

THE LEGEND OF MARX'S ATHEISM*

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Marx's Canonization

The 1949 edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* defines atheism as follows: "An authentically scientific theory of militant atheism is found in the ingenious studies of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Marxist-Leninist atheism radically distinguishes itself from all previous forms of atheism and opens a new era in the struggle against religious beliefs. The proletarian atheism developed by Marx and Engels is an atheism coherent from beginning to end, and an aggressive one at that. While pre-Marxist, bourgeois atheism was based on a metaphysical materialism, the proletarian one is based on the granite foundations of historical and dialectical materialism — that powerful instrument of scientific knowledge and revolutionary transformation of reality. . . . Proletarian atheism is a materialist ideology which has triumphed in the country of socialism, the Soviet Union, and it unites immense masses of workers all over the world."¹

The claim that proletarian atheism as an ideology is not a confession, but only a *weak* Leninist use of a term which, in Marx, is inextricably connected with *false consciousness*. If, for Diamat, atheism was really an ideology in the authentic Marxian sense, there would be nothing objectionable in this formulation. Instead, for it, ideology has the neutral meaning of "philosophical conception," so that the definition becomes unacceptable in that it is based on the presupposition that the theories of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin represent a dogmatic corpus of iron-clad unity and continuity.

Any cursory analysis would easily challenge this claim — even the history of Stalinism can readily explain what has happened. "Stalinism," claimed Lukács, "has not even carried out the elementary task of publishing all of Marx's texts — something which would have been very easy — and today we have available only a minimal part of Marx's complete *opus*."² Among Marx's manuscripts which Stalin did not wish to see published are the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx explicitly claims he is not an atheist. Nevertheless, the ignorance of this text is not sufficient to justify Marx's alleged atheism in Diamat ideology. Thus, in *The Holy Family*, atheism is defined as "the last stage of *theism*, the *negative* recognition of God," which should have forewarned Soviet ideologists.

Nor can Marx's alleged atheism be explained solely in terms of Stalin's

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1. A. Bansani, ed., *La Religione nell'USSR* (Milan, 1961), pp. 23-24.

2. Cf. Abendroth, Heinz-Holt and Kofler, *Conversazioni con Lukacs* (Bari, 1968), p. 175.

attempts to force a textual unity. More recently, even officially "de-Stalinized" French Diamat ideologists still claim that Marx and Engels laid "les fondements théorétiques de l'athéisme."³ In which texts such a theoretical foundation is to be found, however, is not indicated.

In this, Christian theologians are in full agreement with Diamat Marxists, even if they evaluate Marx's "alleged atheism" in totally opposite ways. The theological literature on the subject is too extensive to quote. It may be useful, however, to discuss what has been acclaimed as a "progressive book," that of the Silesian Father Girardi, according to which "the atheistic character of Marxism is not challenged by any serious scholar."⁴ Marx was not a Marxist, but so far no one had accused him of not being "a serious scholar." Considering the various mystifying Marxists' misreadings of Marx, the theologians' distortions are understandable, but not thereby justifiable. Thus, it is not unreasonable to require that those who discuss Marx should be familiar with the texts.

The Evacuation

In a funny passage in Martin Buber, one reads that crows "exhibit three singular characteristics. The first is that no non-crow can deal with them since he will not be listened to: with their uproar they will silence his voice. The second is that they are of the opinion that in the world of birds there exist nothing but crows: all those birds who consider themselves as belonging to another type are crows in disguise and must be forced, with an uproar difficult to imagine, to reveal their true nature. The third is that none of them can stand being alone: the crow that leaves the flock dies of fear of loneliness."⁵

The habits of Buber's crows are peculiarly similar to those of some theologians who often cannot avoid a kind of ideological terrorism. Even Maritain has been guilty of this. Updating his account with a touch of psychoanalysis, he has claimed that some atheists "believe they do not believe in God but . . . in reality they unconsciously believe in Him, because the God whose existence they deny is not God, but something else."⁶ In other words, God is that being who cannot be denied because, when denied, he turns into something other than what one thought he was! That is, all crows have a God, and there can be nothing other than crows. When some position incompatible with the theological one is held to be, deep down, really identical to it (just superficially deviant), one does not need Diamat to rule out any dialogue with those who consider themselves really *other*. Within such a totalitarian perspective, there can be nothing but belief in God or its opposite: *tertium non datur!* If Marx does not share the theological viewpoint, then he cannot be other than

3. See the "Introduction" to a collection of essays which, interestingly enough, ignores *The Manuscripts of 1844*: G. Badia, P. Bange and E. Botigelli, *Sur la Religion* (Paris, 1968). This is a French translation of a German translation of a Soviet edition which has now appeared even in Italian.

4. Giulio Girardi, *Marxismo e Cristianesimo* (Rome, 1970), p. 47. Father Girardi's confusion of Marx with Diamat Marxism is understandable considering that even non-Stalinist Marxists such as Lucio Lombardo Radice manage to misread Marx's clear texts. See Radice's article in *Il Dialogo alla Prova* (Florence, 1964), p. 87.

5. Martin Buber, *Gog e Magog* (Milan, 1964), pp. 92-93.

6. Jacques Maritain, *Il Significato dell'Ateismo Contemporaneo* (Brescia, 1950), p. 9.

an atheist, and therefore still religious.

The ideology of secularization, which has Marx as one of its main targets, extends this ideological terrorism to historiography. Consider the work of the neo-Thomist Cottier, who has dedicated almost 400 pages to Marx's atheism while overlooking with incredible ease the fact that the young Marx explicitly rejected theism as well as atheism. In other words, for Marx, *tertium datur*. But this radical otherness can only be grasped by theologians as nonreason. Thus Cottier writes that Marx's alleged atheism "is not the conclusion of an argument," i.e., it is not a rational deduction.⁷

Before discussing Cottier's account further, it may be useful to pause on the concept of *secularization* employed by those who, like Father Cottier or the Protestant Karl Löwith, theologically manipulate the history of modern philosophy by almost reducing it to a heresy of Christian dogma. In other words, the ideologists of secularization seek to show how some of today's most important non-religious thinkers present ideas which, although *apparently* differing from the theological one, are but versions of dogmatic ones. Thus, within atheism itself, theology reappears triumphant.

Cottier's otherwise informative book is an example of this mystification. For example, consider his approach to alienation, the central category of his book. It is nothing but a variant (a deterioration) of Paul's theme of *kénosis* (*evacuatio*)! Cottier goes so far as to substitute *kénosis* for *Entläusserung* in order to emphasize its Christian character. And here Cottier candidly betrays his own secret: he translated *Entläusserung* with *kénosis* "in order to emphasize an implication of Marx's thought of which maybe he himself was not aware."⁸ This is a peculiar historiography, where what is important is not so much what, for example, Hegel or Descartes *actually* thought, but what *unconsciously* haunted them. While Cottier provides some useful philological details (e.g., the emphasis on the Lutheran translation of *ekénosen* of Paul's text with "hat sich selbst geeussert"), he goes too far when he derives Hegel's and Marx's "externalization" from the "divine emptying" in Christ, as if the latter was the authentic and exclusive archetype of *Entläusserung*.

A more credible use of Cottier's impressive philological knowledge would have traced *kénosis* to its subversive rather than its conservative roots. He could have traced it back to Thomas Münzer's theology — a little closer in time to Hegel than to Paul of Tarsus. In Münzer, the theme of emptying (*Entwerdung*) is "transposed from the level of a metaphysics of being to that of ethical engagement [and] will translate into a rejection of the existing unjust social order."⁹ *Evacuatio* — "a technical term in mysticism referring to the act whereby man is emptied from the cares of the world"¹⁰ — reverses its usual meaning in Münzer's thought. From an escape from the world, it comes to indicate (through what Bloch has emphasized is a conversion towards atheism in Christian mysticism) an engagement in the world. In this inversion, the theological empty-

7. Georges Cottier, *L'Athéisme du jeune Marx* (Paris, 1959), p. 358.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

9. Cf. E. Campi, "Introduzione" to Thomas Münzer, *Scritti Politici* (Claudiana, 1972), p. 22.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

ing (*leherwerden*) turns into a mundane becoming-other, which prefigures Rousseau's alienation.

But what would be the relevance of emphasizing Münzer's *Entwerdung* or *leherwerden*? No one can deny the extensive cultural background of the category of alienation in, e.g., Rousseau. It is doubtful, however, that what can be grasped through Paul's *kénosis*, Luther's *geeussert*, or Münzer's *Entwerdung* could provide the historical specificity of Rousseau's texts, had they been lost. The same can be said of the texts of Marx and Hegel. De Negri is not wrong in writing that "Hegel's system integrates a tremendous amalgam of Protestant reform theology, and of ingenious epistemological visions"; even if he correctly emphasizes "how much theologism has passed — through a path from which depart, both to the right as well as to the left innumerable branches — in that thought that calls itself laic."¹¹ Granting Hegel's theological heritage, what is crucial in his thought is the "tremendous amalgam" and not simply a heresy to be challenged by an alleged genuine Christology, as seems to be the intent of those who talk about "secularization."¹²

But even if Hegel's Christology were nothing but a Christian heresy, and even if Marx's thought was nothing but a Hegelian heresy, what should one conclude? That we are all crows? Or that Christian theology leads to revolution? If, however, the Christologization of Marx seeks to reduce him to an impotent sweet Jesus protector of manipulation, then it becomes necessary to show how Marx not only denounced Hegel's theology as a mystification rooted in the archetypal mystification of Christian mythology, but also how he always openly rejected Christianity.¹³ Yet, this rejection of religion (especially of Christianity) cannot be interpreted as an atheism.

For Marx, atheism and religion are false opposites in that they flow into one another. Each is the dialectical reversal of the other. Atheism does not necessarily exclude religion, as can be seen with Buddhism, an atheistic religion *par excellence*. Similarly, negative theology, from pseudo-Diogenes to Cardinal Cusano, claims that being does not pertain to God: "In deo non est ens nec esse . . . Esse formaliter non est in deo . . . Deo ergo non competit esse."¹⁴ Thus, if religion can be atheist, the Marxian position can be radically anti-religious: post-atheist [*non-più-atea*].

Search for Grandma

The discourse of "secularization" is mystifying, and Bloch is perfectly right, with respect to Löwith, to ironically dismiss it as "that kind of epistemological search . . . for grandma in mythology; at least with its secondary aim of representing the grandson as one who brings to ruin the ancient goods of the tem-

11. Cf. Enrico De Negri, "Teologia e Storicismo," introduction to *I Principi di Hegel* (Florence, 1949), pp. xv and xxv.

12. Thus, that the theme of incarnation (*Menschwerdung*) reappears modified even in the *Phenomenology* does not change the fact that, granting to Cottier that Hegel's work is an enormous exemplification of the *kénosis-Menschwerdung*, this still fails to fully grasp its historical specificity. The same can be said of the derivation of the dialectical process (*Fortssetzung*) from the Trinity. See Cottier, *op.cit.*, p. 29 and p. 32.

13. Cf. Karl Marx, *Sulla Religione* (Milan, 1972), especially the chapter on "Anti-kriege."

14. Cf. Meister Eckhart, *La Nascita Eterna* (Florence, 1953), pp. 8-10.

ple."¹⁵ Bloch's conclusion is that "a good content . . . is not weakened by the fact of being rectified and, even more obviously, it is not secularized by the fact of being realized with its being put back on its feet."¹⁶ Bloch is taking aim not just at Löwith, but also Cottier and all those who imagine some kind of incest among Hegelianism, Marxism, and Christian theology.

Consider the following examples of the search for grandma in Cottier's book. *Aufhebung* is seen as the secularization of Paul's exultation; *Entfremdung* as the secularization of the sinner's estrangement from God; *Gattungswesen* as the laicization of the Holy Ghost, and "the Marxian idea of alienation is nothing other than the explication of transcendence from the viewpoint of immanentism." "Burdened with universal suffering, the proletariat is the echo of Isaiah's suffering serf. It is the messiah and, like the Christ of some Lutheran theology, in order to fulfill its own redemptive mission, must first of all be sin and blasphemy . . . The proletariat is the protagonist in a kind of Easter mystery;" "Marx's labor is the last expression of . . . Hegel's Christology;" "Marx's world without God is populated by entities. The first of them is Man himself as *Gattungswesen*."¹⁷

The museum of horrors does not stop here. Some even propose a further secularization of Marx along the lines of "Claude Trésmontant, who points out that Marx's theses are authentic ontological and metaphysical theses: [in the *Manuscripts of 1844*] Marx claims that the world and nature do not owe their being to anyone else, they exist *for themselves*, they are ontologically sufficient. Marx attributes to the world and nature what theologians attribute to God: existence for itself, in itself . . . We have no doubt that the world exists on its own, that it is self-sufficient, that evolution is self-creating. All these are claims which can be scientifically studied and which must still be proven, while in the way Marx posed them they are grounded in ontology and metaphysics."¹⁸ Given this epistemological search for grandma in mythology (which here con-

15. For Bloch, this is a revisionist operation similar to the one seeking to manipulate Marxism by rooting it "in an alleged unitary classical origin." Consequently, "Marxism . . . without regard for its more peculiar proletarian-revolutionary sources, was reduced to a doctrine at least still rational, even if decidedly not materialist. But, then, in the late bourgeoisie, especially in Germany, there was a growth of irrationalism. Accordingly, it became possible to denigrate Marxism by tracing it back to absolutely mythical origins. Consequently, instead of the previously fashionable Kantianization or the Hegelianization, now it was sought to annihilate it by charging it with plagiarism. This gave rise to an ineffable fetishism of sources whereby from Marx one goes back to Joachim of Fiore or to Augustine or even to the mythical awaiting for salvation of proto-history The target is Marx: he is arrested and unmasked as if he were a sacrilegious thief. All this is accomplished by means of secularization After that humanity is nothing more than the trivialized Son of Man, proletarian solidarity is only a cheap reprint of the charitable communism of early Christians, the reign of freedom is equivalent exclusively to the Reign of the Sons of God, and all this unfolds at the level of the lowest atheistic pseudo-Enlightenment. Here, on the whole, historical materialism is the 'history of salvation in the language of political economy' and 'communist faith' is a 'pseudomorphosis of Judeo-Christian messianism.' Of a Marxism so baptized, wholly masked as plagiarism, and magically liquidated, it is neither scandalous nor surprising to claim that 'compared to Marx's, Hegel's philosophy is realistic.'" See Ernst Bloch, *Karl Marx* (Bologna, 1972), pp. 52-53.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

17. Cottier, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 34, 67, 158, 176, 258 and 368.

18. Ferdinando Ormea, *La Religione del Giovane Hegel* (Milan, 1972), p. 21.

fuses Marx and Darwin), it may be useful to clarify the matter by recourse to Marx's own texts — especially a passage in *The Holy Family*, where he exorcises speculative philosophy by describing its procedure: "Having distorted my question on my lips, and having put its own question there instead, like the catechism, it could naturally have a ready answer to all my questions, also like the catechism."¹⁹

Post-Atheism

At least once — in *The Holy Family* — Marx defined atheism as "the abolition of religion,"²⁰ but there he was explicitly referring to Bruno Bauer's alienated conception of it. His own view, as already indicated, is that atheism is "the last stage of *theism*, the *negative* recognition of God."²¹ Thus, he considers atheism as an upside-down religion. As he writes in *The Manuscripts of 1844*, atheism is the "abolition of God,"²² which, in that abolition, postulates the existence of man. Within atheism, man cannot be defined other than in relation to this religious object that he rejects and with which he remains connected, as if it were an ineliminable presupposition. Because of this relation of dependence, even if only negative, the atheist remains religious.

From the Hegelian perspective of the dialectic of self-consciousness, man becomes man only when he is so recognized by another man (and vice versa). Hence, both the atheist and the religious individual are not yet men to the extent that their recognition, negatively or positively, is not based on man but on some other entity. In this sense, Marx's humanism is consistent in rejecting the religious viewpoint, both atheist and theist, because it is not a recognition of man as such, but of man as sub-human, an entity dependent on some other entity. Thus, Marx's perspective is not atheist. Marx knows very well that "communism begins from the outset (Owen) with atheism, but atheism is at first far from being communism."²³ Pre-Marxian communism is atheist; Marx's communism is post-atheist in that it represents a totally new position, i.e., the self-postulation of man over himself.

What, following Bloch, can be called post-atheism, has to be considered from both a historical and a theoretical perspective. According to the first, developed primarily in the famous fragment dealing with the history of materialism in *The Holy Family*, Marx showed how atheism not only was not part of his outlook, but also that it was the outlook of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudal residues. Not by accident, Marx refers to Pierre Bayle and his claim that there could be a society of atheists, that atheists can be upright individuals, and that man is degraded not by atheism, but by superstition and idolatry. At the end of the 17th century, Bayle had announced the coming of an atheist society, and he had paved the way for a bourgeois culture which was to express in its anti-theological and anti-metaphysical positions,

19. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1956), p. 121.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 120.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

22. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (New York, 1964), p. 187.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

its struggle against feudal residues. Thus, atheism is a specific expression of the bourgeois Enlightenment — one of the ideological weapons in the bourgeois revolution. As such, it is not to be confused with the outlook of those advocating a revolution against the bourgeoisie.

By accepting Marx's alleged atheism (at least up to the point that it can be construed as a criticism of the superstition and idolatry to which the Christian divinity can be degraded), some Catholics willingly confuse Marx's position with that of the bourgeoisie. But Marx's rejection of atheism is based on the fundamental distinction of Marxian communism from every preceding form and on the dialectical relation man/man and man/nature as its main presuppositions. As is well known, in *The Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx distinguished three forms of communism. The crude variety is nothing but a generalization of private property. It denies man's personality (e.g., in the common sharing of women) and, as the expression of universal envy and greed, is nothing but the *Vollendung* of a society based on private property and competition. The second form is political communism, which goes as far as advocating the abolition of the state. This is not Marx's communism since it has not yet reached its fulfillment, i.e., it is still connected to private property as the estrangement of man, although it rejects it. Thus, it is a negative communism. The third form is Marx's positive communism, which not only projects the abolition of private property understood as man's self-estrangement, but also the arrival of a historically developed man for himself. It is the identification of humanism and naturalism: the true resolution of the antagonism man/man and man/nature.

Marx knows very well that this project of revolution is a not-yet — to use Bloch's term — and that it aims at the future in a utopian way. He also knows that the dialectic will not stop during the phase of positive communism — also because it is not the *end* of history, but rather its *beginning*. Thus, it cannot be argued that, having reached this point, humanity would cease, *adialectically*, its own free self-projection.

This radically new position of positive communism is not, as Cottier thinks,²⁴ a departure from the dialectic so that Marx would have to "assume a resting place, a definitive state." Cottier's objection does not make sense if one recalls that for Marx, positive communism is not a final arrival point, but rather the beginning of history. Similarly, to work freely, to creatively project oneself, is an essential characteristic of future man. Hence, this man remains immersed in the dialectic which is the bond that relates man and nature as *being-other*. What is the relation between post-atheism and what Marx, in *The Manuscripts of 1844* defined as "the hypothesis of socialism," i.e., the concrete utopia of positive communism?

By now it is clear that there is a parallel between atheism as the negative recognition of God and negative communism as the negative recognition of private property. In both cases, man remains dependent on what he negates. He is not yet "for himself." Quite different is the situation of positive com-

24. Cottier, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-360.

munism as a radical new position, a leap from prehistory to history where he no longer need define himself negatively, but can now rest positively on himself. In the same way, he does not recognize himself as postulated through rejection of God. To the extent that he considers himself no longer a proletarian, he is also post-atheist.

Marx's post-atheism is, consequently, at the very heart of the concrete utopia of positive communism. To reject God for love of man is not Marx's viewpoint but rather that of a pre-Marxian communism: "The philosophy of atheism . . . is at first only *philosophical*, abstract, philanthropy, and that of communism is at once *real* and directly bent on action."²⁵

The Absurd Question

What is presupposed by man's self-postulation and, consequently, post-atheism? Marx's presuppositions are certainly not those indicated by theologians as an original ethical choice or an arbitrary beginning which, as such, would be on the same level as similar arbitrary beginnings — those of theology, for example. In *The German Ideology*, Marx admits that his own account has presuppositions. But these are not freely chosen since it is a matter of real presuppositions, i.e., real individuals, their actions and their material conditions of existence. These are not dogma but presuppositions from which one can abstract only in the imagination.

Alienation does not originate from an axiological and generally humanistic *pietas* but proceeds "from an economic fact of the present. The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces . . . The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates."²⁶ And in the "Preface" to *The Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx mentions the results "achieved by means of an analysis entirely empirical, based on a careful study of political economy." But this beginning with the facts does not amount, as some have claimed,²⁷ to following a "merely positivistic line." To claim the ineliminability of specific non-arbitrary presuppositions to develop a coherent argument is not exclusively the prerogative of positivism, which is based on a metaphysics foreign to Marx's thought. But Marx was not satisfied with appealing to unchallengeable presuppositions; he also justified their non-arbitrary character. And it is here that the theme of atheism reappears.

In *The Manuscripts of 1844*, he showed that it is impossible to undertake a meaningful discourse that does not recognize man himself as a presupposition. This argument is triggered by the discussion of God's creation of man and the world. For Marx, this is a badly posed problem: "When you ask about the creation of nature and man, you are abstracting, in so doing, from man and nature. You postulate them as *non-existent*. . . . Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or, if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent, and if you think of man and

25. Marx, *The Manuscripts of 1844*, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

27. Virgilio Melchiorre, "Osservazioni su una Recente Raccolta di Scritti Marxiani sulla Religione," *Humanitas* (July 1972), p. 552.

nature as *non-existent*, then think of yourself as non-existent, for you too are surely nature and man. Don't think, don't ask me, for as soon as you think and ask, your *abstraction* from the existence of man and nature has no meaning. Or are you such an egoist that you conceive everything as nothing, and yet want yourself to exist?"²⁸

Consequently, the question of the precedence and independence of God over man and nature *cannot be posed*: "Ask yourself how you arrived at that question. Ask yourself whether your question is not posed from a standpoint to which I cannot reply because it is wrongly put. Ask yourself whether that progression as such exists for a reasonable mind." In abstracting from himself and from nature, man cannot surreptitiously avoid presupposing himself and nature, which are consequently also presupposed by every *Weltvernichtung*. Thus, it is not legitimate to abstract from them. But it is precisely through this illegitimate abstraction that the question of God as an entity in itself can be asked. In other words, man cannot meaningfully think of being created; while history irresistibly proves to him that he originates, not in his *animal immediacy*, but in his *human sociality*. Thus, man and nature are so inextricably interconnected that human thought cannot be explained either by a divinity or a nature in itself. Sex, hunger, needs and passions irresistibly demonstrate the externality of objects and of nature. From a Marxian framework, it is not possible to discuss nature and matter without already presupposing the man who undertakes that discussion through a language presupposing a human collectivity at a certain level of civilization. Thus, the problem of God makes sense only within the world of man. The dual structure of human self-consciousness emphasized by Hegel, Feuerbach and more implicitly by Marx accounts for the origin of the belief in the religious object and therefore of the form and modality of religion: an alienation which gradually assumes specific historical aspects inextricably connected to specific socio-economic structures. For Marx, man is the true presupposition of God. But this is not the alienated man (as Marx already pointed out, against Kant, in his doctoral dissertation) who has not yet perceived how both the objectivity of God as well as of paper money are functions of the value given them by the human collectivity. Rather, it is man freed of alienation (at least, the religious type) who knows himself as its own presupposition.

Self-Positing

This man simply postulates himself and has no need of any indeterminable divinity. Only at the end of the demonstration of the improbability of the dependence, through creation, of man on God, does Marx claim that "since for the socialist man the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labor, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his *birth* through himself, of the *process of his creation*."²⁹ Thus, "since man has become for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man has become practical, sen-

28. Marx, *The Manuscripts of 1844*, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

29. *Ibid.*

suous, perceptible — the question about an *alien* being, a being above nature and man — has become impossible in practice.” And every posing of a problem, of course, presupposes a subject doing this posing, i.e., the ineliminability of man.

In this sense, the impossibility of posing the question of God is not an unmotivated original ethical choice in Marx, as various theologians claim. Rather, it is the realization of the *logical* impossibility of posing the problem of God. This realization cannot be considered atheism or anti-theism (struggle against God) since “*atheism as the denial of this unreality has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, and postulates the existence of man through this negation; but socialism as socialism no longer stands in any need of such a mediation.*” It “*is man’s positive self-consciousness, no longer mediated through the annulment of religion, just as real life is man’s positive reality, no longer mediated through the annulment of private property, through communism.*”³⁰

If, theoretically, post-atheism can be prefigured before the advent of positive communism (and this is why it can co-exist with the radical critique of religion), it can be fully realized only in it. Post-atheism is thus an inextricable part of Marx’s positive communism. As far as a state-sponsored atheism is concerned, in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* Marx observed that “the man that proclaims himself atheist through the state remains nonetheless religiously bound precisely because he recognizes himself only in a vicious circle — through a mediator.”³¹ Thus, a state atheism is analogous to a state religion and it is by no means a prelude to post-atheism. This is not one of Marx’s youthful and purely theoretical positions. In the harsh 1871 political clash with Bakunin in the First International, among the elements of radical disagreement with the “Anarchist Alliance,” Marx, not by accident, emphasized the sterility of the *Atheismus-streit*. He argued that, from the viewpoint of religion, atheism is relatively irrelevant when compared to the critique of property relations. In other words, confronted with an attack on its source of wealth (the true God!), the church is ready to unleash “the furies of private interest”³² far more readily than when confronted with an innocuous atheism. Hence, it is primarily in the economic dimension that it must be attacked. Marx’s post-atheism had so little to do with an esoteric and provisional doctrine that in the 1870s, Engels himself, whose critique of religion differs significantly from Marx’s,³³ held fast to his friend’s position: “One can say that, for the enormous majority of the German social democrats, atheism is a stage they have already gone beyond. This word with a purely negative meaning applies to them to the extent that they are no longer theoretical, but only

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

31. Reprinted in Luciano Parinetto, ed., Karl Marx, *Sulla Religione* (Milan, 1972), p. 189.

32. Karl Marx, *Prefazione del 1867* (Rome, 1964), p. 34.

33. As Fetscher has pointed out, Engels’ critique of religion “moves away from its origins in humanistic anthropology” and takes on positivist and Darwinist elements to subsequently develop in this form in the large majority of other Marxist authors.” Cf. Iring Fetscher, *Il Marxismo*, Vol. 1 (Milan, 1970), p. 10.

practical, adversaries of religion."³⁴ Marx's alleged atheism that pollutes Diamat is derivable neither from Marx nor from Engels.

Marx's post-atheism is not theologically comprehensible either as an assertive atheism or as anti-theism.³⁵ Nor is it a peaceful agnosticism since it does not rule out, during prehistory, an indirect struggle against religion. But God and religion are clearly distinguishable. Religion is a specific, historically rooted human institution. Thus, it is appropriate to take a position toward it. Since religious alienation is a metaphor exemplifying every other form of alienation, Marx constantly keeps an eye on it, from the early writings to *Capital*. Thus, post-atheism does not remove Saint Prometheus from the Marxian calendar, but instead finds it inseparable from that critique of religion which is the presupposition of every other critique. Post-atheism also rules out Cottier's interpretation of Marx's *Gattungswesen* as a secularization of God still bearing "the mark of transcendence" so that "Marx's God-less world would be populated by entities and, first and foremost, by Man himself as *Gattungswesen*."³⁶ But, for Marx, man's autonomy is certainly not grabbed away from God or deduced from Him. Rather, it is derived from the history of human labor. *Gattungswesen* cannot be approached as if it were an entity of scholastic theology. As indicated in the "Theses on Feuerbach," human essence is the whole of social relations. It is not a meta-historical ontological or metaphysical entity, unless one understands it in the specific Blochian sense: ontology of what-is-not-yet, and metaphysics as a temporal horizontal transcendence. Only by explicitly relating it to Marx's "concrete utopia" is it possible to accept the definition of *Gattungswesen* as a metaphysical entity, and the meaning of "ontology" in *The Manuscripts of 1844*. Every time Marx mentions *Gattungswesen* he refers not so much to an existing entity (the whole of existing but alienated social relations), but to a not-yet-being: the total man as the multi-sided, free and creative worker. The transcendence of the *Gattungswesen* is not that of the collectivity with respect to the individual, but primarily that of a *futurum* seeking a revolutionary dissolution of the present. It is not an abstract ethical ideal but, rather, is an elaboration of the experience of alienation. It has empirical and not arbitrary presuppositions. Thus, every effort by the old metaphysical and ontological theology to recoup Marx's *Gattungswesen* is philologically doomed.

At any rate, it is not possible to recoup Marx even for that part of theology which has lost its religious object and bemoans the death of God. This theology would also like to secularize Marx by claiming that, "in Marx, divine reality becomes historical process,"³⁷ thus becoming the announcer of the Word which negates himself. Here the theology of the death of God dusts off

34. Cf. Frederick Engels, *Saggi degli Anni 1871-1874*, "The Blanquists," cited in A. Lunckarskij, *Religione e Socialismo* (Milan, 1973), p. 19.

35. For definitions of these terms, see V. Miano, "Religione e Atteismo Contemporaneo," in *Dio è Morto?* (Milan, 1969), p. 88. Miano himself, however, admits that the use of these terms is somewhat fluctuating.

36. Cottier, *op.cit.*, p. 368.

37. Cf. Altizer and Hamilton, *La Morte di Dio* (Milan, 1969), p. 187.

and recycles "an authentic movement of embodiment" through which "the primordial God must die by accepting or affirming the reality of the profane." Only "after the fall can it allow the birth of a faith which confronts real conditions in the world and can move forward, through alienation and estrangement, towards an eschatological end transcending a primordial principle."³⁸

According to this new (!) theology, the dialectic of Christianity would consist precisely in the "negation of original participation," which "can allow itself a final participation . . . reachable only through fall and death, towards a final and definitive reconciliation of the sacred and the profane." "Through this negation of the negation what was originally sacred will be negated," so that this death of God (a God devoid of divinity and no longer Lord or cosmic Logos) must be understood as a negation in view of God's return, as the final and definitive conciliation of the sacred and the profane. On a closer analysis, then, this is not a real death of God, but only the hibernation of his primordial larva, pending a final triumphant transformation. Here atheism is but a pause dialectically relating two affirmations of God. Marx was right in rejecting it as a form of religion and in contraposing it to his own post-atheism, which even the most clever dialectical theology cannot instrumentalize.

At any rate, there is an evident contradiction between the theologian's assertion that today all claims concerning Jesus are nothing more than "empty shells of what was once a vital faith" and the simultaneous claim that Jesus is *the Word* (even if "a Word devoid of God") witnessed only "in the existence of a dismayed and suffering humanity."³⁹ Here it is useful to quote a passage in Marx where he demystifies the Hegelianism in the theology of the death of God. Its main scheme is the following: God (the primordial God) is postulated; he is subsequently negated (the death of God) while remaining optimistically waiting for his dialectically transfigured eschatological representation — a negation of the negation so orthodoxically Hegelian as to remove the original God in the conciliation of the final and total *coincidentia oppositorum* of the sacred and the profane.

To this new theological reintegration of atheism one must contrapose Marx's critique of mystification whereby "Hegel sets out from the estrangement of substance (in logic, from the infinite, the abstractly universal) . . . which means, but popularly, that he sets out from religion and theology. Secondly, he annuls the infinite and establishes the actual, sensuous, real, finite, particular (philosophy — annulment of religion and theology). Thirdly, he again annuls the positive and restores the abstraction, the infinite — restoration of religion and theology." But "if I *know* religion as *alienated* human self-consciousness, then what I know in it as religion is not my self-consciousness, but my alienated self-consciousness confirmed in it. I therefore know my own self, the self-consciousness that belongs to its very nature, confirmed not in religion but rather in *annihilated* and *superseded* religion. In Hegel, therefore, the negation of the negation is not the confirmation of the true essence, effected

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-172.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

precisely through negation of the pseudo-essence."⁴⁰

If the theology of the death of God had fully understood this critique and the meaning of Marx's *post-atheism*, it probably would not have become entangled in the archaic Hegelian swamp of alienation and may have been able to come to (and this applies also to traditional theology) an evacuation much more radical than the one that it preaches: its own evacuation. Only as such could it have truly converted to the categorical imperative indicated by Marx as the necessary consequence of the true critique of religion: "to overturn all relations in which man is a subjected, humiliated, abandoned and disreputable being."

40. Marx, *The Manuscripts of 1844*, *op.cit.*, pp. 172 and 185.