

Why Feuerbach Is both Classic and Modern

At a certain level of abstraction, the title of this postscript may appear to be contradictory. The Classics are connected, independently of their subject matter or historical classification, with tradition and established knowledge. Modernity, on the other hand, is associated with hypothetical, speculative and unproven theories. Plato's teaching of the virtues is classic in both the historical and systematic sense. It has historic significance since it exposes a method of addressing questions concerning what a virtuous way of living means, and as a result this knowledge has been conveyed during several epochs in the history of thought. This context of the mediation of traditional knowledge is obviously needed in order to grasp thoughts in time, either if the particular intellectual trend-setters start off from what could be considered to be traditionally classic positions or if they simply reaffirm traditional knowledge. The various works that deal with traditional knowledge more or less explain the simultaneous development of different theoretical designs, for instance: rationalism/empiricism, idealism/materialism as well as the renaissance of ancient schools, which is expressed in terms such as neo-Aristotelianism, neo-Kantianism and neo-Marxism.

Only classical authors set a precedent, only the classic stances can provoke contradictory paradigms, and only classical authors are worth consulting regarding the problems of the present, even if their epoch is now long gone. In this sense, the Classics are discursive texts which even today have something important to tell us, and as Feuerbach said, these are things which allow theorists to have a global and historic rapport without the disconnection of time¹. Classic knowledge is persistent knowledge, plural and continual knowledge and it becomes classic precisely because of this. Has Classic knowledge been modern at some time and has negated traditions? Or was knowledge more or less traditional up to the arrival of modernity?

¹ Feuerbach, L.: *Abälard und Heloise oder der Schriftsteller und der Mensch. Eine Reihe humoristisch-philosophischer Aphorismen* (1834). In: *Gesammelte Werke*. Ed. Schuffenhauer, W. Berlin 1967-2004. Vol. 1, p 564.

Each question presents a different understanding of modernity, no matter how we understand modernity now, in its 21st century version, as for instance a self-extinguishing epoch of terror, war and environment catastrophes or as an ending historic phase that came into being at the beginning of modern natural sciences coinciding with the times of Galileo and Descartes. Disregarding the dispute whether modernity started in the 16th or in the 20th century, the linear historiography identifies modernity as a historically *fixable* period, which perhaps is not over yet but will nonetheless and inevitably be over some day. Moreover, the post-modernists claim that modernity is now breathing its last and that it too will become classic in the foreseeable future. Otherwise they would not have proclaimed under the flag of a term borrowed from the architectural stylists the end of modernity and at the same time the end of history, which is after all only a context, but nonetheless one which reveals describable structures and even permits us to view the future. So we can say that those who think that modernity is over, or will soon be over, have a chronological understanding of history and not a dialectic one. They understand modernity as an epoch, which follows on from pre-modernity and which is preceded by post-modernity.

The dialectic term of history is however different, as Feuerbach shows in his interpretation of history as a discourse of spirits through the epochs. The dialectic term for history does not present history as an ensemble of events or as a linear sequence of distinct and unrelated epochs, but rather focuses its attention on structures, which dynamically connect the past, present and future to a simultaneousness, which makes a rapport throughout the centuries possible. That is why, according to Feuerbach, "the paradoxical aphorism of our (individual) life loses its fragmentary meaning only, and becomes sensible and reasonable only if it is read in the context of the great text of the past"¹.

Against a background of a structural understanding of history which connects the single epochs with each other, not only chronologically but as cultural spheres with their own structure of development, a certain lack of concurrency with the present time is noticeable, and

¹ Feuerbach, L.: Abälard und Heloise. p 559.

therefore the question of whether modernity is a historically fixed epoch or a dynamic element of every epoch is easy to answer. Evidently Plato's idea of virtue was modern compared to the moral relativism of the sophists, and both Feuerbach and Marx were certainly modern compared to the dogmatism of the Hegelian school. Even Nietzsche's nihilism, which rebelled against the self-assuredness and double-standards of the Eurocentric ideology of moral education, was in this way, modern too. A hundred years later Nietzsche became a classical author, confirmed by his renaissance, which serves the whole postmodern movement, including its use as a role-model by political "think tanks". If according to Nietzsche "all the great wars of the present time are effects of historic studies²", then from a pragmatic perspective it makes sense to abolish all historic studies and their specific point of view. Therefore, just one question remains: since politics has liberated itself from all of its historic burdens – such as the modern constitutional state, why does war still take place?

Other philosophers such as Schelling or Feuerbach did not experience such a renaissance, although they were admired by many during their lifetimes and had already obtained the status of Classic authors with their contemporaries. They still live - so to speak - on their former popularity, and have been acknowledged as classical authors, in a broad sense, up to this day. They are classic in the sense of their elementary links: without Schelling's term of nature Feuerbach would not have created his philosophy of corporality as a contradiction to Hegel's immaterial history of the world spirit, and without Feuerbach's criticism of the speculative philosophy, Marx would not have left us his famous quotation about religion being the opium of the people³.

Does a powerful position in world history indicate then, whether we have to deal with a classic author or not? Without doubt Marx's model of the communist society, distorted or not, has made history, and can be viewed as a completed experiment, even taking into account the existing communism of Cuba and China, because Cuban communism will end when Castro dies, and China's fight for survival with global competition has already taken it along the path of monopolistic state

² Nietzsche, F.: *Morgenröte* (1881). In: *Friederich Nietzsche. Werke*. Ed. K. Schlechta. Darmstadt 1989. Vol. I, p 1133.

³ Marx, K.: *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843). In: *Marx. Werke*. Ed. Lieber, H. J. / Fürth, P. Darmstadt 1981. Vol. I, p 488.

capitalism⁴. Does Marx's powerful position in the history of politics alone make him a classic author as opposed to Feuerbach for instance who played a big role in the secularisation process of the 19th century but hardly in the current philosophical or political discourse?

Obviously the term "classic" also carries a moral connotation. Classic texts do not only document great political influence or we would have to include destructive and hostile texts like Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a text which can be seen as the manifesto of the bloody history of the 20th century. Yet Hitler is not a classical author in the way that Plato, Descartes, Cervantes, Goethe, Marx and also Feuerbach are. In fact, real classical authors make history by influencing their time or by creating a specific *zeitgeist* – as Hegel said. But first they do so in the shadow of authority or better said, against power, because power does not look at itself, and is only concerned with its own existence. Secondly classic authors still influence after generations, sometimes continuously, sometimes in the form of a renaissance.

So we can list a few indicators which make a text and its author classic: the text must be trans-epochal, discursive, and original and last but not least stand within the horizon of moral reason. If these qualities are present, we do not only speak of a classic text but also of a modern text. A classic seems to be a text which transports its message through centuries and even millennia, carrying its own modernizing potential.

Considering the title of this anthology *Der politische Feuerbach* we can conclude that Feuerbach's critical and political anthropology, although often placed merely in a small space between Hegel and Marx, has a vast potential to become a classic in the 21st century, whose pluralistic and multicultural societies face existential problems, so they depend on political and religious tolerance as the basic principles of social and even economic cooperation. It was Hegel who explained how the world spirit can remove *the* world history, and it was Marx who explained that this world spirit stands on the very material basis of economic and technological developments, so it was

⁴Landes, D. S.: The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor. New York 1998

Feuerbach who paid attention to the individual who is actually not carried by the world spirit – as according to Hegel – but its carrier. In addition to his role in unmasking Hegel’s system of philosophy as a Eurocentric theological ideology, Feuerbach’s anthropology is also accelerating the process of secularization in the 19th century. Furthermore his “deconstruction” of Christianity and in a wider sense of monotheism in general opens the door to an inclusive type of ethics which is so much needed in times when national, social, economical and religious exclusion is often seen as the only way to save one’s identity in totally pluralized and globalized societies. The fact is that we can globalize economies and even societies, but not the individual who still carries the entire burden of social upheavals. As Feuerbach’s theory of the individual was a reply to Hegel’s construct of a self-creating process of consciousness and knowledge, his inclusive ethics too, based on the respect for individuality as the key of humanitarian practice, is a reply to all the concepts which put the individual completely under structural interest and instrumental reason.

Individualism alone cannot be the solution regarding the global challenges, but without respect for the individual, we will not achieve the necessary individual responsibility towards the community, or either the society and the future of mankind. This is maybe the deeper message of Feuerbach’s criticism and ethics which connects him with the great moral philosophy of the past but also with existential questions of the future generations. That is why his philosophy seems to be as much classical as modern at the same time and that is why we can place Feuerbach in the first row of the “world spirit”.