

## Dialectical Atheism in Karl Marx

### Introduction

Whereas the impossibility of God was intimated by other philosophers, Karl Marx's philosophy requires the complete extermination of God for the progress of man. According to Marx, atheism is the essence or key to man's true freedom and his social flourishing in the form of the Political State. Marx, by asserting a strict materialism and critique of religion he acquired through Feuerbach, seizes upon the deficiencies of Hegelian immanentist idealism that disregard the truth and force of extra-mental reality. This materialism of history, of reality, evolves or progresses by the method of the Hegelian dialectic, wherein man must constantly oppose what is part of him and yet simultaneously contradictory to him<sup>1</sup> in order to, through permanent revolution<sup>2</sup>, become himself. This also explains why atheism is constructive of "true humanity" for Marx and why criticism of religion is the final premise for the emancipation of man. While a god or even the sentiments of "religiosity" exist, Marx maintains there is a gap or hole in the human structure or human life-process. Atheism, for Marx, is a positive, actual addition, or evolutionary adaptation in man that forces him to become for himself the Supreme Being that he is. Marx develops his philosophy out of Hegelian presuppositions, but through Feuerbach he deviates considerably in his treatment of man and religion. Then, as is in keeping with the supersession or genesis of the dialectic's third, resulting term, he gains objective freedom by surpassing all forms of alienation and reaching the State, the whole of freemen. Taking from the Dialectic's self-generating and overcoming within the totality, man is the cause and result of himself in his different quantifiable and empowered forms and he can only supersede the alienation inherent in him through his social, political identity.

### The Life of Karl Marx<sup>3,4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question", The Portable Marx, ed. Eugene Kamenka (Penguin Books: The Viking Portable Library, 1983) 104 "[The State] can only [constitute itself as the real, harmonious species-life of man] by entering into *violent* contradiction with its own conditions of its existence."

<sup>2</sup> Marx, 105.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ed. Eugene Kamenka, "Introduction," The Portable Karl Marx, (Penguin Books: The Viking Portable Library, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Frederick Copleston, "The Transformation of Idealism," A History of Philosophy, Volume: VII Modern Philosophy (Image Books: Double Day, 1965) 305-313.

Karl Marx was born in Trier, Germany in 1818 to Jewish parents, but raised with little religious upbringing. He studied at universities in Bonn and Berlin and changed his focus of studies from law to philosophy because he wanted to bring about real change. In 1841, at the age of 23, he finished his doctoral dissertation on “The Difference Between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature,” which sought to revive the explicit atheism of the atomists and reveal their centrally creative role in the progress of society over the other theistic philosophies.<sup>5</sup> He began writing and editing for a paper in Cologne that drew him into contact with concrete social problems and the need for social activism. After the suppression of the paper Marx traveled to Paris and there met Friedrich Engels and the socialist movement. Once in Paris, he wrote two very significant articles among the body of his works: a criticism of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and the other *On the Jewish Question*, a review of essays on Judaism by a young Hegelian, Bruno Bauer. In 1847 he joined the Communist League and by 1848, with Engels, he published the Manifesto of the Communist Party. The following year, after returning from failed revolutions in Germany and his second expulsion from France, he became a refugee in England until his death in March 1883 at the age of 72. His major works include The German Ideology (published 1932), The Poverty of Philosophy (1847), The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, The Civil War in France, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859), Capital (1867-1894), Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy and Theories of Surplus Value.

### **Reduced to the Cogito, Being Excludes the Notion of God**

The principle of immanentism, that one *is* because one thinks or has self-consciousness, makes man the cause and judge of being and truth, rather than the perceiver of it. This new role given to men in relation to reality imposes a new end for men as well. Cornelio Fabro remarks that beginning “from the constitutive autonomy of the Ego or the immanence of being within consciousness, which is the new concept of freedom ...there is simply no place whatever for God.”<sup>6</sup> If subjective thought is the foundation of reality, then the limits of man’s knowledge are the limits of *being*. The individual’s thought is private power and autonomy for determining what is and what is not. From this enclosed world of the “Ego”, Hegel tries to transcend it through the immaterial Spirit which is pantheistically above and within everything in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Cornelio Fabro, “The Atheism of Dialectical Materialism (Marx),” God in Exile, () 690.

<sup>6</sup> Fabro, 691.

universe. To achieve absolute freedom among the competing freedoms of individual men, Marx uses the unified and civilized “ego” or the Political State. Since Immanentism makes all beings take their source in consciousness or in themselves, religion too must have its source in man. Thus Marx’s conclusion that “man makes religion; religion does not make man.”<sup>7</sup>

Hegel also made religion subject to man when he maintained that “the truth of religion is in philosophy”, so “only as a philosopher of religion [is he] truly religious... and [he denies] real religious sentiment and the really religious man.”<sup>8</sup> The Immanentist worship of human thought underlies the remark of Marx, Feuerbach and Schelling that all logical proofs for God’s existence are not more than further proofs of man’s rational powers and his own existence.<sup>9</sup> There is no “suprasensible” or “extraneous entity above and beyond nature and man.”<sup>10</sup> What Hegel encloses in the Spirit, in an Absolute Idea, Marx encloses in material man, his labor, the objective and thus real life of man. Atheism is the “core,” not the “consequence” of immanentism.<sup>11</sup> It permits and secures the absolute authority of the subject which is the entire claim of immanentism. If man dictates truth according to subjective experience, then while the immanentist principle may not explicitly deny God, it relegates to him a vestigial—for Marx, hazardous—role in the universe. Marx retrieves and protects this seed of atheism in immanentism which Hegel blurred and Feuerbach cultivated, and brings it to conditions for growth and change in Communism through Socialism.

### **Springing from Feuerbach: Atheism defines man and reality**

In 1845 Marx wrote against the teachings of Feuerbach, though not for their error but their insufficiency and timidity.<sup>12</sup> Feuerbach had strengthened Marx’s materialist principles, asserting “against metaphysical idealism” that “primary reality is Nature.”<sup>13</sup> Thus equipped, Marx exchanges the immaterial monism of Hegel for a materialist monism that still operates by the dialectic.<sup>14</sup> Hegel retained religion as a link to the immaterial, made perfect in philosophy, but Feuerbach “reduced religious essence into the secular human essence,” something that

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 115.

<sup>8</sup> Fabro, 698.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Fabro, 691.

<sup>10</sup> Fabro, 700.

<sup>11</sup> Fabro, 692.

<sup>12</sup> Coppleston, 310.

<sup>13</sup> Coppleston, 314.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pintado, Patricia, “God in Exile: An Introduction to Cornelio Fabro’s Appraisal of Modern Thought,” *Studia Fabriana*, ed. Nathaniel Dreyer (Cornelio Fabro Cultural Project of the Institute of the Incarnate Word: Chillum, MD, 2017) 143,146-147.

“*naturally* unites many individuals.”<sup>15</sup> Religion, according to Feuerbach, is only an idea of man that joins him to other men with the same idea. Feuerbach suggests men take their ideals for themselves and project them on to a divine being and this is the alienation that Marx accuses for the stagnation in the development of the State. Religion and God, once made irrelevant and false in *thought*, must be extricated from man in *practice*, in labor, in law, in all realms of man’s life. Feuerbach thinks religion occurs in man rather than that it is a “social product” of man, as Marx proposes.<sup>16</sup> Feuerbach’s atheism is an “abstract atheism, wherein it is only man in the abstract that has taken the place of God, not yet man in the concrete.”<sup>17</sup> Marx, holding that only the material has the fullness of reality, derides any abstract idea or universal until it is expressed in man’s action—until it is made material. By all means, Marx wants to eliminate the idea that religion, which Feuerbach reduces to a relation or need of dependence, is natural to man. Marx denies that anything can be abstracted from each individual that could define him *essentially*, since the “human essence possesses no true reality.”<sup>18</sup>

For Feuerbach man is only a genus, not more than a sensible being.<sup>19</sup> Marx therefore posits that *being* is exclusively the activity of the brain. Being is the result, not the cause, of life. In his sixth thesis against Feuerbach, Marx states that man’s essence is “the ensemble (aggregate) of social relations.”<sup>20</sup> Man does not have a given nature, according to Marx, because he is the product of his own labor; he is the “economic man” who creates his nature and reality, not the “sensible man” who endures and experiences his nature and reality.<sup>21</sup> If what *is* relies on man’s knowing it, thinking it, making it, doing it—man’s sense and physical activity—then God who is proposed to be outside or above these things cannot have real, *practical* being.

### **The Dialectic According to Marx**

Although the ultimate dialectic for Marx, unlike Hegel, is that between “the general interest and the private interest...or the political state and the civil society,” the dialectic is for them both the “chief motive force of history.”<sup>22</sup> Hegel proposes a “tension of two worlds or two

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<sup>15</sup> Fabro, 696.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Fabro, 696.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Fabro, 690.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Fabro, 697-698.

<sup>22</sup> Fabro, 697.

spheres” which the Absolute “must overcome ...not by denying all reality to the finite, not by reducing the infinite to the multiplicity of finite particular as such, but by integrating, as it were, the finite into the infinite.”<sup>23</sup> Marx does not recognize an “infinite” anything, but in history he observes the “overcoming” of the “exploited” “class” (the proletariat) by the “ruling class” which owns the means of production (the bourgeoisie).<sup>24</sup> When revolution has yielded all men into the “ruling class,” progress becomes overcoming “civil society” which is the world of “industry and trade, the pre-or extra-political world of the egoistic self-seeking individual standing in a relationship of competition and antagonism to all other individuals.”<sup>25</sup> Marx proposes the integration or absorption, not of the finite into the infinite, but of the particular egoist man into the common, civilized State.

Hegel asserts that by applying reflection and reason to the apprehension of opposites, all activity in the logical realm, man discovers a real and superior synthesis, which is actualized by its being thought. Marx critiques this notion of philosophy, accusing it of not producing any real change because it never becomes material or real, though he grants that “the practice [*praxis*] of philosophy ...is itself *theoretical*.”<sup>26</sup> “This duality of the philosophical self-consciousness manifesting itself in dual directions diametrically opposed to each other [theory and practice]” helps explain Marx’s dual direction of the egoist individual, that is real, objective or in practice, and the citizen, that is abstract, subjective, or in theory. But just as the acts of turning inward and outward of philosophy bring about real progress, so the turning inward and outward of the individual will yield the True State, not just a state in theory. A note from Marx’s doctoral dissertation reads, “inasmuch as philosophy as will turns toward the world of appearances, the [philosophical] system is reduced to an abstract totality and thus becomes one side of the world confronted by another side.”<sup>27</sup> The dialectic between the abstract theoretical and real practical worlds is how Marx still maintains the shape or movement of the dialectic although he disregards the immateriality of Hegel’s system. While Hegel divulges to the world the self-actualizing plan of the *Geist*, Marx rallies men to participate in their own self-actualization through the State, which will give “total recovery of the human mind and consciousness as a sensible reality.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Coppleston, “Hegel,” p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Kamenka, 563.

<sup>25</sup> Kamenka, 562.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, “Doctoral Dissertation, the Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature,” 81.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, 81.

<sup>28</sup> Fabro, 694.

Both philosophies are restricted by the immanentist principle that can only begin and end with the individual; Hegel's Spirit is the cause and end of itself and Marx's autonomous man, whose life amounts to his labor, his practice, is the beginning and end of himself. Hegel proposes a "love-dialectic" between "I" and "Thou" where Marx proposes a "strife-dialectic" between empowered and oppressed classes or private and public spheres of society.<sup>29</sup> By cutting out the immaterial from Hegel's system, the dialectic is reduced to man's power, senses and history. Marx replaces perfection of the Geist through art, religion and philosophy with the perfection of man through the Political State. Marx looks at history and observes a dialectic, "the actual progress of reality" not "a law of thought expressed in reality"<sup>30</sup> that moves forward the "disintegration of the sacred in the modern mind" and is part of the true realization of man.<sup>31</sup> Marx maintains a man to man dialectic, where the oppressed class, the proletariat, is only ever restricted or separated from the social powers proper to it because of religion which makes men settle with life in the "vale of tears" rather than revolt and end their suffering now. Religion is the last conquest for man; it is to be conquered first publically, politically or legally, as with the separation of church and state, then radically, within man, for what is within man that is not common to the State is an enemy to the State.

### **Marx's Philosophy Depends Upon Atheism**

Marx wanted to "free the culture of his age from the last theological encumbrances" and to "proclaim the absolute freedom of man."<sup>32</sup> The real world lacks men capable of actualizing their freedom so long as God remains legally in the laws of the State or privately in the beliefs of the individual. "The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the Supreme Being for man."<sup>33</sup> Nothing is superior to man's creative and free thought.<sup>34</sup> "The struggle against religion is therefore mediately the fight against the *other world*, of which religion is the spiritual aroma."<sup>35</sup> The other world that possesses all that this world does not, is considered by Marx an illusion that sedates the masses and prevents them from overcoming their suffering here and gaining true freedom in this real world; it prevents the labor, the activity that will free them in

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<sup>29</sup> Fabro, 698.

<sup>30</sup> Copleston, "Transformations of Idealism," 311.

<sup>31</sup> Fabro, 693.

<sup>32</sup> Fabro, 692.

<sup>33</sup> Fabro, 693.

<sup>34</sup> Fabro, 694.

<sup>35</sup> Fabro, 695.

the service of the State.<sup>36</sup> So the dialectic is detained by man's unwillingness to overcome the existence of God and another world. Once this final obstacle is overcome, man can and must produce his own fulfillment and freedom, as agents, yet his species-being "is essentially a *result*"—an effect of the dialectic of self and State.<sup>37</sup>

Marx refers to the Protestant Revolution, the French Revolution and the formation of the people North America as proofs of the dialectic movement of man towards perfect freedom, which can only exist in the absorption of private life into public life. Marx commended the action and change that was produced by the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, but he condemns their half-measures and partial fruits. The Political State ends alienations or separations because there is only one being. "Real and definitive liberation will come only when man has been delivered from his inner "priest", from religious-mindedness as such," and can then "fling at its adversary the defiant slogan: *I am nothing, and I should be everything.*"<sup>38, 39</sup> But individual man can only be *everything* by *being* mankind, so that everything *actually* belongs to everyone. Religious mindedness opposes the common life of the State and is necessarily subversive to the state because one's loyalty and dependence is not on oneself or the State or to Mankind as a whole, but to a creature of man's imagination, which is God or the supernatural. Thus this alienation from oneself or from other men is what Marx considers a threat to man's absolute freedom and his actualization.

Marx expounds in his criticism of Hegel's philosophy of right that to obtain absolute freedom philosophy cannot just interpret history, it must change it. The "weapon of criticism" is powerful to stir up "indignation" against conditions of society, but what is immaterial cannot create real, concrete change without becoming material.<sup>40</sup> "...Theory becomes a material force when it takes hold of the masses. Theory is capable of taking hold of the masses as soon as it makes its demonstrations *ad hominem*, and ...radical."<sup>41</sup> To get to the root of man which is man himself<sup>42</sup> there can be no obstructions or intermediaries present, so the "criticism of religion" brings man closer to himself by "overthrowing all those conditions in which man is a debased,

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<sup>36</sup> Marx, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Fabro, 697.

<sup>38</sup> Fabro, 693.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, "From 'Contribution to the critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction,'" 117.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, 119.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Marx, 119.

enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being.”<sup>43</sup> Those conditions are created by religion, but man who created religion, can change those conditions—he is creator and creature. Marx asserts that man’s end, that for which he searches, his true self, “cannot [be found] in the non-human.” This is why Marx proposes a naturalism or humanism as the true answer to man’s search for his true self, which is his free self, which is only accessible through the State.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

This examination of Marx’s materialization of the Hegelian Dialectic is a culmination of the immanentist principles that make irreconcilable man’s subjective reality with any other. To guarantee real social change, Marx’s makes objective the subjective person, and overcomes man’s self-alienation in private property so that man may become “socialized man” in the “species-being” that is “not external to man and his real interests.”<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> Having revealed the impossibility of God according to immanentist philosophy, Marx saw an obligation to make material this immaterial, abstract, philosophical discovery. This is constructive atheism: to take the non-existence of God as the foundation of the real life of man and shape man through Man’s collectivized will—the State. Fabro affirms Marx’s logical consistency: “if being is grounded primordially upon consciousness and man is defined essentially as sense-consciousness, as a relation with the sensible world, then clearly no entity transcending sense-consciousness can either exist or even, if the pun be pardoned make any sense!”<sup>47</sup> Marx accuses idealism of having rejected the reality of the concrete and particular, preferring abstractions and amalgamations that do not change or improve the life of actual man. Materialism grounds or limits Hegel’s dialectic to actual events, in political movement toward the emancipation of man, through continual conflict.<sup>48</sup> Feuerbach’s criticism of religion as the “arrested or perverted development of consciousness” is a materialized condemnation that Marx uses to completely surpass even the negation of God.<sup>49</sup> Since “God” is a concept of man and one that is a threat to his freedom, man can and should be freed from that “abstraction” which is consciousness “mired in the

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<sup>43</sup> Marx, 119.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Fabro, 698.

<sup>45</sup> Marx, “Contribution to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 114.

<sup>46</sup> Coppleston, 307.

<sup>47</sup> Fabro, 700.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Marx, “From ‘On the Jewish Question’,” 105.

<sup>49</sup> Fabro, 694.

spiritualism-materialism antithesis.”<sup>50</sup> Evolving out of the dialectic, atheism is no longer a pressing or plausible question of the mind, but the concrete means and motive of the activity of socialist labors that will gain for man Communism, “the first real coming-to-be, the realization become real for man, of man’s essence, of the essence of man as something real.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Fabro, 699.

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