

The Head of State as Representative of Mankind in Ludwig Feuerbach's Political Conception

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In the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 – 1872) religion occupies a central place, for it is on the religious plane, and by means of the genetic-critical method, that Feuerbach realizes the anthropological reduction of God, while postulating praxis by situating the community spatiotemporally, thus giving rise to the constitution of the state. The aim of this article is to highlight the problem that arises with the figure of the head of state in the *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* (1842), by postulating a type of individuality that represents all men and that operates, in turn, as a replacement for God. To think of it in these terms would make praxis and thus politics impossible. It is proposed, then, to think of the figure of the representative of mankind (*Deputierte des Menschheit*), which appears in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), as a mediator of intersubjectivity in the exercise of praxis and as representative of the genus in the political community.

Keywords: political community – praxis – state – generic individual – God

Introduction

The anthropological reduction carried out in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) brings to light a mechanism for negating praxis: God, the immediate unity of individual and genus (Feuerbach 1989, 153), annuls the space-time limits that make political action possible. Through God, the individual is linked to others within the community (Feuerbach 2012, 57, 162): the genus exists, is realized, in the multiplicity of individuals. But God, made flesh in Christ, reigns as

absolute before the religious individual.¹ The community of believers, therefore, represents a pre-political organization, under these assumptions, by negating praxis, since its kingdom is not of this earth. The question lies in realizing the political community from a practical exercise of sensibility, the only way of conceiving praxis, which overcomes the link between individual-God, which nullifies the possibility of encounter and thus of community. The approach of *The Essence of Christianity* is inadequate, for here Feuerbach does not think in terms of praxis;² when he studies the difference between paganism and Christianity, his analysis focuses on the relation between the individual and the genus, in the former, and God, in the latter, since its object is to reveal, behind God, man. God is nothing more than the personification of the human race, which is constituted as such in the totality of individuals, in “in all men taken together” (Feuerbach 1989, 152).³ Now, this scattered multitude does not make up the community in itself, but rather only through the bond between each individual (Feuerbach 1989, 152). And this becomes possible in a certain type of organization: the political community, the state.

I. The Head of State

How is the state, a community located in nature, constituted? Consider the following passage from the *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy*:

Man is the fundamental being of the state. The state is the realized, developed, and explicit totality of the human being. In the state, the essential qualities or activities of man are realized in particular estates (*Ständen*), but in the person of the head of state they are again resolved into an identity (Feuerbach 2012, 172).

It would be, then, a type of political configuration that bases its identity on the person of the head of state. This would guarantee the non-atomization of the

¹ Stirner’s objection is well known: wouldn’t man, under these assumptions, function as an absolute? For this discussion, see Stirner (2011, 35ff.); and Feuerbach’s reply, in Ludwig Feuerbach (1976).

² Marilyn Chapin Massey suggests that the censorship influenced both the style and the substance of the first edition of the *Essence of Christianity*. Cf. Chapin Massey (1985, 173 – 175). See also Harvey (1995, 28); Gooch (2011, 257 – 280).

³ “...in its existence (of the species), in so far as it has its complete existence only in all men taken together” (Feuerbach 1989, 152). And, later: “Doubtless the essence of man is *one*, but this essence is infinite; its real existence is therefore an infinite, reciprocally compensating variety, which reveals the riches of this essence. Unity in essence is multiplicity in existence.” (Feuerbach 1989, 152) (Author’s emphasis).

particular estates: the head of state is an individual, but one that represents the totality. The first question that comes our way is the following: are not his attributes perhaps those of God? The first answer could be this: God is an *immediate* unit, but the head of state links, mediates between, the individuals in the particular estates. Here, politics, is mediation. Nothing is immediate, because – it is important to clarify – it is a type of articulation that, being mediated, would leave no impression on the feelings.⁴ However, can we make this assumption? In other words: would not the head of state be the incarnation of God in the political community? If multiplicity resolves itself into the identity of the head of state, and if humanity is only protected, as far as its unity is concerned, in such a representation, the only difference between the head of state and God lies in the possibility of mediation, of being mediated. This difference is not minor: ultimately, what distinguishes the head of state from God resides in the very thing that differentiates religion from politics.⁵ God is understood as the immediate unity of individual and genus; that these already diverse elements come together in an individual entity of an absolute nature would have an impact on the spirit, unlike humanity, since the latter is not identified with an individual, according to the Feuerbachian approach. If the head of state did not incarnate God, we would not have to focus on the type of subjectivity that he embodies, but on the predicates. No matter how individual the head of state is, his attributes are not. Otherwise, he would not represent the political community in his person. Let's look at the following Feuerbachian approach:

What the subject is lies only in the predicate; the predicate is the *truth* of the subject – the subject only the personified, existing predicate, the predicate conceived as existing....The reality of the predicate is the sole guarantee of existence" (Feuerbach 1989, 19). (Author's emphasis.)

And, later:

⁴ "Because of this immediate unity of the species with individuality, this concentration of all that is universal and real in one personal being, God is a deeply moving object, enrapturing to the imagination; whereas, the idea of humanity has little power over the feelings, because humanity is only an abstraction; and the reality which presents itself to us in distinction from this abstraction is the multitude of separate, limited individuals. In God, on the contrary, feeling has immediate satisfaction, because here all is embraced in one, i.e., because here the species has an immediate existence – is an individuality" (Feuerbach 1989, 153).

⁵ Cf. Dacuy (2021, 215ff.).

Hence, he alone is the true atheist to whom the predicates of the Divine Being—for example, love, wisdom, justice—are nothing; not he to whom merely the subject of these predicates is nothing. And in no wise is the negation of the subject necessarily also a negation of the predicates considered in themselves. These have an intrinsic, independent reality; they force their recognition upon man by their very nature; they are self-evident truths to him; they prove, they attest themselves. It does not follow that goodness, justice, wisdom, are chimaeras because the existence of God is a chimaera, nor truths because this is a truth. The idea of God is dependent on the idea of justice, of benevolence; a God who is not benevolent, not just, not wise, is no God; but the converse does not hold. The fact is not that a quality is divine because God has it, but that God has it because it is in itself divine: because without its God would be a defective being (Feuerbach 1989, 21).⁶

For the same reason: “It is the function of the head of state to represent all estates without distinction; to him, they are all equally necessary and equally entitled before him. The head of state represents universal man.” (Feuerbach 2012, 172). Nevertheless, if the subject of the divine predicate is the individual who rises to political power and represents the totality of men, the fact that he mediates difference by means of himself and renews the unity within the state is no guarantee that it will not have an impact as immediate unity on the spirit of the citizen. So, that the difference between God and the head of state resides in the mediation between genus as a political community and particular individuals, remains in question. How, then, is this question to be resolved, so that such an impact on the mood of such an individual-genus unity gives rise to religious and political community; that is, makes it possible without annulling it? *Aut, aut*. Let us look at the treatment of the subject in other writings.

⁶ The same idea can be found in Feuerbach’s *Pierre Bayle. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Menschheit* (1838), but with a detail, by the way, which is not minor. While in paganism it is the divine attribute or predicate that is central, in Christianity it is the divine personality (*göttliche Persönlichkeit*). It is not mere personality – since the devil is also a person, as Feuerbach makes clear – but divinity in personality, in a specific type of individuality according to its content, its quality (Cf. Feuerbach 1967, 260ff.). Now then, that individual who represents the political community as such in his person, how can he not be, for that reason, divine? How can he not *ipso facto* constitute himself a divine personality in the eyes of the community?

II. From Political Catholicism to Republicanism

In another work from the same year, namely: "The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy" (*Notwendigkeit einer Veränderung der Philosophie*, 1842), the proposal becomes more complex when it specifies the type of individuality that the state would manage, in the passage from Catholicism to Protestantism and from this to the republic. The changes in the history of humanity are distinguished, in this work, by religious transformations (Feuerbach 2012, 146), since a historical movement has not taken shape completely if it has not penetrated the human heart (Feuerbach 2012, 146). Religion, here, expresses the desires of the heart. This proposal is not new (Feuerbach 1989, 121ff.). What is new is the role it assumes with a view to praxis. Already in the Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* (1843), Feuerbach turns the religious gaze outwards and thus transforms the object of representation into the object of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) (Feuerbach 1989, xxxix). And although he exclaims: "we must once again become if politics is to be our religion" (Feuerbach 2012, 149). In the formulation, namely, that politics becomes religion, the definitive moment is not expressed, but only the need for the heart to take sides in the political transformation, so that the latter is comprehensive. But here the approach pivots, so to speak. The interrelation between religion and politics has at times a unilateral aspect. In "The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy," the text with which we are occupied in this section, religion annuls the state: where religion prevails, there is no political community, precisely because there is God: "man does not stand in need of man...On this account, man is only accidentally related to man" (Feuerbach 2012, 149). So, we return to the state.

However, how does the state arise here from an atheist matrix? According to Feuerbach: "Not the belief in God, but rather the doubt concerning him is the actual cause underlying the foundation of states. From the point of view of the subject, it is the belief in man as the God of man that explains the origin of the state." (Feuerbach 2012, 150). As in the *Provisional Theses*, the state is formed through the union of particular individuals constituting the total man, the "absolute man" (*der absolute Mensch*):

Within the state, the powers of man differentiate and unfold themselves in order, through this differentiation and synthesis, to constitute an infinite being; for the multitude of men and the multitude of forces form one single power. The state comprehends all realities and is man's providence for him. Within the state, one represents the other, one is complementary to the other—what I am not able to do or know, someone else is. I am not alone

and delivered up to the hazards of the power of nature, but I am together with others; I am surrounded by a universal being; I am part of a whole. The true state is the unlimited, infinite, true, perfect, and divine man. It is primarily the state in which man emerges as man; the state in which the man who relates himself to himself is the self-determining, the absolute man (Feuerbach 2012, 150).

Now, let's note that in this approach one element is missing: the head of state. In the *Provisional Theses*, it is in the figure of the head of state that the unity of the state is validated: this individual represents the totality in his person. Now, what is this absence due to? We find the answer in the same work:

Just as the transformation of God into reason did not dissolve but only transubstantiated Him, so in the same way Protestantism transubstantiated the Pope into the king. Now we have to do with the political Popedom; the reasons for the necessity of the king are not different from those for the necessity of the Pope (Feuerbach 2012, 151).

Is the head of state, then, the king? What is the difference between the pope and the king? Up to a point, none: the king and the pope are men "as I" (Feuerbach 2012, 152). The king, however, represents political Catholicism in his person. But:

But the practical instinct of mankind is a political one; that is, it is an instinct for an active participation in the affairs of the state, an instinct demanding the abolition of political hierarchy and the unreason of the people. It is an instinct demanding the negation of political Catholicism. The Age of Reformation destroyed religious Catholicism, but the modern era has put political Catholicism in its place. What the Reformation aimed to achieve in the field of religion, one aims to achieve now in the field of politics (Feuerbach 2012, 151).

The domain of the pope—religious Catholicism—is superseded (*aufgehoben*) by political Catholicism, in the figure of the king. But what is at stake is the process in which the community becomes a republic. It is a question of the passage from the religious community (supported by the figure of the pope and the king) to the political community, specifically the passage to the republic:

The Pope, the head of the Church, is as good a man as I, and the king is as good a man as we all. Therefore, he cannot unrestrictedly do whatever he pleases; he does not stand above the state or above the community. A Protestant is a religious republican. That is why Protestantism naturally

leads to political republicanism once its religious content has disappeared; that is, has been exposed, unveiled (Feuerbach 2012, 152).

This is the last word. Now, then, with what, do we replace the king? With the head of state. But the problem it is that the head of state, as Feuerbach presents him in the *Provisional Theses*, has in his person the divine attributes: he is himself pope and king. In other words: the attributes of the head of state in “The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy” and in the *Provisional Theses* coincide. The question, then, remains open.

III. The Head of State, Representative of Humanity

Let’s look at the following passage:

Doubtless the essence of man is one, but this essence is *infinite*; its real existence is therefore an infinite, reciprocally compensating variety, which reveals the riches of this essence. *Unity* in essence is *multiplicity* in existence. Between me and another human being—and this other is the representative of the species, even though he is only one, for he supplies to me the want of *many* others, has for me a *universal* significance, is the deputy of mankind (*Deputierte des Menschheit*), in whose name he speaks to me, an isolated individual, so that, when united only with one, I have a participated, a human life—between me and another human being there is an essential, qualitative distinction (Feuerbach 1989, 158). (Author’s emphasis.)

We emphasize this construction—the representative of humanity—so as to inquire into the reason for its appearance, since it is introduced uniquely in *The Essence of Christianity*, and in turn, so as to investigate the usefulness of extrapolating this category to the strictly political level, as an articulator of the genus in the multiplicity of existing individuals. The other is the representative of the genus, and to that extent he is the representative of humanity. His representative character is what leads us to understand, according to our hypothesis, that this type of articulation is the appropriate one to take up instead of head of state, since it is not a question “of any other” as he himself replaces many others: “But my fellow-man is to me the representative of the species, the substitute of the rest, nay, his judgment may be of more authority with me than the judgment of the innumerable multitude” (Feuerbach 1989, 158-159). The following could be argued: the extrapolation is not correct, because here Feuerbach is referring to another with whom there is a bond, whom I love and know, who reproaches me for my faults, sees me, etc. (Feuerbach 1989, 158). But if the criterion of truth resides in this coincidence

with the other, and this other represents the genus, who better than the one who represents in his person the total man, the absolute man, that is, the genus? So, we have to return to the qualities of this other who represents the genus and in whom my objectivity lies.

The head of state, as Feuerbach characterizes him in the *Provisional Theses*, is the condition of unity: all diversity is resolved in him, in this total and universal man. He is man and individual; he is the existing genus and, therefore, different from any other. The political function resides here not only in representing each and every one of the citizens (in a representative system), but in representing in himself – making it present at the level of consciousness – the genus according to its political implementation, the exercise of praxis. We have said that praxis implied the contextualized exercise of politics (Feuerbach 2012, 162); but there is another sense, and that is of interpreting the present time of the genus and transforming it into public consciousness: “What is theory? What is praxis? How are they different? The theoretical is that which is found only in my head; the practical, what can be found in many. What unites many heads becomes a mass, spreads and—thus—makes a place for itself in the world” (Feuerbach 1982, 343). What unites many heads, indeed, the only thing that can unite a scattered crowd and form a community, is the genus (Feuerbach 2012, 63ff.; Feuerbach 1989, 158). That is why the figure of the head of state is so important: as a representative of the genus, and as that actor who interprets the generic essence (*Gattungswesen*) in the best possible way in the circumstances, at a given space and time.

This head of state is a man like any other, but *primus inter pares*, and no more than that. In what way is he first? In what sense does he preside? He does so through his way of *representing*, making the genus present in the exercise of praxis, interpreting it; and for this reason, he brings, links, each individual again to the generic being; in turn, he determines the criterion of truth in the exercise of praxis. As representative of humanity, he must put the political articulation into effect in accordance with the genus. Thus, the ideal head, on the basis of these assumptions, is the one who understands in the best possible way, in a given situation, the link between individual and genus, who best interprets the genus and puts it into practice (Feuerbach 1982, 343). Feuerbach tries to deprive the predicates of their sacredness, making them profane (Feuerbach 1976, 82). His “political philosophy of the future” would have its roots in such a development.

IV. The Problem of Unity without Content

In the Feuerbachian approach, it is assumed that, in order to become a head of state, the uniting element must represent in the best possible way the particularity of the citizens in view of universality, and not generality, without more. This last point is the subject of reflection in this section, since universality can become an abstraction, thus blocking the possibility of a true exercise of praxis. The question resides in finding the commonality of particularity; otherwise, it would be an imposture of a mere general interpretation that should be realized in the world, as a peculiar form of idealism. Now, sensibility determines rationality in Feuerbach; therein lies the difference between the first and second editions of *The Essence of Christianity*, made explicit both in the second prologue and in the final considerations. That is, what sense would it make to include sensibility as an organon of reason if, in mentioning the relation between praxis and limit, and this conceived as spatiotemporal coordinates determining the political community, there is no intention of interpreting particularity, the singular, putting a limit on the abstract? However, it is the place of the common. Therein lies the fundamental relevance of politics, as dialectic of *empiria* and reason in the order of the exercise of praxis in a given community, without falling into an abstract unity of individuals linked by a unity without content, abstracted, if the unity is not sustained in a permanent exercise of limiting reason by sensibility. In this sense, the Feuerbachian political community becomes self-limitation of the genus in the person of the head of state.

Reason is theologized when it abandons the terrain of sensibility. The limit, fundamental for praxis, requires sensibility. If we analyze this link between sensibility and politics, the opinion of the second prologue (1843) will not seem strange to us, when the philosopher of Bruckberg claims that the task resides in directing the eyes of religion from the inside and to the outside. This is a marvelous expression for a materialistic reading of politics since the characteristic of religion is to have as its object the essence of man: in the figure of God, in a first consciousness, and in the contemplation of the genus, in an anthropological reduction of theology; religion would turn this human essence outward, it would realize it, but this "outside" is mediated by sensibility. That is: it is not a matter of theologizing the political community, but of realizing the human genus in its web of particularity, in exteriority, which implies mediating the genus with sensibility. Idealism is, plain and simple, religion, the exteriorization of religion mediated by sensibility is politics.

Here lies the keystone of Feuerbachian materialism since politics is, for this author, eminently religious. And religion, on the other hand, humanizes nature through politics. So essential is this link that it resolves the indecision about the foundation in the *Provisional Theses*. There, nature is the foundation of man, but man is also the foundation; it is in him that nature is spiritualized and becomes spirit. In Feuerbach the senses return particularity to the element of unity and make praxis possible. Praxis, so, cannot be realized without sensibility, and the same goes for religion and politics. That is why the central concept of praxis is that of limit, with its spatiotemporal coordinates. The community replaces gender because it remains in the mute interior of man; the political community desacralizes gender, the generic determinations, and thus realizes man in nature.

V. Conclusions

The political problem in Feuerbach lies in the type of articulation between genus and the individual in a given community. It could be said that this question is not exclusive to Feuerbach, but with him it acquires a particular relevance, for several reasons. First, because the genus is not realized unless it is in nature: I suggest that this argument takes shape from 1839 and is given its most developed formulation in the Heidelberg Lectures (1848 – 1849). Stating it in these terms assumes a political exercise that implies contextualizing political action, situating the public exercise of praxis, of the community, in space and time. The relationship between genus and nature presupposes the idea of a political community, at the cost of reducing genus to a mere formulation of consciousness, and determining nature as a merely contemplative, theoretical and aesthetic object. The state, as a political community, is the device, the artifice—taking Hobbes's expression—that makes it possible to mediate individuals generically.

The head of state, as representative of humanity, makes it possible to overcome the absolute figure of the papacy and the king. Being a man like everyone else, the only difference with respect to the rest of the individuals would be his quality of interpreting the genus and articulating the political within the community. A king cannot do it because he absolutizes the individual and is also, according to Feuerbach, a hindrance to political Catholicism.

The passage to republicanism implies demystifying the divine attributes of the head of state, returning to them their profane, common character; but this entails removing from the attributes of the head of state everything that

makes him universal and absolute. For this reason, he constitutes himself as the representative of humanity, as a representative of the genus who fulfills a public and precise function: to make praxis possible. This interpretation makes it possible to continue, at least in part, the development of the idea of political representation in a republican model “The Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy” but also through an idea of the state (*Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy*), in accordance with praxis, as spatial-temporally situated generic interpretation.

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