

# All or Nothing: Althusser, Feuerbach, and the 'Method of Inversion'

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## I.

This paper presents a critical examination of Louis Althusser's conception of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx's theoretical relation to him, primarily in Althusser's first major work, *For Marx* (1965). The central thesis, which I will present and defend in this paper, is that Althusser fundamentally misunderstands this relationship, not out of ignorance of either Feuerbach or Marx, but rather out of ignorance of their common denominator: Young Hegelianism. I argue that Althusser performs a kind of double move. First, he identifies the 'ideological field' in which the young Marx operates with several key Young Hegelian figures. Then, he identifies this ideological field of Young Hegelianism in general with Feuerbach specifically, what he calls the 'Feuerbachian problematic'. Finally, in an extension of that second move, Althusser identifies the Feuerbachian problematic with one key component of Feuerbach's thought, viz. the so-called 'method of inversion' or Feuerbach's inversion motif. In order to establish these claims, I will do two things. First, I will lay out the 'double move', which I claim that Althusser performs, in some detail. I will show how he first singles out the 'ideological field' of Marx and then proceeds to identify it with Feuerbach, thus equating Marx's Young Hegelianism *in toto* with (merely a) Feuerbachianism. It is in this sense that Marx's relationship to Feuerbach becomes an 'all or nothing' to Althusser: *either* Marx is a Feuerbachian (and only a Feuerbachian) *or* he is not a Young

Hegelian at all. I will then go on to examine the ‘method of inversion’, which Althusser identifies with the Feuerbachian ‘problematic’ and thus Marx’s Young Hegelianism. In order to do this, I will also draw on manuscripts of Althusser’s that went unpublished in his lifetime, namely the fragments “On Feuerbach” and “The Humanist Controversy”.<sup>1</sup> Finally, after having established my claim, I will offer a critique of Althusser on several grounds. I argue that Althusser’s reduction of Young Hegelianism to Feuerbachianism is historically absurd and scholarly unsound; I argue that many of the general characteristics which Althusser identifies as Feuerbachian are in actual fact characteristic of the Young Hegelians as such, independently of Feuerbach; I argue that Althusser is inconsistent and wavering in his descriptions of the Young Hegelians, Feuerbach, and the Marxian ‘break’; and I argue that my analysis has dire consequences for this Althusserian concept of a ‘break’ in Marx’s thinking, at least from a historical viewpoint.

## II.

The roots of Karl Marx’s thought, Althusser writes, are not found with Hegel but rather, in the first phase of Marx’s youth, with Kant and Fichte and in the second phase with *Feuerbach*.<sup>2</sup> It is in the latter part of this ‘rooting’ period that Feuerbach dominates Marx’s thinking, i.e., in the years of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* and the Paris manuscripts (1843-45). However, Althusser begins by acknowledging that the ‘ideological field’ in which Marx moves is larger than this. The group of Hegelians that, according to Althusser, constitute this ‘ideological field’ of Marx’s youthful thinking consists—apart from Hegel himself—of ‘at least’ Feuerbach, Moses Hess, and Max Stirner. These are the Young Hegelians mentioned explicitly by Althusser.<sup>3</sup> Althusser writes that,

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<sup>1</sup> Both translated and printed in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron (London: Verso Books, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso Books, 2005), e.g. 35, 158, 223-24. For simplicity’s sake, I simply refer to *For Marx* as one book, though it is of course an anthology of texts.

<sup>3</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 65. It is perhaps interesting to note that there is serious scholarly discussion about whether either Hess or Stirner should be counted among the Young Hegelians at all – much more so than other

Marx's fate in the years from 1840 to 1845 was not decided by an ideal debate between characters called Hegel, Feuerbach, Stirner, Hess, etc. Nor was it decided by the same Hegel, Feuerbach, Stirner and Hess as they appeared in Marx's own works at the time (...) It was decided by *concrete* ideological characters on whom the ideological context imposed *determinate features* which do not necessarily coincide with their literal historical identities (e.g. Hegel), which are much more extensive than the explicit representation Marx gave them of in these same writings, quoting, invoking and criticizing them (e.g. Feuerbach).<sup>4</sup>

However, this should not be taken to mean that Marx does not engage in a direct relation to these thinkers. Althusser is only claiming that what created this ideological field was neither those thinkers as they were perceived by Marx, nor as they perceived themselves or even how they acted historically. It was not them as individuals, but them as components of precisely this ideological field, which is something else and more than the sum of its parts. *It is their indirect effect as ideology.*

In the text "On the Materialist Dialectic",<sup>5</sup> Althusser describes Marx's theoretical practice in transforming Hegel's philosophy into his own, thus transforming ideology into science, in conceptual terms. The practice consists in taking a pre-existing universality, which Althusser calls 'Generality I', and transforming it 'into that other "concrete" generality', which Althusser then calls 'Generality III'.<sup>6</sup> In between is, obviously, 'Generality II': 'constituted by the corpus of concepts whose more or less contradictory unity constitutes the "theory" of the science at the (historical) moment under consideration'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we have, schematically, that Generality I = ideology (philosophy), Generality II

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relevant Young Hegelians whom Althusser could have mentioned. It should also arouse our suspicion that Althusser does not include Marx's close friend, thesis supervisor, and the *de facto* leader of the Berlin Young Hegelians, Bruno Bauer. It is my feeling that Bauer was simply not very well known to Althusser if at all – he is mentioned not once in all of *For Marx*, and the only thing on Bauer in Althusser's personal library is a general introduction to the Hegelian left (Enrico Rambaldi's *Le Origini della sinistra hegeliana : H. Heine, D.F. Strauss, L. Feuerbach, B. Bauer*, 1966), cf. L'Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), "Catalogue de la bibliothèque personnelle de Louis Althusser", 437.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 161-218.

<sup>6</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 184.

= theory, and Generality III = science. Theoretical practice is the transformation of ideology into science. The ideology that constitutes the 'Generality I' of Marx's theoretical practice is Young Hegelianism:

For Marx, this world was the world of the German ideology of the 1830s and 1840s, dominated by the problems of German idealism, and by what has been given the abstract name of the 'decomposition of Hegel' [i.e. Young Hegelianism] (...) *The contingency of Marx's beginnings was this enormous layer of ideology beneath which he was born, this crushing layer which he succeeded in breaking through.*<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the 'Generality I' of Marx, Hegel and his philosophy, is also identical to what we have above described above as his 'ideological field', viz. Young Hegelianism. Althusser explicates this when he emphasises how 'the Hegel who was the opponent of the Young Marx', the Hegel of this ideological field, was not the 'real' Hegel who 'we can meditate on in the solitude of 1960', but rather

it was *the Hegel of the neo-Hegelian movement*, a Hegel already summoned to provide German intellectuals of the 1840s with the means to think their own history and their own hopes; a Hegel already made to contradict himself, in despite of himself.<sup>9</sup>

In the ideological field of Marx's youth, the Young Hegelians constructed a Hegel that answered to their own needs, both in terms of delivering answers and as someone with whom to fight.

It is this construction of a specifically Young Hegelian version of Hegel in the ideological field of the 1830s and 1840s that Althusser then equates with 'the Feuerbachian problematic'. According to Althusser, Feuerbach is the key to understanding Young Hegelianism, and the Young Hegelians could only act theoretically through Feuerbach:

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<sup>8</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 74. Emphases in original. It is perhaps interesting to note that Marx himself called Young Hegelianism the 'decomposition of Hegel' (in *The German Ideology*), though he was not alone in applying the expression.

<sup>9</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 65.

Feuerbach's humanism made it possible to think just this contradiction [between the state's essence as reason and its appearance as unreason] by showing in unreason the alienation of reason, and in this alienation the history of man, that is, his realization.<sup>10</sup>

Hegel had declared history to be reasonable, but in the wake of Friedrich Wilhelm IV's ascension to the throne, the Prussian state had showed itself to be unreasonable; this could not be thought by the (Young) Hegelians alone, *only through Feuerbach* and his *Essence of Christianity* (1841) did they receive the theoretical vocabulary to solve this 'dead end'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, one has to 'read Feuerbach to understand the writings of the Young Hegelians between 1840 and 1845'.<sup>12</sup> It was Feuerbach who created the concepts and categories that made it possible to think. In other words, he created the *problematic*<sup>13</sup> that characterised the Young Hegelians.<sup>14</sup> What are these concepts and categories? Althusser provides us with a list of examples:

'philosophy's world-to-be', 'the inversion of subject and predicate', 'for man the root is man himself', 'the political State is the species-life of man', the 'suppression and realization of philosophy', 'philosophy is the head of human emancipation and the proletariat is its heart', etc., etc., are expressions *directly* borrowed from Feuerbach, or directly inspired by him.<sup>15</sup>

We must now understand that the ideological field in which Marx moves is, on the whole, identical to what Althusser in several places refers to as 'the Feuerbachian problematic',<sup>16</sup> since the thinkers that this

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<sup>10</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> 'Problematic' (*problématique*) is, of course, a central theoretical term for Althusser, which he adopted from Jacques Martin (Althusser, *For Marx*, 32). In the terminological appendix found at the end of the English edition of *For Marx*, a problematic is defined as the ideological or theoretical framework of a text, while it is noted that this is 'centred on the absence of problems and concepts within the problematic as much as their presence' (Althusser, *For Marx*, 253-254).

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 66-70.

<sup>15</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 45. That it can be decidedly proven that most of these concepts or themes were *not* invented by Feuerbach, or at least *not only*, and that some of them are even foreign to Feuerbach (to my knowledge he never spoke of the proletariat, for example, and was indeed theoretically hostile to such a concept), is important but not relevant here. I will, however, return to it below (see section IV).

<sup>16</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 66-70 especially.

ideological field consists of (Stirner, Hess, etc.) are Young Hegelians and the Young Hegelians could only think 'though' Feuerbach. This is no less expressed in the fact that Marx (before he gets to work on the theoretical practice of transforming his Generality I) is himself completely enveloped in the philosophy or ideology which he will later transform, not as a Hegelian, because the Hegel of his ideological field is only ever a constructed Hegel, but as a *Feuerbachian*: 'the Young Marx *was never strictly speaking a Hegelian* (...) rather, he was first a Kantian-Fichteian, then a Feuerbachian'.<sup>17</sup> This is put in no uncertain terms by Althusser, and the examples of how Althusser considers Marx to be a Feuerbachian in the period 1842-1845 are *legio*. We will therefore limit ourselves to a few more examples that are typical of this claim. First, Althusser writes explicitly in his introduction that, 'Those [texts] of the second moment (...) rests on Feuerbach's anthropological problematic'.<sup>18</sup> Second, in the first text of the book, Althusser writes that,

I believe that a comparison of the Manifestoes [Feuerbach's] and of Marx's early works shows quite clearly that for two or three years Marx literally *espoused* Feuerbach's problematic, that he profoundly *identified himself* with it, and that to understand the meaning of most of his statements during this period, even where these bear on the material of later studies (for example, politics, social life, the proletariat, revolution, etc.) and might therefore seem fully Marxist, it is essential *to situate oneself at the very heart of this identification*, and to explore all its theoretical consequences and inferences.<sup>19</sup>

Third, and finally:

For many passages directly and indirectly reproduce or paraphrase Feuerbachian arguments without his name ever being mentioned (...) Why should Marx have referred to Feuerbach when everyone knew his work, and above all, when *he had appreciated Feuerbach's thought* and was thinking in his thoughts as if they were his own?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 65-66.

Here, we really have the total identification of the young Marx and Feuerbach. It should not be necessary to demonstrate further that to Althusser we have in the young Marx a total identification of the Young Hegelian *ideological field* with the Feuerbachian *problematic*, and that (the young) Marx is a wholesale *Feuerbachian*.

### III.

Above, we gave a quote containing Althusser's list of examples of the concepts that constitute the Feuerbachian problematic central to the Young Hegelian ideological field. Of these concepts, the most important for this problematic, as it appears in *For Marx* and other texts by Althusser, is without a doubt the idea of an 'inversion', both of the subject-predicate relationship and of Hegel's philosophy in general. In a footnote to a paragraph in *For Marx* containing a critique of this idea of an 'inversion' of Hegel, or of 'putting Hegel on his feet', Althusser for example writes that, "As for the famous 'inversion' of Hegel, it is a perfect expression for Feuerbach's project. It was Feuerbach who introduced it and sanctioned it for Hegel's posterity."<sup>21</sup> And elsewhere, Althusser describes how Feuerbach's method of inversion was what,

put the world which philosophy had made to walk on its head back on to its feet again, that denounced every alienation and every illusion but also gave reasons for them, and made the unreason of history thinkable and criticizable in the name of reason itself, that at last reconciled idea and fact, and made the necessity of a world's contradiction and the necessity of its liberation comprehensible.<sup>22</sup>

When Althusser says that we must understand that Young Hegelianism is equal to Feuerbach because it was only with Feuerbach that the Young Hegelians were able to think themselves out of their theoretical crisis, he is thus primarily thinking of the method of inversion.

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<sup>21</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 72 n.

<sup>22</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 44.

‘Inversion’ has two senses in *For Marx*, as the book’s index reveals: a specific, theoretical move (the inversion of the subject-predicate relationship) and a general theoretical motif (the inversion of Hegel). By far, the second of these constitutes the lion’s share of the book’s discussions of an ‘inversion’, and we will therefore focus on that. The concept of an inversion of Hegel, of course, does not in the first instance come into Marxist theory from Feuerbach (or even Althusser), but from Marx himself in the famous afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* volume one:

The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. *It must be inverted*, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.<sup>23</sup>

This is recognised by Althusser himself, who, in the opening of “Contradiction and Overdetermination”,<sup>24</sup> gives the quote and goes on to say that, “this ‘turning right side up again’ is merely gestural, even metaphorical, and it raises as many questions as it answers.”<sup>25</sup> (That this is the case is the shtick of Althusser’s whole argument in the text). One of the questions that it raises for Althusser is the question of its origin, and this, of course, is traced by him to precisely Feuerbach. But his criticism on the too common reliance on this metaphorical expression of Marx’s relation to Hegel also turns on an understanding of the *difference* between Feuerbach’s and Marx’s respective ‘inversions’ of Hegel – and the recognition that Marx’s theoretical move should perhaps not be called an inversion at all.<sup>26</sup> This is the cornerstone of Marx’s break with Feuerbach: Feuerbach’s ‘inversion’ is merely a critique from *within* Hegelian philosophy, whereas the ‘truly Marxist critique’ depends on a ‘change of elements, that is, on the abandonment of the philosophical problematic whose recalcitrant prisoner

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, “Afterword to the Second German Edition”, in *Capital Volume I* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 19. My emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 89-128.

<sup>25</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 89-90.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 91 esp.



Feuerbach remained'.<sup>27</sup> But what, then, are the essentials of the 'inversion of Hegel' argued by Feuerbach (since that is what interests us here in order to characterise the Young Hegelian, i.e. Feuerbachian problematic)? Althusser does not give us much to go in the *For Marx*. While there is much on Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel (or rather, a critique of this notion) and how it constitutes a break with Feuerbach, not much is said on Feuerbach's supposed inversion.

Before we go on a quest for something on the second and dominant meaning of the Feuerbachian 'inversion', a few words on the first meaning as it appears in *For Marx* are also in order, which is mainly to say that it doesn't. By an inversion of the subject-predicate relationship, Althusser is referring to a specific theoretical move in Feuerbach, which he first mentions in the very first text of the book ("Feuerbach's Philosophical Manifestoes") as one of several parenthetical examples of Feuerbachian terminology influencing Marx: "alienation, species being, total being, 'inversion' of subject and predicate, etc."<sup>28</sup> That it appears simply as one of several items in a list is also the case the two other times in *For Marx* that the subject-predicate inversion is mentioned. As such, we do not get much information about what Althusser refers to here either, and we must instead turn to other texts.

For both of these questions, however—the inversion of subject and predicate in particular and the inversion of Hegel in general—we can turn to an unpublished manuscript of Althusser's: "On Feuerbach". Written in two drafts as lecture notes for Althusser's 1967 course on *The German Ideology* (the pretext for which was that the text was part of that year's *agrégation* in philosophy), the text offers a quite detailed and informed analysis of Feuerbach's philosophy. Here, Althusser begins the very text by stating, that the 'inversion' of Hegel is the essential undertaking of Feuerbach's philosophy,

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<sup>27</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 48. Note here, that the core of the *Feuerbachian* problematic ('inversion') becomes the telltale sign that Feuerbach is still thinking from within the *Hegelian problematic*! Do we have a Feuerbachian problematic? A Hegelian problematic? Is the Feuerbachian problematic a sub-set of the Hegelian? Who knows!

<sup>28</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 45.

“proclaimed and carried out”.<sup>29</sup> This inversion, which Feuerbach “indeed” carries out, is a *true* inversion (as opposed, we must suppose, to Marx’s only so-called inversion), since it really is “putting what is on top at the bottom, and vice versa”.<sup>30</sup> This inversion, Althusser continues, is expressed in many ways: “inversion of the relationship between Thought and being, Idea and sensuous nature, Philosophy and non-philosophy”.<sup>31</sup> We should understand the inversion quite literally as a topsy-turvy: If in Hegel’s philosophy thought is primary and being secondary, in Feuerbach’s it will be being that is primary and thought secondary etc. But since Feuerbach remains a “prisoner” of Hegel’s problematic, since he works from inside the Hegelian system and uses its concepts, Feuerbach’s inversion in this way *adds nothing* to Hegel – it is only a restructuring or rearranging of the system. Instead, Feuerbach *deletes something* from Hegel’s system, namely History in the sense of a *Bildung* and a theory or philosophy of history; to the extent that history features in Feuerbach’s system it is history as simply a collection of facts, because the essence of Man in the materialist anthropologism, with which he replaces Hegel’s absolute objective idealism, is given and eternal: the ‘specular’ I-Thou relationship expressed as love. One example will suffice to demonstrate how this works in practice: the problem of self-consciousness.

Because Feuerbach equates what he calls “consciousness in the strict sense” with the essence of the human species (the human species-essence is the ability to take itself, its own species and hence universality, as its object), consciousness, in reality, is *self-consciousness*, or *self-knowledge*.<sup>32</sup> However, due to alienation this self-consciousness is not necessarily conscious per se, in the Cartesian sense of the word: through the alienated religious manifestations in which man knows himself, Man is rendered opaque – it is himself that he knows, but he does not know this (he believes to know God). It is “self-

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<sup>29</sup> Althusser, “On Feuerbach”, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Althusser, “On Feuerbach”, 88.

<sup>31</sup> Althusser, “On Feuerbach”, 88.

<sup>32</sup> For the following account, see Althusser, “On Feuerbach”, 101 ff. Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. Marian Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-2.

consciousness ... without transparency".<sup>33</sup> The daily, alienated (religious) consciousness is thus a based and individual consciousness not in correspondence with its true object (Man), and only through the 'disalienation of man', through disclosure, and through the *inversion* of the alienated sense can consciousness be rendered adequate to self-consciousness. As such, Absolute Knowledge (species consciousness) is always-already present in man, and it is only ever a question of disclosing it through disalienation.<sup>34</sup> Althusser concludes:

But whereas Hegel seeks to reveal the operations of the dialectic that engenders the identity of consciousness and self-consciousness *by setting out from consciousness*, and, in particular, to show that *self-consciousness is produced by the dialectic of the development of consciousness, something that presupposes all of history*, Feuerbach, in contrast, inverts the Hegelian relation between consciousness and self-consciousness, *treating self-consciousness as primordial and reducing the history of alienation to mere modes of consciousness*, that is, man's alienated relation to his generic essence.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, if to Hegel consciousness is primary and self-consciousness secondary, to Feuerbach it will be the reverse. This is the method of inversion in its most basic form: reverse whatever Hegel's position is. However, even if this kind of topsy-turvy style inversion seems basic, Althusser's analysis and critique of Feuerbach in this section (as in general) is well-founded. In many ways, this truly is how Feuerbach works, as for example Van A. Harvey also notes.<sup>36</sup>

This can also be used to tell us something about the specific use of the inversion motif mentioned by Althusser in *For Marx*: the subject-predicate inversion. As mentioned above, Man's self-consciousness is bound up on being conscious of himself *through* being conscious of something else. This is what

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<sup>33</sup> Althusser, "On Feuerbach", 102.

<sup>34</sup> This is also an example of how Feuerbach, according to Althusser, takes history out of Hegel. See e.g. Althusser, "On Feuerbach", 110.

<sup>35</sup> Althusser, "On Feuerbach", 103. Emphases in original.

<sup>36</sup> Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 26.

Althusser calls the 'speculary' relation in Feuerbach's philosophy. This is "the relation of the objectification of essence that binds the subject to its object and the object to its subject", and, Althusser notes, once understood correctly this relation entails that "*one can approach matters from either end, subject or object; the result is the same*".<sup>37</sup> That, however, is for the long term. The immediate consequence of the specular relation is that Man knows himself in objects; through relating to an object, the subject necessarily and essentially relates to its own essence objectified therein. This is the core of the Feuerbachian analysis of God: He is Man's essence objectified and hypostasised in an external Supreme Being, and His essential predicates, therefore, are the essential predicates of Man. In the analysis of religion, the inversion of the subject-predicate relationship thus comes down to the inversion of *to whom* it is that the predicates belongs, i.e. who the true subject is. In a more general sense, however, Feuerbach also criticises Hegel for an inversion of subject and predicate. While it is referred to by Althusser, it is not something that appear to be explicated in any of the three texts under consideration here. Feuerbach himself says it, perhaps most clearly, in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843). We quote at length:

Hegel, therefore, quite rightly transformed the logical-metaphysical determinations from determinations of objects into independent determinations, that is, into self-determinations of the concept; he transformed them from predicates, which they were in the old metaphysics, into subjects, thus giving to metaphysics or logic the meaning of self-sufficient and divine knowledge. But it is a contradiction when these logical-metaphysical shadows are made, in the concrete sciences precisely as in the old metaphysics, into determinations of real objects; this is, of course, only possible when either the logical-metaphysical determinations are at the same time always connected to concrete determinations derived from the object itself and, therefore, applicable to it, or when the object is reduced to completely abstract determinations by which it is no longer recognizable.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Althusser, "On Feuerbach", 96.

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred Vogel (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company), 66 (\$49)

In order not to be this completely abstract and unrecognisable determination, the relationship must be inverted, and the real subject, which has for example the predicate 'thinking', must be Man – rather than Thought being the subject with 'man' only as an accidental predicate: "Only a real being recognizes real objects; only where thought is not the subject of itself but a predicate of a real being is the idea not separated from being."<sup>39</sup> In short, Hegel has hypostasised the predicates of Man ('thinking', 'being', etc.) into necessary independent subjects (Thought, Being, etc.) of which 'man' is himself only an accidental predicate; this relationship must be reversed to achieve true "unity of thought and being."<sup>40</sup> This is what Althusser is referring to in *For Marx*, and also in "The Humanist Controversy", when he briefly mentions Feuerbach's ambition "to invert the attribute into the subject, to invert the Idea into the Sensuous Real, to invert the Abstract into the Concrete, and so forth".<sup>41</sup> (p. 236).

In summary, though Althusser on several occasions mentions the specific move of inverting the subject-predicate relationship in Hegel, he is not so much interested in the specific theoretical move of the subject-predicate inversion as he is in the inversion of Hegel as a general motif. Althusser sees this inversion of Hegel as a 'true' one, i.e. one where the same object is simply turned on its head, unaltered, in the same way that if you turn a glass of water on its head you might see a superficial change (you will have wet feet, for example), but the glass will remain essentially the same.<sup>42</sup> As a result of this 'true' inversion, Feuerbach never leaves Hegelian philosophy, of which he instead remains a prisoner. From the above, it should also be clear the weight that Althusser places on the method of inversion and that he equates this with Feuerbachianism as such. If this is true, then it should follow that, for Althusser, Marx's Feuerbachianism must also in some sense relate to this method of inversion, which indeed it does (much of the texts under consideration here is dedicated to distinguishing the Feuerbachian and

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<sup>39</sup> Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 67 (§51).

<sup>40</sup> Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 67 (§51).

<sup>41</sup> Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy", 237.

<sup>42</sup> The terminology here might be a bit confusing, since the 'true' inversion is for Althusser in fact the worse one compared to Marx's 'false' or 'not proper' inversion.

post-Feuerbachian Marx's relation to the 'inversion').<sup>43</sup> It should also follow, that to the extent that Marx is a Feuerbachian, i.e. subscribes to the Feuerbachian problematic and its central concept of an inversion of Hegel, he is also a Young Hegelian, and that he is a Young Hegelian only insofar as he subscribes to this problematic of the inversion. Therefore, when Althusser—in *For Marx* and elsewhere—argues for Marx's break with the Feuerbachian problematic and its concept of an inversion, he is inadvertently also arguing for Marx's break with Young Hegelianism as such (and I do not think that Althusser would mind this characteristic of his argument or argue against it). Young Hegelianism is Feuerbachianism or the Feuerbachian problematic; the Feuerbachian problematic is identical to the method of inversion; when Marx breaks with the Feuerbachian problematic through his break with the method of inversion (as it exists in Feuerbach), he therefore also breaks with Young Hegelianism.

#### IV.

In this final section, I will lay out some criticisms of Althusser's double move, and I will offer a broad, suggestive conclusion. My main criticisms are the following. Firstly, that Althusser's reduction of Young Hegelianism to the Feuerbachian problematic and further to the method or motif of 'inversion' is scholarly unsound. Second, that even if we were to attempt such a reduction, it would be theoretically unfounded, since the characteristics of Young Hegelianism that Althusser lists as coming from Feuerbach are almost all found in other Young Hegelians as well, including the inversion motif, and this before they become themes in Feuerbach's philosophy. If anything, it is Feuerbach who adopts these themes from other Young Hegelians and not the other way around. Finally, even if we accept a Feuerbachian problematic such as Althusser describes, with whatever consequences follows for Marx's Feuerbachianism and Young Hegelianism, Althusser's description of when, how, and where (in which

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g. Althusser, *For Marx*, 72-73, 107-109, 164-165, 190 ff.; "The Humanist Controversy", 244 ff.

texts) the ensuing ‘break’ with Feuerbach occurs are shifting and inconsistent (as are his descriptions of the Young Hegelian ideological field and Feuerbachian problematic). This could be justified by Althusser’s account of the break in certain places if it were not for the rigidity of the account in others. In the end, Althusser falls flat and it is himself who has tripped him. Finally, I offer the broad conclusion that Althusser’s account of a ‘break’ between Marx and Feuerbach (and therefore Marx and Young Hegelianism) fails from a historical viewpoint, though it might succeed—this is a different question up for debate—from an epistemological one, which I claim is Althusser’s real concern anyway.

First, then, it ought not need saying, but out of historical decency alone, Young Hegelianism cannot be reduced to being identical with Feuerbach. Even with a relatively narrow definition of Young Hegelianism, the group counted more than 25 philosophers, theologians, jurists, poets, historians, journalists, etc. Claiming that the activities of this group through more than 15 years can be summarised in not just one of its members but in one central concept from one of its members is, from a scholarly standpoint, unsound, unfortunate, and unworthy. It is precisely as cheap as claiming that ‘all Ionian natural philosophy can be reduced to Anaximander’, or that ‘all Communist theorising of the 1920’s can be expressed in Lenin’s concept of imperialism’, or that ‘all Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School is represented adequately by Alfred Sohn-Rethel’. Of course, all such claims are absurd. And of course it is the case that the motif of inversion, which is so essential to Althusser, is present in Feuerbach *because it is an essential motif to the Young Hegelians as such* (it can be found, e.g., in D. F. Strauss and Bruno Bauer before it can be found in Feuerbach<sup>44</sup>), and not the other way around. This is the second of the criticisms I want put forward: the specifically ‘Feuerbachian’ characteristics laid out by Althusser are, in reality, general Young Hegelian characteristics.

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<sup>44</sup> For a discussion see Zvi Rosen, *Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx. The Influence of Bruno Bauer on Marx’s Thought* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 202 ff.

As already quoted above (see section II), Althusser, in *For Marx*, provides a list of the general characteristics of Young Hegelianism which he believes to be derived from Feuerbach's philosophy: "philosophy's world-to-be', 'the inversion of subject and predicate', 'for man the root is man himself', 'the political State is the species-life of man', the 'suppression and realization of philosophy', 'philosophy is the head of human emancipation and the proletariat is its heart', etc., etc."<sup>45</sup> I will not get into the business of tracing and explaining each of these problems or motifs, as that is not within the scope of this paper, but I will try to briefly explain what Althusser might be alluding to with each of these themes and explain, how they can also be identified as Young Hegelian independently of Feuerbach.

The 'philosophy's world to be' in all likelihood refers Young Hegelian concept of history as something productive rather than retrospective. Where Hegel understood history as something that could only be grasped philosophically *in retrospect* ("The Owl of Minerva takes flight as dusk' etc., etc.), the Young Hegelians believed that Hegel's philosophy (especially the *Phenomenology*, the *Philosophy of Right*, and the philosophy of history) could be applied practically in order to establish reason in the world proactively. While this is the also clear and manifest position of Feuerbach's 'philosophical manifests', as Althusser calls them, most importantly in the two key texts *Principles for the Philosophy of the Future* (1843) and "Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy" (1842). However, the idea had been introduced as early as 1838 by the Young Hegelian philosopher August von Cieszkowski in his first major work, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* which was immensely influential on the Young Hegelians as a whole. Here, Cieszkowski combined a revision of Hegel's partition of world history<sup>46</sup> and instead argues for history as a philosophical science of the future ('Historiosophy') based in an Aristotelian

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<sup>45</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Taking the *Logic* as a point of departure, Cieszkowski is dissatisfied with the fact that Hegel divides world history in four: Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Germanic. In keeping with his own logic, Cieszkowski argues, Hegel should use a *tripartite* division, since History belongs to the realm of the Spirit (where such divisions are always tripartite) and not nature (which moves through fourfold divisions). For a general account, see Lawrence S. Stepelevich, "Making Hegel into a Better Hegelian: August von Cieszkowski", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (1987), 263-277.



conception of *praxis* (a concept introduced into the German theoretical vocabulary by Cieszkowski). When this was happening, Feuerbach was writing a monograph on the philosophy of Pierre Bayle.

The inversion of subject and predicate has already been discussed. What we did not discuss then, is that this theme can also be found in decidedly Young Hegelian philosophers before Feuerbach's supposed influence, notably in D. F. Strauss. That Strauss was a Left Hegelian cannot be discussed: he invented the term.<sup>47</sup> He initiated the Hegelian biblical criticism that Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christentum* is a product of. The leading Young Hegelian journal, *Hallische Jahrbücher*, was founded in defence of Strauss. If Strauss was not a Young Hegelian, no one is, and certainly not Feuerbach.

'Man is the root of man himself'. This, in actual fact, seems to refer to a specifically Feuerbachian concept, however not one which was in any way universally recognised within Young Hegelian circles. Feuerbachians such as Marx, Engels, Moses Hess, and Karl Grün<sup>48</sup> will certainly have recognised it, but Young Hegelians like Max Stirner and Bruno Bauer—with their concepts of the One (*der Einzige*) and self-consciousness—certainly would not. In fact, Stirner's whole criticism of Feuerbach et al. in *The Ego and Its Own* (1845) is based in what he perceives to be the hypostatisation of the category of Man. The same goes for the idea that 'the political State is the species-life of man' – while this is decidedly Feuerbachian, it is not generally Young Hegelian and would only have been accepted among a narrow clique of specifically Feuerbachian Young Hegelians (again: Moses Hess, Karl Grün, Engels, Marx).

'The suppression and realisation of philosophy', again, is one of the most general Young Hegelian motifs and exists explicitly and decidedly independently of Feuerbach in virtually all Young Hegelians from August von Cieszkowski in 1838 to Mikhail Bakunin in 1843 or Max Stirner in 1845. In Hegel, of

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<sup>47</sup> David F. Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Vertheidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie. Drittes Heft* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1837), xy

<sup>48</sup> Karl Grün remained a Feuerbachian for most of his life. The relationship of Marx as well as Engels and Hess is up for discussion, of course, but everybody should be able to agree that at least for a while in 1844 the three of them formed a Feuerbachian communist group or 'party' (sometimes referred to as 'philosophical Communism', especially by Hess and Engels) within the wider Young Hegelian stream.

course, we have the question of the “*Verwirklichung des allgemeinen Geistes*”,<sup>49</sup> coming at the end of *Philosophy of Right* (I say ‘of course’, but Althusser seems to be forgetting or ignoring it!). World history is constituted by (and identical to) the progress of reason’s realisation; as Hegel writes, world history is the medium through which Spirit (*Geist*) understands itself, or rather, ‘once again comes to understand what it means to understand’. It is the natural principle of the Germanic realm to reconcile and resolve all opposition, which happens in the first instance in the internal life (Protestantism and philosophy), but which must be carried over into the state through a world-historic moment – as such, philosophy is ‘realised’ in the rational (Germanic) state. This is also the sense in which the Young Hegelians speak of ‘realisation’ of philosophy; they too trace this realisation in history. The great divider (as perceived by the Young Hegelians themselves, as well as their contemporaries) was that Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* was interpreted to claim that this realisation *had already taken place* with the Prussian state, while the Young Hegelians only believed it to *have the potential to take place* within the Prussian state. This is what Althusser fundamentally misunderstands about the reaction of the Young Hegelians to Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s 1840 ascension to the throne: It was not that, “In principle, history should be reason and liberty; in fact, it was merely unreason and slavery”,<sup>50</sup> it was that the specific Germanic state that was—according to Hegel himself—supposed to have been the vehicle of freedom apparently rejected this world-historic mission. The Young Hegelians became disillusioned with even *the potentiality* of freedom in Prussia. Althusser senses this when he writes that, “In 1840, the Young Hegelians, who believed there was a goal to history... looked to the heir to the throne for the realization of their hopes... in short, the installation of a regime of political, intellectual and religious liberty”.<sup>51</sup> However, he betrays this insight when he wrongly concludes that it was Feuerbach who then ‘saved’ the Young Hegelians by

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<sup>49</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Werke* vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 504 (§342)

<sup>50</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 44.

<sup>51</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 44.

“making a *tabula rasa* of Hegel”.<sup>52</sup> Though, even if this was true and Feuerbach indeed was the saviour of the Young Hegelians *it would still not be Feuerbach who injected neither the ambition of realising philosophy nor the breakdown in this theory by 1840 into Young Hegelianism*. The former came from Hegel, the latter from the violent interjection of *Realpolitik* into the world of philosophy.

Finally, that ‘philosophy is the head of human emancipation and the proletariat is its heart’ – this is dubious, even as an expression of Feuerbach’s own philosophy. While he certainly speaks of the heart in his philosophy (as Althusser himself notes, the three essential characteristics of Man to Feuerbach are the will, the heart, and reason<sup>53</sup>), Feuerbach does not to my knowledge ever speak of the proletariat, and he was sceptical of any sense of the ‘masses’.

In his accounts of *when* and *how* the break between Marx and Feuerbach—or rather, Marx’s break with the Feuerbachian problematic—actually takes place, Althusser is sometimes quite inconsistent, especially so with regard to whether it was a process or a sudden rupture. He fairly consistently claims that the break takes place in 1845,<sup>54</sup> though he differs on in which texts and sometimes also gives other dates.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes, the break is processual and happens both in the notebooks, in the “Theses on Feuerbach”, and in the *German Ideology* manuscripts and even extends far beyond 1845; sometimes, it is a sudden rupture: *The German Ideology* constitutes the break in and of itself – *nichts weiter*. This is mostly the case in *For Marx*. In “The Humanist Controversy”, Althusser most consistently argues for the break as a process. Here he writes, on the one hand, that, “The conception of the ‘break’ as a process is not a backhanded way of abandoning the concept of the break ... [the break] can be *dated* with precision. In Marx’s case, the date is 1845 (the ‘Theses’, *The German Ideology*).”<sup>56</sup> But on the other hand,

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<sup>52</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> Althusser, xyz.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Althusser, *For Marx*, 28, 32-37, 45, 65, 227.

<sup>55</sup> ddd

<sup>56</sup> Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy”, 269.

Althusser stresses precisely the processual nature of an epistemological break: it is “a process of very long duration” with many (dialectical) moments and many smaller breaks and realisations.<sup>57</sup> In the end, Althusser argues, “*No science is ever anything more than a continuing Break*”.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, though the break has a beginning (it can be ‘dated with precision’) it has no discernible end.

Althusser is also inconsistent in his descriptions of the ideological field of Young Hegelianism and the problematic of Feuerbach itself; what I have presented above is a kind of ‘ideal average’, to borrow a term from Marx, of Althusser’s account, but nowhere does he himself present it so consistently. Sometimes, both Hegel, Kant and Fichte are part of the ideological field that Marx wrestles with;<sup>59</sup> sometimes it is only Hegel and the Young Hegelians;<sup>60</sup> sometimes it is only the Young Hegelians (non-defined).<sup>61</sup> Sometimes, Feuerbach provides the theoretical key to solve the Young Hegelian riddle,<sup>62</sup> sometimes he himself is under its spell.<sup>63</sup>

Characteristics are general Young Hegelian characteristics

Althusser is inconsistent

Conclusion: Break is historically dubious

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<sup>57</sup> Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy”, 269.

<sup>58</sup> Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy”, 270. Emphasis in original. Over these two pages, Althusser speaks of a break, a ‘break’, and a Break but with no discernible difference.

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