Feuerbach consequently does not see that the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual that he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular social form. (Marx 1845)

Once the Prussian government placed the Rheinische Zeitung under especially severe censorship in 1843 and radical journalism became impossible, the young Marx took the opportunity to improve his education, and after marrying his childhood sweetheart moved to Paris: “the old university of philosophy and the new capital of the new world!” he wrote to Ruge (Marx 1975a). Here he could take up the study of French socialism under the direction of the League of the Just, secret societies of French workers, the mystical Christian socialist Pierre Leroux, utopian communists like Victor Considérant and Étienne Cabet, the poets Lamartine, Heine and Herwegh, the anarchists Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, as well as other German refugees like Karl Grün and Arnold Ruge (Wheen 1999).

In August 1843, he met up with Engels, and after a trip to London to study political economy, returned to Paris, but unable to restrain his lèse majesté, Marx soon found himself exiled again, and with family and friends took up residence in Belgium. Here they published the bitterly polemical “Holy Family” (Marx 1975f) attacking the Young Hegelians, and moving on to Feuerbach, Marx put down on a scrap of paper what became known as “Theses on Feuerbach” (Marx 1975g). Engels described this document as “the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook” (Engels 1990a), but he wrote this only when publishing it for the first time, 5 years after Marx’s death. In “The German Ideology” Marx used a critique of Feuerbach to further elaborate these ideas, and then continued with gusto the polemic against the Young Hegelians, but as Marx later remarked: “We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose—self-clarification” (Marx 1987).
Marx wrote very little on philosophy, and published even less. He worked long and hard in thinking through the philosophical foundations of his practice, but anyone interested in recovering that initial philosophical work has to dig for it. What philosophy he wrote tended to be critique; even his political writings are either commentary on events or polemical works actually part of a political struggle. Rarely does Marx generalize and rarely does he make predictions—though there are rather charming predictions here and there which betray a revolutionary optimism of most irrepressible stamp. In the main, Marx allowed events themselves and the voices of the various actors to do his thinking, but in the odd page of manuscript or marginal note, he allowed us a glimpse of his inner thinking process.

Activity

“Theses on Feuerbach” (Marx 1975g) is surely the founding document of Activity Theory, even though it remained unknown until after the author’s death. A few words are necessary to place it in the context of Hegel critique in Germany at the time it as written.

Hegel had become more conservative since he left behind the materialistic enquiry of his youth, and although still subject to censorship and still critical of the regime, he had actively dissuaded his pupils from involvement in agitation. After his death, Hegelianism was taken directly into political application criticizing existing institutions. But the Young Hegelians were still very idealistic in philosophical terms, as reflected in the phrase of Engels quoted above about “the power of the mind over the world.”

Feuerbach, himself a Young Hegelian, had broken with this kind of idealism, and made real, physiological, anthropological human beings the foundation of his philosophy; ideas reflected a social and material reality, not the other way around. He illustrated this in “The Essence of Christianity” by demonstrating that a range of Christian ideas—eternal life, the Holy Trinity, the Personal God, etc., etc.—had their origin in earthly relations: the holy family was only a reflection of the real, earthly family, projected on to the heavens in order to give it supernatural justification. But as Marx saw it:

§4…He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off