive subjective things (things in subjective activity). Moreover, to conceive “human activity itself as objective activity” (third sentence) means that human activity as such must be the object of our cognition (and, at the same time, the object of our actions). That is all the thesis says. Therefore, Mr. Hunayama is right only when he says, “Marx . . . demands that materialism be applied to history. Marx develops materialism and reproduction theory here and does not discard them.” This is, in fact, what the thesis means, and the other parts of his interpretation have nothing to do with it. I would like to go further in analyzing the thesis in this respect.

To begin with, the first thesis largely concerns the object and not the subject of materialistic cognition. Cognitive and active subjects as such must also be conceived as objects or objective activity and as the objects of materialistic cognition. Mr. Hunayama believes that the thesis mainly involves the cognitive subject and says that “conceiving things subjectively” means most of all that the reproduction of things is given by practice and that human beings not only contemplate things but also act on them. In other words, he thinks that, before Marx, materialist cognition pursued its purpose by acting on things and not by distancing itself from and just contemplating them. However, Marx does not criticize earlier materialism in that way. Regardless of the attempt by Mitin and his followers to apply the copy theory of knowledge to the interpretation of the thesis, Marx himself makes no distinction between his and earlier materialism in terms of cognition.

Marx uses a few simple phrases to explain his materialism. He notes that, “This method of approach is not devoid of premises. It starts out from the real premises and does not abandon them for a moment,” and he refers to “real, positive science.”⁷⁾ In his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels explains, “That means it (materialism) was resolved to comprehend the real world—nature and history—just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from preconceived idealist crotchets. . . . And materialism means nothing more than this.”⁸⁾ Thus, what distinguishes Marx’s materialism from earlier materialism is that “the materialistic world outlook was taken really seriously for the first time and was carried through consistently—at least in its basic features—in all domains of knowledge concerned.”⁹⁾ It develops knowledge materialistically (empirically and scientifically, based on observation) not only in nature but also in history. Although

7) Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *The German Ideology*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 37.

8) Engels, Frederick (1990) *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1990) *Collected Works*, London, Vol. 26, pp. 382-3.

9) Engels, Frederick (1990) *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1990) *Collected Works*, London, Vol. 26, p. 383.

neither the thesis nor *The German Ideology* addresses the dialectic, about which Marx says in a letter, "What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel's *Logic*, at which I had taken another look by mere accident."¹⁰

In this first thesis, Marx distinguishes his materialism from earlier materialism only in the realm of application; thus, "to conceive things subjectively" means precisely that. In this thesis, "sensuous human activity (practice)" is equated with "subjectively" (first sentence). That is, "subject" means "practice" and "human activity." "Objectivity," therefore, here means "nature," the object independent of human activity. That all previous materialism conceives of things only in the form of the object (first sentence) means that only nature was an object of cognition for it. Thus, "things are . . . conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation" does not mean—Mr. Hunayama is wrong about this—that things are regarded as objects of contemplation and not as objects of practical activity. Things are in reality conceived of as objects of practical activity. They are separated from the subject, stand outside of it, stand before it, confront it, and the subject acts actively on them. Such things are objects that are outside human beings, are contemplated, or objects of intuition that confront the active subject or human activity and are independent of it. "Contemplated things" or "objects of intuition" refer to objects that an acting and thinking human finds lying before him. If some things appear as objects of intuition and the subject draws attention to things lying before him, the subject is expected to act practically on such things, and contemplation on them is related only to such acts. Earlier materialism also understands this truth. Francis Bacon, one of the earlier materialists or natural scientists, says "*Ipsa scientia potestas est*" (knowledge is power), and "we cannot command nature except by obeying her." In saying this, Bacon only grasps nature as an object of study; he fails to understand human practice as such. This is, according to Marx, the defect of earlier materialism (first sentence).

Marx's proposal "to conceive things subjectively" means that human activity as such, separated from natural objects, should be apprehended as it is, as objective activity, or as (I think it is fair to say) as an objective object that is intuitively known. There is no difference between conceiving of human activity as an object and making it an object of practical activity.

Bacon describes the empirical and positive study of nature (that is, materialism) as "putting nature on the rack and torturing her for her secrets." Such as study of human activity is just a matter of applying a practical and realistic attitude toward human objects. Marx's second thesis about Feuerbach means this: "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question." Incidentally,

10) Marx, Karl (1983) *Marx-Engels Correspondence 1858: Marx To Engels in Manchester [London,] 16 January 1858*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1983) *Collected Works*, London, Vol. 40, p. 249.

some translations seem to misunderstand the second thesis. Plekhanov, for example, translates “this-sidedness” [*Diesseitigkeit*] as “does not stop at this side of phenomena” (in Russian), which is supposed to counter neo-Kantian epistemology. I believe such a translation is incorrect. As Lenin says, “Plekhanov’s free paraphrase is not obligatory upon those who desire to know Marx himself.”¹¹ This-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] means reality, being realistic, and seeing things in a realistic perspective, not being out of touch with reality.

The reality of a thought must be demonstrated in practice by applying it to a real object. In that respect, there is no difference between Marx’s materialism and earlier materialism. Marx’s materialism, however, grasps human activity as such as the object of empirical, demonstrative study, as a realistic object for study. Realistically grasped objects can be treated only realistically and objectively. Actual human problems can be resolved only by practical criticism or realistic reformation (fifth sentence). In this way, Marxists are practical materialists, that is, materialists of human activity.

The German Ideology says, “For the practical materialist . . . it is a question of revolutionizing the existing world, of practically attacking and changing existing things. When occasionally we find such views with Feuerbach, they are never more than isolated surmises and have much too little influence on his general outlook to be considered here as anything else than embryos capable of development.” The reason is that “Feuerbach’s conception of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it,”¹² that is, he does not conceive things subjectively.

This does not mean, however, that Feuerbach attempts to conceptualize and reproduce the sensuous world only by adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Intuition is not an attitude of the subject or a form of cognition. It is about intuitive objects. Intuition means that the objective things that the subject confronts act on and are at least separated from the subject. Intuition is the object in intuitive form. It implies a nature independent of human activity. Earlier materialism also covers the human in intuition, the human as a natural product, the natural side of the human. It is not materialists who depend on, so to speak, intellectual intuition in recognizing objects, but Cartesian rationalists. This is an essential requirement for materialists and the focal point of my discussion.

How does earlier materialism use intuition to understand its object of recognition, that is, the human? The human that is described by it is far from a naïve subject that just contemplates things in equanimity. Born in nature, the human is driven by sensory stimuli, instincts for self-preservation, and a variety of desires. From those desires develop acts in relation to persons of the opposite sex, food, and other things. Human beings may struggle against one another in the fulfillment of their desires.

11) Lenin, V. I. (1962) *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, in Lenin, V. I. (1962) *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 104.

12) Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *The German Ideology*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, pp. 38-39.

Earlier materialism thus discusses production, trade, and the division of labor. It describes, however, the human as a purely natural phenomenon, trapped in a natural order and a domain beyond human action.

Marx's ninth thesis on Feuerbach discusses this issue clearly: "The highest point reached by contemplative [*anschauende*] materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society [*bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*]."¹³⁾ "Civil society" is a Hegelian term referring to human needs and desires and how they are met through economic life. The earlier materialism understands it intuitively, that is, as an order developing from nature. What does it mean to grasp things "subjectively," in contrast to "intuitively"? It means to understand the human not as just a natural product, but as an activity or a product of active process. Feuerbach argues, "Man as he sprang originally from nature was only a mere creature of nature, not a man. Man is a product of man, of culture, of history."¹⁴⁾ With some disappointment, Engels says of Feuerbach, "with him, even this dictum remains absolutely sterile."¹⁵⁾ Had he developed this dictum, he would have understood what it means to conceive of things subjectively: the human, which is grasped intuitively and as a product of nature, is in reality a product of human activity and the objectification of it. Moreover, this human product can be renovated and changed by the development of subjective practices.

As mentioned above, Engels argues that Feuerbach does not understand practical-critical activity and cannot be a practical materialist, since "Feuerbach's conception of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it, and on the other to mere feeling."¹⁶⁾ Feuerbach remains just a silent observer of things and forgets that the human subject is a subject actively working on direct objects. He fails to see that the object on which he labors is not natural but the result of human activity. "He does not see how the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations,"¹⁷⁾ says *The German Ideology*. "So much is this activity, this unceasing sensuous labor and creation, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists."¹⁸⁾ Feuerbach

13) Marx, Karl (1976) *Theses on Feuerbach*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 5.

14) Engels, Frederick (1990) *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1990) *Collected Works*, London, Vol. 26, p. 379.

15) Engels, Frederick (1990) *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1990) *Collected Works*, London, Vol. 26, p. 379.

16) Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *The German Ideology*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, p. 39.

17) Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *The German Ideology*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *Collected Works*, Moscow, Vol. 5, Moscow, p. 39.

18) Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) *The German Ideology*, in Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels

cannot be a practical materialist, not because he does not want social revolution, but because he finds things to change that are all objects conceived in intuition, that is, "human" but abstracted from the active side and regarded as natural objects. Thus, when in "the contemplation of the sensuous world, he necessarily lights on things which contradict his consciousness and feeling, which disturb the harmony he presupposes, the harmony of all parts of the sensuous world and especially of man and nature," he cannot find the means to overcome them. He must look for solutions and activities outside of the sensuous world, that is, not in the objective world, but in the unrealistic world of fantasy, philosophy, and theory. That is why he "regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance" (fourth sentence). In other words, he is, after all, an idealist who "does not know real, sensuous activity as such" (second sentence). The solutions in theory and philosophy are, in the end, about seeing the world differently only to confirm the existing world as it is. Objects are for Feuerbach natural beings through which he cannot find any way to realize his practical intentions in objective reality. Thus, his revolutionary intentions, which we find in some parts of his works, cannot become his principal focus.

Marx and Engels conceive of objects subjectively. Objects are not thought of as independent from human activity; they are products of subjective activity. Objects, the sensuous world, and the environment are being changed by the development of human activity. Those who would like to change the objective world should understand how objects are constructed, find factors of change, and participate in this activity. Marx and Engels expand the materialist perspective from intuitive objects, objective things, and nature to subjects, human activity, and historical activity, that is, sensuous human activity, and in so doing they introduce a practical conclusion: the meaning of practical criticism (fifth sentence) and its theoretical orientation.

Practical materialism has two aspects: it apprehends the practical field (historical and social human activity) materialistically, empirically, and realistically, and it changes the real, given human society according to the conditions that such apprehension suggests. Practice is not a problem of subjective enthusiasm or will power, but those who can understand practice as subjective activity-historical, social, and real activity-can learn how to change the real world.

Section 2

We have already analyzed the first thesis thoroughly in Section 1, and we must now examine Mr. Hunayama's interpretation of it.

I refuted his interpretation that the subjective conception of objects means, above all, that their reproduction is given by practice and that human beings both contemplate and act on things. How can