

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TIME IN MARXISM: KARL MARX'S BREAK WITH THE YOUNG HEGELIANS

Yingyao Jiang, MA, PhD student

Renmin University of China, China

Mengyuan Luo, MA, PhD student, corresponding author

South China Normal University, China

Abstract

The concept of “time” constituted an internal and inescapable dimension of the Young Hegelians’ debates over the conception of history. Within the framework of speculative philosophy, the historical conceptions they articulated – and their corresponding understandings of time – largely inherited Hegel’s de-temporalizing tendency, in which time was subordinated to the movement of substance or of self-consciousness. More concretely, Max Stirner projected individual time onto the framework of human history, interpreting history as the unfolding of the “self”; Ludwig Feuerbach sought to restore time through his philosophy of species; Bruno Bauer, grounded in the philosophy of self-consciousness, treated “critique” as the very measure of time. Despite their internal polemics, all three failed to emancipate time from the internal structure of speculative philosophy. Confronting this impasse, Karl Marx broke decisively with the German idealist paradigm by advancing the understanding of the real human being beyond abstract anthropology and concretizing it as the subject of material production – an active being situated within determinate historical conditions and social relations. He further formulated the historical materialism, within which historical development is grounded in concrete social practice and time is redefined as a historically determinate process rather than the self-deduction of pure thought.

Keywords: *Young Hegelians, Karl Marx, time, philosophical revolution, historical materialism.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 34, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol34.736>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Yingyao Jiang; Mengyuan Luo

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN 2500-9974



Introduction

The Young Hegelians (*Junghegelianer*) constituted an important branch that emerged from the disintegration of Hegel's philosophical system. In their struggles against Christian theology, orthodox pietism, and feudal reactionary forces, they demonstrated a remarkable capacity for intellectual transformation [see Li Y. 1995: 361]. Under the impetus of religious criticism, they developed speculative philosophies of history grounded in various forms of "spiritual entities" [see Shu 2021, Preface: 1–2]. Yet their internal positions were marked by profound tensions, which rendered the Young Hegelians less a unified school than a loose and heterogeneous constellation of thinkers [Shu 2021: 8].

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholarly interest in the Young Hegelians has steadily expanded, particularly regarding their religious, political, and philosophical critiques. Among these research trajectories, the diverse conceptions of history that gradually emerged within the movement have become a sustained focus of debate. Based on the collation of existing primary sources and examinations of the history of philosophy, a broad scholarly consensus has taken shape: Bruno Bauer locates the origin of historical events in individual activity and self-consciousness [see Rosen 1977: 105–106, 108; Li Y. 1995: 27; Moggach 2003: 47–48]; Ludwig Feuerbach conceives history as a "process of the humanization of humanity", that is, as the genesis of *species-essence* (*Gattungswesen*) [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 596–597; Shu 2021: 164]; and Max Stirner interprets human history as the history of my "self-discovery", portraying the dialectic of individual growth as a tripartite historical structure [see Leopold 2023; Nie 2008].

History itself occupies a central position within Hegel's philosophical system [Levine 2016: 151]. Yet insofar as history and dialectics are ultimately subsumed under Absolute Spirit, this conception of history assumes a fundamentally non-temporal (de-temporalized) character [see Löwith 2006: 165; Pan 2023]. This raises a critical question: do the Young Hegelians follow this theoretical "inertia", similarly culminating history in a spiritual realm in which time is effectively expelled? The question is worth careful consideration. More broadly, the intricate relationship between history and time has long been a significant theme in intellectual history. From a historiographical perspective, history may be understood as the science of "human beings in time", with time serving as the generative medium of historical phenomena and the field within which they become intelligible [Bloch 2011: 47–48]. For German philosophers living between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the philosophy of history thus increasingly came to signify the unfolding of rational human activity in time [see Henrich 2013: 74; Xia 2025]. In this respect, the debates over historical conceptions that followed the decline of religious criticism among the Young Hegelians could no longer avoid engaging with the question of time – even

though such discussions often appear scattered across their works and are frequently articulated only in implicit form.

It is precisely within this problem-field that Karl Marx's philosophical revolution assumes decisive significance. Deeply involved in the intellectual disputes of the Young Hegelians in his early years, Marx gradually distanced himself from this milieu through systematic critiques of Bauer, Feuerbach, and Stirner. His philosophical "farewell" to German ideology did not merely consist in a revised understanding of "consciousness" or "essence", but rather in a fundamental reconstruction of the way history unfolds and of its underlying temporal structure. To date, scholarship on "time" within the Marxist tradition has largely concentrated on issues such as historical time, temporality in capitalist society – including capitalism and time, sociotemporal regimes, acceleration, and free time – as well as general principles of the philosophy of time [see Pan 2024: 7–15]. Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to the earliest genesis of Marx's conception of time. As Löwith has noted, Marx was a key figure in advancing the "temporalization of history" that began in the late eighteenth century [see Löwith 2006: 135]. Koselleck further emphasizes that Marx was among the first thinkers to recognize that historical explanation must proceed according to temporal criteria [Koselleck 1985: 256]. From this perspective, the internal debates among the Young Hegelians concerning history not only constituted an important background to Marx's intellectual transformation, but also formed an indispensable theoretical prehistory for understanding how Marx defined time within historical materialism.

On this basis, the present article seeks to restore "time" to a central position within the philosophy of history by examining how debates over history among the Young Hegelians implicitly contained divergent conceptions of temporality, and by identifying the specific theoretical site at which Marx's philosophical revolution occurred.¹ By retracing Marx's path of rupture from the intellectual horizon of the Young Hegelians, this study aims to outline a major revolutionary trajectory within the 19th-century European philosophy – one that differs from the existential path inaugurated by Kierkegaard and instead points toward a reconstruction of time grounded in real historical processes. At the same time, the article endeavours to provide a materialist intellectual-historical foundation for interpreting Marx's analyses of social time and free time in *Das Kapital* and its manuscripts. As an initial exploration, it seeks to open further avenues of discussion, including the normative dimensions of time, issues of temporal justice, and the divergences between Hegelian and Marxian dialectics.

¹ Contemporary time studies can broadly be divided into two parts: "explorations of the nature of time" and "research on various historical conceptions of time" [Wu 2006: 207]. The work undertaken in this article primarily falls within the latter category, focusing mainly on the conceptions of time held by the Young Hegelians and Marx.

1. The debate on the philosophy of history within German idealism and its implied structure of time

Within the Young Hegelian movement, sustained internal differentiation emerged around the questions of “how history unfolds” and “how the subject realizes itself in time”. Stirner, Feuerbach, and Bauer – three of its key representatives – articulated distinct yet mutually responsive conceptions of history from the respective standpoints of the *unique one*, *species*, and *self-consciousness* and *critique*. It is precisely within these differing philosophies of history that time is understood and measured in divergent ways, thereby revealing specific theoretical tensions and limitations in each position. A reconstruction of their concrete polemical engagements shows that disagreements over time within the Young Hegelians were not accidental, but rooted in fundamentally different philosophical determinations of subjectivity, historical dynamics, and reality.

1.1. Max Stirner's structure of time grounded in the unique one

Between 1843 and 1844, Max Stirner composed *The Ego and Its Own* (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*), a work grounded in extreme idealism and solipsism. The book is divided into two parts, “Man” and “I”, directly mirroring the structure of “God” and “Man” in Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Objectively speaking, although Stirner was deeply influenced by Feuerbach – especially by his critique of religion – he nevertheless took Feuerbach as a primary target of criticism. In Stirner's view, while Feuerbach emphasized sensuousness, he still treated Reason, Will, and Affection as the fundamental determinations of human nature [see Feuerbach 1989: 3; Stirner 2009, Translator's Preface: 5]. Consequently, Feuerbach's conception of the *species-essence* remained an abstract totality, and his critique of religion amounted merely to a formal transformation “within unreal abstraction,” failing to make philosophy “truly return to the foundations of reality” [Shu 2021: 171].

To abolish completely the speculative residues in Feuerbach's philosophy, Stirner proposed replacing the species grounded in the whole with the “self” grounded in individuality [see Stirner 1995: 162–163]. His aim was to return to the concrete person and the real world, thereby realizing the genuine reality of man. He declared that the Ego and its Own sought to create a form of egoism reflecting my own realization – an egoism consistent with itself. From this philosophical standpoint, Stirner summarized two great causes to which humanity had historically devoted itself: the cause of God and the cause of Man. Still, he argued, both causes neglected the individuality of the person and therefore failed to allow the “I” to truly return to “itself” [Stirner 1995: 5–6]. On this basis, the “I” must carry egoism through to the end, placing my cause above all else, caring only for myself, and finding

satisfaction in myself alone – in short, “Who am my all, Who am the only one [*der Einzige*]” [Stirner 1995: 7]. In doing so, Stirner elevated the “I” to the highest position, positing that everything external is “my own”, and regarding the freedom of the “I” as the supreme goal of egoism.

Through the process by which the individual “self” liberates itself from the oppression of the created world, Stirner articulated his understanding of time. He used the developmental stages of the individual to analogize the evolution of human history, transplanting the rhythm of individual temporality into the grammar of historical time. According to Stirner, human history is the process of the individual “self” realizing itself, corresponding to three stages of individual development: the child’s realism, the youth’s idealism, and the man’s egoism [Stirner 1995: 17–18].

In childhood, the person faces a strange and alien world with curiosity, taking the objects and world external to the “self” as unquestionably real [see Stirner 1995: 15]. As one matures into youth, one gradually overcomes the “world of things”, becomes rich in ideals and spiritual aspirations, and comes to regard the spiritual as the truly real, while the non-spiritual is relegated to the realm of “external things”. The pursuit of pure thought and its revelation becomes one’s passion, and faith is placed in the realization of spirit within reality [see Stirner 1995: 16]. Upon entering adulthood, one gains an increasingly lucid understanding of the reality in which one lives and overcomes the “spiritual world”. The individual returns the reality once attributed to spirit back to oneself, recognizing oneself as *embodied spirit* and believing that the *corporeal self* is the unique and supreme existence. Letting everything depend upon and find satisfaction in the “self”, one thus becomes an egoist and attains the “world as *mine*” [see Stirner 1995: 17].

Within this framework, Stirner correspondingly proposed a tripartite division of human history that mirrors these life stages of individual. The first stage is that of *the ancients*, characterized by realism dependent on things, which he described as possessing an innate “Negroidity” [Stirner 1995: 62]. The second is *the moderns* (*Die Neuen*), characterized by idealism dependent on thought, bearing a “Mongoloidity (Chineseness)” [ibid.]. The third stage is *the free*, which represents the negative unity of realism and idealism, marked by “Caucasian” qualities; at this point, historical development culminates in the age of union among true egoists [see Stirner 1995: 89].

1.2. Feuerbach’s philosophy of “species” as a response to Stirner’s challenges

As one of the earliest thinkers to recognize that Hegel ultimately brings time to an end within the spiritual realm, Feuerbach, working within his critique of speculative philosophy, already discerned that Hegel – and speculative philosophy as a whole – effectively expels time from its philosophical framework [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 109–110]. In Feuerbach’s view, this illusory old philosophy and its

conception of time deprive the subject of immediate, intuitive experience, thereby stripping existence of its meaning [see *ibid.*: 110]. In fact, time is the essential form and condition of life itself, for it is intrinsically bound up with development, movement, and change; only within the successive sequence of time can life and nature come into being and persist [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 557]. Precisely because time constitutes the essential form and condition of life, Feuerbach calls for the “restoration of the honour of time” as a means of truly recovering this-worldliness and, with it, genuine human emancipation [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 558].

It is precisely since this attempt to re-endow time with a vital, life-theoretical significance that Feuerbach comes to understand the alienation and return of the *species-essence* as a historical process unfolding in time, and accordingly divides human history into distinct stages. The first stage is characterized by the domination of religion over the human’s *species-essence*, resulting in a condition of alienation in which human beings are estranged from themselves; in this sense, “the history of Christianity is the history of the Passion of Humanity” [Feuerbach 1989: 61]. The second stage marks the overcoming of this religious alienation, in which human beings recover and appropriate their *species-essence*, such that “human beings are able consciously to make their own human essence into the moral and political norm, foundation, purpose, and standard” [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 524].

Earlier, Stirner’s critique had challenged the philosophical foundation of Feuerbach’s conception of history – namely, *species-essence*. In response, Feuerbach reaffirmed his theory of “man’s self-alienation”. Stirner had argued that Feuerbach’s humanism caused a split within the “I”, dividing it into essential and non-essential parts. To counter this, Feuerbach continued to uphold the modern philosophical task of “the realisation and humanisation of God” [Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 122]. He reiterated the central thesis of *The Essence of Christianity*: God exists only within man; therefore, the origin of man must be sought in God or religion, and on that basis, the transcendence of God or religion must be eliminated. Religion, according to Feuerbach, abstracts the inherent substance of man into a transcendent entity external to him, thus creating a rupture between man and God. This division, therefore, must be traced back to the difference between man’s “self” and his substance. The so-called divine nature of man is nothing but the illusion revealed by religion; to eliminate the division between the essential and non-essential “I”, one must completely divinize and affirm “the whole man” [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 423–424].

Besides, to refute Stirner’s notion that the *unique one* disregards the sensuous world, Feuerbach once again clarified the central place of sensuousness in his philosophy. He maintained that individuality can only be truly grasped through sensuousness. He emphasized that *The Essence of Christianity* was the first work to investigate the truth of sensuous things and distilled this into three key points. First,

“absolute being” should be equated with “sensuous being”, that is, absolute being is identical with man’s concrete needs and nature rather than with abstract divinity [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 424]. Second, genuine cognition is rooted in sensory experience, and within the sensuous world, the abstract speculation of religion and philosophy loses its validity [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 426–427]. Third, he underscored that individual self-affirmation depends upon relations between persons, from which the existence of the “species” arises [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 427–428].

On this basis, Feuerbach emphasized that *species* is not an abstract concept, but a real, relational entity grounded in human interconnection [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 427–428]. While he granted a limited acknowledgment to the *unique one*’s emphasis on the individual’s sense of uniqueness and completeness, he argued that because man is a reflective being, he inevitably becomes aware of his own limitations in time and space. Without recourse to the concept of *species*, the emptiness resulting from this awareness tends to be filled by the idea of God. Hence, the function of the “species” is to overcome this limitation and to counter the sense of emptiness that arises from the consciousness of finitude.²

There is no denying that Feuerbach’s critique of the “de-temporalization” of Hegelian speculative philosophy, as well as his emphasis on *species-essence*, carries considerable significance. Most notably, his project seeks to draw philosophy down from its theological and abstract heights to the “low ground of existence without God” [Löwith 2019: 247], thereby reorienting philosophical reflection toward real human beings and their living activity. Nevertheless, this attempt does not fully escape the residues of metaphysics. Feuerbach remains unable to respond adequately to the various challenges posed by Stirner, including the latter’s charge that Feuerbach continues to define real individuals through metaphysical concepts, thereby transforming the finite temporality of the “I” into something infinite and de-temporalized [see Pan 2024: 66]. In this sense, despite Feuerbach’s emphatic call to “restore the honour of time”, his theory ultimately fails to genuinely restore time from speculative philosophy, which reflecting the internal limits of his thought become apparent in the face of Stirner’s challenge.

² In Feuerbach’s view, the “species” symbolizes the interdependence among human beings – a relation that can even replace religion as a more fundamental ontological foundation. By enumerating various forms of human dependence, Feuerbach demonstrated that at critical moments the merging of self and others affects human existence itself; hence, “man is the God of man” [Feuerbach 1989: 83]. Moreover, Feuerbach employed the metaphor of the caterpillar transforming into a moth to illustrate that the “realization of the species” is a process by which the individual actualizes the latent potential of the species through growth at different stages of life. Only when the individual completes this realization of the species can he experience himself as having attained a new and more integrated state [see Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 2: 430].

1.3. Bruno Bauer's philosophy of self-consciousness measured time through "critique"

In *Charakteristik Ludwig Feuerbach*, Bruno Bauer positioned himself as a critic grounded in the philosophy of self-consciousness, seeking to transcend both Stirner and Feuerbach by undermining them through the radical force of "critique". In Bauer's view, the debate between Stirner and Feuerbach was nothing more than an entanglement between two dogmatists³ – both of whom, in essence, represented variants of religious logic, but neither achieved a genuine transcendence of the old philosophy. Bauer's critique unfolded in three aspects.

First, according to Bauer, whether in the philosophy of *species* or in the doctrine of the *unique one*, both reconstructed religious structures upon abstract entities and thus failed to break free from theological thinking. Bauer accused Feuerbach of replacing the divinity of God with the sacredness of *species-essence*, thereby perpetuating the alienating logic of theology. Bauer argued that by elevating the species to the level of a universal substance and demanding that individuals adhere to it through sensuous dependence, Feuerbach, subjected individuality to the same kind of normativity and constraint previously exercised by religion. In this sense, the species was structurally homologous to the Christian God, both being manifestations of illusion for the sake of God [see Bauer 1845]. Conversely, although Stirner claimed that the *unique one* would abolish all universality, Bauer contended that this notion merely secularized Christian individualism. The *unique one*, as "the most abstract of abstract entities", exists neither in the physical nor in the psychological world; it cannot be spoken, named, or grasped. Such an indeterminate abstraction is essentially identical to the transcendent and ineffable God beyond time and space. Hence, the figure of the *unique one* is spectral – an undigested theological remnant whose function, like that of theology itself, is to provide a refuge for the old order [see Bauer 1845].

Second, Bauer argued that the opposition between Feuerbach and Stirner regarding the "species" and the "individual" was a false dichotomy, for neither could properly discern the dialectical unity of individuality and species. He criticized Feuerbach for neglecting individuality and difference, asserting that Feuerbach's conception of "beauty" within the philosophical framework of species was akin to Plato's theory of Forms – an abstract, perfect, and eternal "beauty" that, in fact, was lifeless and devoid of content [see Bauer 1845]. Conversely, Stirner's effort to dissolve species also betrayed a latent dependence upon it. In fact, the recognition of individuality presupposes mediation by species. As Stirner demands that others acknowledge "my woman", such recognition necessarily relies upon a shared

³ Inheriting the German idealist tradition, especially that of Hegel, they diverged into two main orientations: one centered on "substance" and the other on "self-consciousness". In Bauer's view, both of Stirner and Feuerbach represented "substance" orientation [see Bauer 1845].

understanding of the universal attribute “woman”. Without this universal reference, “my woman” would amount to “a meaningless declaration”, unrecognizable by others. Consequently, the *unique one* cannot escape the referential frame of species [see Bauer 1845]. Moreover, the uniqueness of the *unique one* is itself a concretization of the universal; by emphasizing the independence of the *unique one*, Stirner inadvertently reproduces the universal determinations of the species, thereby exposing the internal contradiction of his own theory.

Third, both Feuerbach and Stirner, according to Bauer, failed to liberate their interpretations of “love” from the shadow of religion. Like Stirner, Bauer identified Feuerbach’s religion of love as a new form of religion. For Feuerbach, love served as the practical bridge between the divine and the human realms; meanwhile, in doing so, it perpetuated the Christian tradition of self-sacrifice and self-denial. The human being thus became the slave of love, and love itself exercised a despotism devoid of will [see Bauer 1845]. As for Stirner, although he did not explicitly elevate “love” to a principle, his conception of the *unique one* fell into a similar logic of self-deification. Since Stirner refused to replace divinity with the concept of the species, Bauer argued, a vacant position was inevitably left for the individual within his framework. If divinity was not supplanted by the species, that emptiness would inevitably be filled by “God” or by the “personalized essence of species”. The issue, however, is that by attempting to negate all universality and assert an absolute self, Stirner’s theory both retains this vacant space and renders it impossible to fill. The *unique one* is caught in a dilemma: if it does not resort to religion, it must deify itself – which amounts to a mutation of religion; nonetheless, if it does resort to religion, it must rely on the recognition of the Other to fill its emptiness – which again reproduces the structure of religion [see Bauer 1845].

On the basis of these three layers of critique, Bauer concluded that neither Feuerbach nor Stirner had truly broken with the old philosophy. Unlike them, Bauer regarded “critique” itself as a task of pride – a creative and liberating force that constitutes “the self-education of self-consciousness itself” [see Bauer 1845]. Correspondingly, the critic, as the agent of critique, becomes the personalized manifestation of self-consciousness creating history. In this respect, Bauer’s philosophy of self-consciousness offers an alternative structure of time: critique is not merely an explicit feature of this philosophy but also a measure of time itself – through which self-consciousness generates history by means of continuous negation.⁴

⁴ In Bauer’s conception of time, *critique* carries a fundamentally negative meaning, which renders it structurally closer to Hegel’s understanding of temporality; even so, it remains equally de-temporalized. Within Hegel’s philosophical system, time is conceived as natural time governed by Spirit [Pan 2024: 25], while Spirit itself constitutes a form of “history eternally oriented toward the future”, insofar as it exists as a “negative absolute principle” [see Hyppolite 2024: 19; Hegel 1962, Vol. 1: 135–136].

2. From the battlefield of the Young Hegelians to the dawn of historical materialism

Bauer classified the polemics among the Young Hegelians as an internal strife within the philosophy of substance [see Bauer 1845]. Yet his own challenge, launched from the standpoint of the philosophy of self-consciousness, remained a speculative attempt to resolve the contradictions internal to speculative philosophy itself – thereby never breaking free from its self-enclosed speculative loop. Marx perceptively exposed this false revolution, one that was merely “opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases” [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 30], and instead undertook a concrete and practical critique of Feuerbach’s sensuous contemplation and Stirner’s extreme individualism. With this philosophical revolution, Marx redefined the domain of “time”: no longer a self-deduction of idea, but the concrete unfolding of real individuals in the process of material production.

2.1. The false revolution of “opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases” and the failure to grasp “time”

While Bauer, the self-styled critic, indulged in castigating both Stirner and Feuerbach as dogmatists, Marx unmasked all his manoeuvres. Following *The Holy Family*, Marx once again dissected Bauer’s so-called “critique” with meticulous precision.

First of all, Marx exposed Bauer’s opportunistic method and the superficial nature of his critique. When faced with the confrontation between Stirner and Feuerbach, Bauer employed a strategy of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer), effortlessly fabricating a scene in which the two theoretical opponents seemed to “annihilate” each other, leaving behind the two tails of the philosophy of substance [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106]. Once these “tails” were exposed, Bauer could triumphantly denounce substance philosophy as a whole. Yet this method of *divide et impera* fell far short of genuine critical engagement; it merely substituted tactical manipulation for substantial critique.

In fact, Bauer’s *divide et impera* approach amounted to little more than a pedantic repetition of Hegelian formulas and an opportunistic attitude toward the critique of egoism. As Marx mentioned, Hegel had already regarded the *ego* as one of the most solid aspects of *substance*, situating both within a single philosophical system. Bauer simply adopted this schema, identifying Feuerbach’s *species-essence* with Spinoza’s *substance* and Stirner’s *unique one* with Fichte’s *ego*, thereby subsuming both under the same speculative category and condemning them together. Meanwhile, such a manoeuvre – attempting to resolve speculative contradictions by speculative means – inevitably confined him within the same speculative game. Ironically, Bauer,

who had scorned egoism, ended up appropriating Stirner's extreme egoism and transforming it into what Marx mockingly called Bruno Bauer's egoism [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106] – a telling sign of the speculative opportunism inherent in his philosophy of self-consciousness.

This hasty and pedantic form of critique could yield only vacuous conclusions. As Marx observed, the more decisively Bauer denounced the *unique one* as “substance”, the more clearly he revealed that his critique never left the speculative kingdom. Furthermore, Bauer's indiscriminate labelling of both Stirner and Feuerbach as dogmatists merely disguised his own intellectual poverty under moral judgment. His crude method of dichotomizing their confrontation as “he is the good one, the other the evil one” or “he is God, the other is man” [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 106–107] only exposed his inability to grasp the real stakes of their debate.

So far, Bauer's critical stratagems and their substantive implications are laid bare by Marx. Although Bauer reformulates the dialectical movement of the “negation of the negation” as a movement of “critique”, this so-called critique remains, in essence, de-temporalized. It is incapable of articulating the genuine movement of history; instead, it still imprisons time within a self-referential and circular speculative structure. In addition to Bauer, the disputes involving Feuerbach and Stirner likewise amount to a critique of mere phrases [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 31; Pan 2024: 115]. Confined to the internal debates of the realm of pure thought and never engaging with material reality, such controversies exemplify the fundamental predicament of the Young Hegelians: their persistent expulsion of time through speculation. It was precisely this failure that compelled Marx to undertake a decisive reckoning with speculative philosophy.

2.2. Breaking free from the struggles within the realm of pure thought

Like Bauer, Marx reflected on the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach. However, unlike Bauer, Marx gradually moved beyond the internal struggles of speculative philosophy and turned toward real individuals and the real world [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 31], thereby laying the philosophical foundation for reconstructing a new, scientific structure of time. Within the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach – one can discern both Feuerbach's incomplete reduction of the “real world” and Stirner's equally incomplete reduction of the “real individual”. Marx's effort to render their doctrines concrete, practical, and historical constituted a crucial step in transforming the philosophy of history from speculative idealism to historical materialism.

Feuerbach's concept of *species-essence* dissolved the mysticism of the religious world by transferring the foundation of existence from the transcendent realm of heaven to the accessible realm of human life – thus forming the theoretical

“groundwork” of his philosophical anthropology. This reconstruction of a new foundation effectively criticized the abstract and impersonal character of speculative philosophy. Meanwhile, it also revealed the incompleteness of Feuerbach’s reduction to some extent: the this-worldly realm he restored was not yet the world in which human beings actually live their real lives, but only a world of intuition and contemplation. Consequently, Feuerbach sought human emancipation through a utopian religion of love.

However, his analysis of religious alienation remained confined to the sphere of consciousness, and his critique of human alienation stopped at the level of ideas. As Marx observed, “Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity” [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 6]. Furthermore, Marx concretized Feuerbach’s broadly defined this-worldly realm – recovered from the beyond-worldly realm – into the sphere of material production. Within this material sphere, he examined the alienation inherent in private property and capitalist relations of production, along with pathways for overcoming them.

From the standpoint of their polemic, Stirner’s *unique one* represented the antithesis to Feuerbach’s *species* [Jiang and Xu 2021: 217]. Stirner shifted the perspective from universal commonality to concrete individuality, regarding the *unique one* as the creator of all things. Ideological systems and collective identities – emanating from the state, morality, or religion – constrain individual freedom. Therefore, the individual must act solely according to his own will, transcending all external authorities to affirm his pure subjectivity. In Stirner’s view, this pure subjectivity serves as the foundation of existence: through self-possession and self-use, the individual achieves freedom, even if his mode of existence remains isolated, abstract, or nihilistic.

Still, Marx, considered Stirner’s doctrine of extreme individualism to be devoid of any practical or historical validity. By dissolving “human emancipation” into the “emancipation of the individual”, Stirner confined individuality to the realm of pure thought, detaching it entirely from reality and history [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 27, 99, 242]. Consequently, Stirner also struggled to engage with the history of real life, resorting instead to a sharp severance of the relationship between the individual and society. Marx, by contrast, situated the individual within the totality of productive forces and relations of production, arguing that “real individuals” (*die wirklichen Individuen*) are both shaped by and capable of transforming their material circumstances. In this way, Marx’s notion of the real individual severed all dependency on illusion and ideology, moving from the solitary and unbound abstraction of the ego toward some concrete, historically conditioned form of existence.

Through his reappraisal of the Stirner–Feuerbach controversy, Marx accomplished a genuine breakthrough from the confines of German idealism. He attained a firm grasp of both the real individual and the real world, taking them as the premise and point of departure for history itself – as well as the true key to understanding the structure of time. At this moment, the full dawn of historical materialism began to emerge.

3. Marx's philosophical revolution endows “time” with reality and revolutionary

Grasping time through real individuals and their activity was the key to Marx's genuine transcendence of previous speculative philosophical paradigms and his restoration of temporality. Thus, Marx's reinterpretation of “time” had already created a certain intellectual “chasm” separating him from the earlier Young Hegelians. The “time” restored within the horizon of historical materialism possesses reality, while its inherent revolutionary potential is fully tapped. This significantly expands the future dimension that “time” points toward within the historical materialism.

3.1. Conceptualizing time on the basis of real individuals and their activity

As discussed above, both Feuerbach and Stirner touched – albeit from different perspectives – on the notion of the real human being to some extent [see Stirner 1845: 182; Stirner 2009: 43; Feuerbach 1984, Vol. 1: 105&119]. Eventually, Marx advanced this discussion further by introducing the concept of the real individuals and their activities. This formulation not only corrected the limitations of both Feuerbach and Stirner, but also signified that time must henceforth be understood within the concrete historical process of material production and social relations carried out by real individuals.

The real individual is an active being engaged in material production, and therefore acting within definite, material limits, premises, and conditions not of his own choosing [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 34–36]. Unlike the abstract empiricists who compile dead facts, or the idealists who reduce history to an imagined activity of imagined subjects [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 37] – constructing in boundless speculation their own “prehistoric histories” – Marx insists that genuine history originates from the activity of real individuals, who alone endow history with concrete and substantive content. The activity of these real individuals is itself real and productive; and the process of human production encompasses five primordial historical relations.

The first is the production of material life itself. “The first premise of all human existence, and therefore of all history,” is that men must be able to live in order to be able to “make history” [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 41]. Hence, the first historical

act is the production of the means necessary to satisfy basic needs – food, drink, clothing, shelter, and the material conditions of life.

The second is the production of new needs and of the means to satisfy them. Once primary needs have been fulfilled, new needs emerge under the stimulus of the first need itself, of the activity that satisfied it, and of the tools created for its satisfaction [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 42]. In meeting these new needs, humanity enters the process of reproduction.

The third is reproduction of population, which is intrinsic to the historical process and constitutes its third relation. Humanity, constantly reproducing its own life, simultaneously engenders new life [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43]. In the earliest stage, biological reproduction gives rise to the family, which functions as both the most primitive and the sole social relation. The family, by sustaining the interaction between individuals, becomes the basic unit of social structure.

The fourth is the production of social relations. Whether the production of one's own life (through labour) or that of others (through production of fresh life), the production of life immediately appears as a twofold relation – both natural and social. It is, in essence, a form of the co-operation of several individuals. The mode of this co-operation activity, the productive forces, is embodied in a definite mode of production or industrial stage. Consequently, the history of human beings is profoundly linked to the history of industry and exchange. The material connections that individuals form in the process of production are as old as humanity itself, and, as these connections continually evolve, they reveal the historicity of the material relations that bind them [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43].

The fifth is the production of consciousness. "After having considered four moments, four aspects of primary historical relations, do we find that man also possesses consciousness" [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 43]. Yet this consciousness, Marx notes, is itself conditioned by man's "corporeal organization". Consciousness has a dual character. On the one hand, it is determined: consciousness, language, and the realm of the spirit are from the outset social products, arising as mediations from the need for human intercourse [see Marx and Engels 1975, V: 44]. Unlike the self-caused consciousness of German Idealism, consciousness in Marx's view derives its content from and evolves with the changing forms and content of human intercourse – that is, with the transformation of social relations of production. On the other hand, consciousness is also active. This becomes evident with the separation of mental and material labour, whereby consciousness acquires the capacity for independent imagination. It can now not only reflect reality but also "emancipate itself from the world and proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc." [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 45]. This active quality of consciousness endows it with the ability to transcend immediate material conditions, to reflect

upon, and even to critique, social relations and historical processes. Nevertheless, this activity of consciousness remains conditioned by the level of productive forces and relations of production; its autonomy cannot be understood apart from the concrete stage of historical development.

As can be seen from the above, Marx identifies “real individuals” as active beings situated within concrete historical conditions, who make their own history through material production and social intercourse. Real individuals and their activity manifest historically in five fundamental dimensions: material production, the expansion of needs, the reproduction of population, the mode of production and social relations, and the production of consciousness. These dimensions constitute the concrete forms of human sensuous activity. Through such sensuous activity, human beings appear as historical and temporal beings, while time itself is transformed into a form of “humanized and socialized time” [Liu 2022]. In this way, time acquires a historical content determined by real production and social relations, embodying both the generative force of objective historical conditions and human agency. It is precisely in this sense that Marx overcomes the de-temporalizing impasse of speculative philosophy.

3.2. The immanent reality and revolutionary character of time in the horizon of historical materialism

Marx probes more deeply into the existential conditions of real individuals and the course of their historical development, thereby redefining the fundamental domain of social existence. Within this horizon, time touches upon the nature of human activity genuinely and runs through the three basic forms of social being. These forms encompass:

Material production, which constitutes the real existence of human beings and serves as the foundation for social development and historical evolution. As material beings, humans must engage in productive activity to satisfy basic needs and secure the necessary conditions of life – food, clothing, shelter, and other material means. Material production is also the fundamental and determining factor of social transformation. Each historical stage is grounded in a specific mode of production, and changes in that mode directly propel shifts in social structures and institutions. Thus, “the material production of life itself” is not only the real premise of human history, but also the starting point for “comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production” [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 53].

Social relations constitute the relational existence of human beings. Individuals never exist in isolation but affirm themselves through interaction with others. Social relations are generated and continually reorganized in the process of production; they

include family relations, class relations, and state relations. As the mode of production evolves, the content and structure of these relations also change, thereby setting into motion the dynamics of social history.

Mental consciousness, which constitutes the self-aware existence of human beings. It enables individuals to reflect upon themselves, understand the world, and anticipate the future. Yet its development remains conditioned by material production and social relations. From the perspective of a generational history of consciousness – religion, philosophy, morality – do not arise out of thin air, nor do they represent “holy ideas” standing above society. Rather, they are the ideological reflections of the economic relations of civil society. To understand the various theoretical products and forms of consciousness, one must trace their historical roots and analyse how they change with transformations of civil society. Likewise, the transformation of ideas must “be effected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical deductions” [Marx and Engels 1975, V: 56].

Within the interplay of these three forms of social existence, human sensuous activity unfolds and “takes on different temporal forms under different social formations” [Liu 2022]. Under capitalist production, temporal forms can be divided into labour time, non-labour time, socially necessary labour time, surplus labour time, employed time, and leisure time [ibid.]. In this context, time becomes the concrete expression of labour power (a kind of commodity), and acquires the invisible quality of an asset. Correspondingly, “relative value, measured by labour time” indicates the extent to which workers experience modern forms of enslavement [see Marx and Engels, VI: 125]. The temporal forms individuals occupy thus reflect their social position and class affiliation. Through this analysis, Marx reveals a distinctive historical structure of capitalist society – one in which human sensuous activity, lifetime, and labour processes are tightly bound to the logic of capital accumulation. However, Marx’s critique of time does not stop there. Its deeper theoretical thrust lies in liberating human time, freeing individuals from alienated rhythms of life and production. Discussions on this topic remain as relevant today as ever in the age of flourishing digital capitalism.

From the standpoint of historical materialism, time ceases to be an “ideal” or purely conceptual category; it is endowed with concrete historical content and thereby carries possibilities oriented toward the future and social transformation. This realistic and revolutionary understanding of time fundamentally differs from the moralistic imagination and utopian narratives of traditional philosophy concerning communism. Overall, the historical materialism Marx constructed – surpassing the Young Hegelians – provides both the concrete and revolutionary coordinates for his later critique of time, grounding history not in abstract speculation but in the real, social processes of production.

Conclusion

Hegel introduced the concept of temporality into the domain of theoretical spirit [see Levine 2016: 152]. Although the major figures of the Young Hegelians did not all follow Hegel's philosophy step by step, the conceptions of history they articulated within the framework of speculative philosophy – and their corresponding understandings of time – largely inherited Hegel's de-temporalizing tendency. Time was thus subordinated to the movement of ideal entities or of self-consciousness itself. Even where certain Young Hegelians attempted to foreground the negativity and developmental character of time, the temporal dimension was never genuinely emancipated from the internal structure of speculative philosophy.

Marx's ability to move beyond the struggles internal to the "realm of pure thought" and to overcome the de-temporalizing tendency of German Idealism was not determined merely by his adoption of a more radical position along the extended line of Young Hegelians' religious criticism. Rather, it rested decisively on the materialist transformation he effected in the conception of history itself. Although debates over historical conceptions within the Young Hegelians often took the form of intense intellectual confrontation, they remained confined to revolutions of phrases and concepts, incapable of reaching the real foundations of history – let alone grasping the essential determinations of time. Unlike Bauer, who became entangled in the false revolution of "opposing phrases with phrases", Marx, within the intellectual context shaped by the controversy between Stirner and Feuerbach, further advanced the understanding of the *real human being*. He no longer confined this notion to an abstract anthropological level, but instead concretized it as the subject of material production – an active being situated within determinate historical conditions and social relations.

In this way, the fundamental divergence between Marx and the Young Hegelians no longer appears merely as a contrast between historical interpretations grounded on the side of "substance" or that of "self-consciousness". Rather, it crystallizes around the question of whether time is acknowledged as possessing a historical content determined by real production and social relations. Correspondingly, Marx fundamentally transformed the philosophical foundations for understanding time through his philosophical revolution by identifying five primordial historical relations and basic forms of social being. Within the horizon of historical materialism, time is embedded in the real, generative processes of material production and social relations. It is precisely in this sense that time simultaneously manifests both the constraining force of objective historical conditions and the agency inherent in human practical activity, thus becoming a key dimension for understanding historical movement, social transformation, and even future possibilities.

In this respect, time functions as a prism through which Marx's philosophical revolution is refracted, clearly illuminating his reckoning with – and departure from – the speculative philosophy of the Young Hegelians. Situating time at the point of theoretical break between Marx and the Young Hegelians not only deepens our understanding of Marx's early philosophical revolution, but also provides an intellectual foundation for critiquing temporal issues within the context of digital capitalism – such as the acceleration of social time, the flexibilization of labour time, and the colonization of life time [see Dai and Liu, 2025]. In a word, time in Marx's thought is not a concept that has been “completed”, but an open problem – one that persistently points toward real critique and future emancipation.

Sources

- Bauer, B. (1845). Charakteristik Ludwig Feuerbach. *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*, No. 3, pp. 86–146.
- Bloch, M. (2011). *The Historian's Craft*. H. Yanhong (trans.). Beijing: Renmin University of China Press.
- Dai, X. & Liu, F. (2025). A Political Economy Critique of Temporal Domination in the Context of Digital Capitalism. *Marxism & Reality*, No. 4, pp. 139–145.
- Feuerbach, L. (1984). *The Collected Philosophical Works of Feuerbach. Vol. 1*. R. Zhenhua et al. (trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Feuerbach, L. (1984). *The Collected Philosophical Works of Feuerbach. Vol. 2*. R. Zhenhua et al. (trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Feuerbach, L. (1989). *The Essence of Christianity*. G. Eliot (trans.). New York: Prometheus Books.
- Hegel, G. (1962). *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Vol. 1*. H. Lin (trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Henrich, D. (2013). *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*. X. Le (trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Hyppolite, J. (2024). *Studies on Marx and Hegel*. C. Qi (trans.). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.
- Jiang, H. & Xu, N. (2021). *On Marx's Critique of Stirner's Historical Concept of Humanity*. Beijing: Guangming Daily Publishing House.
- Koselleck, R. (1985). *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. K. Tribe (trans.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Leopold, D. (2023). *Max Stirner (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. Available: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/max-stirner/> (viewed 16.12.2025).

- Levine, N. (2016). *Marx's Discourse with Hegel*. Y. Zhou et al. (trans.). Beijing: Renmin University of China Press.
- Li, Y. (1995). *Man: The Sun of Religion – A Study on Feuerbach's Philosophy of Religion*. Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Liu, L.-d. (2022). Marx's Criticism of Time and Time-Justice Theory: On Foreign Marxist Space Criticism of Time-Space Dialectics. *Journal of Social Science of Harbin Normal University*, No. 5, pp. 1–8.
- Löwith, K. (2006). *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*. Q. Li (trans.). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Löwith, K. (2019). *Hegel und die Aufhebung der Philosophie – Max Weber*. X. Liu (trans.). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1975). *Marx-Engels Collected Works. Vol. 5*. C. Dutt (trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1976). *Marx-Engels Collected Works. Vol. 6*. J. Cohen et al. (trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Moggach, D. (2003). *The Philosophy and Politics of Bruno Bauer*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nie, J.-f. (2008). Grasping the Life Style: Shidina and Marx – Interpretation of an Excerpt from *St. Max*, a Chapter in *German Ideology*. *Teaching and Research*, No. 2, pp. 16–23.
- Pan, Y. (2023). The Concept of Time in the Perspective of Young Marx: On the Formation of Marx's Historical Materialism. *Theory Monthly*, No. 1, pp. 34–42.
- Pan, Y. (2024). *On the Question of Time in Marx's Philosophy*. PhD dissertation, Fudan University, Shanghai, China, 09.05.2024.
- Rosen, Z. (1977). *Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx: The Influence of Bruno Bauer on Marx's Thought*. Netherlands: International Institute of Social History Amsterdam.
- Shu, G. (2021). *The Evolution from the Young Hegelians to the Marxist Concept of History*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Stirner, M. (1845). Reensenten Stimers. *Wigands Vierteljahrsschrift*, No. 3, pp. 147–194.
- Stirner, M. (1995). *The Ego and Its Own*. D. Leopold (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stirner, M. (2009). *The Ego and Its Own*. H. Jin (trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Wu, G. (2006). *Ideas of Time*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Xia, Y. (2025). Philosophical Eras and Philosophy of the Era: How Is It Possible to Be the Philosophy of Changing the World. *Jilin University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, No. 2, pp. 45–60.