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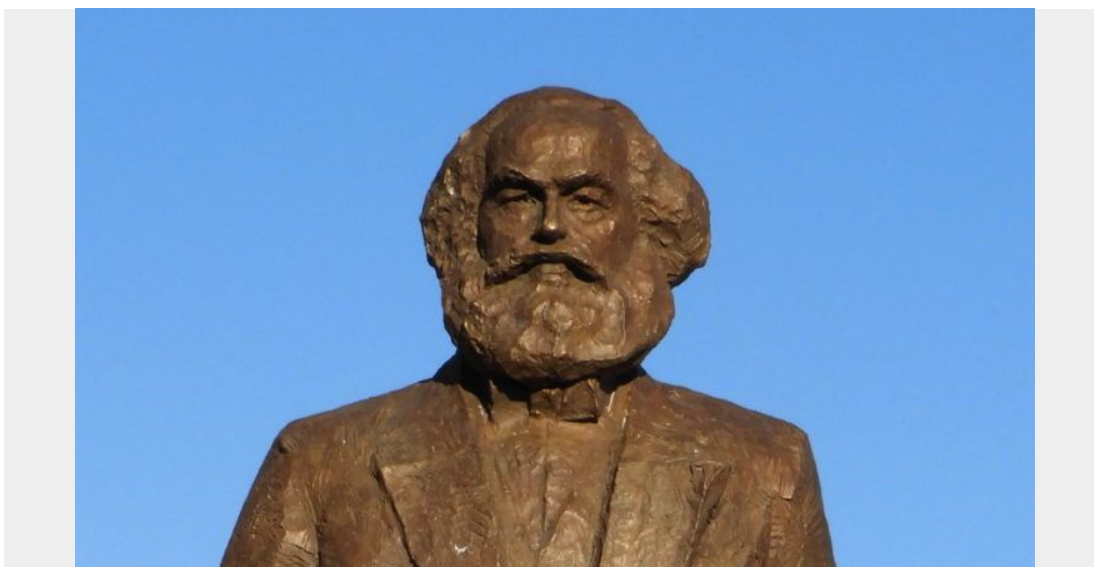
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## *Karl Marx and Religion*



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Karl Marx is widely regarded as one of the most sophisticated theorists of human history. Marx was above all a scientist. He used the term historical materialism to explain that it was the material state of society that produced human relations. Today, perhaps especially in the United States, the mainstream tends to tell us it is the other way around. The American Dream argues that material gains comes from hard work, discipline and innovation.

Karl Marx is a thinker who should be read, and read often. This is precisely because he is able to take this blame away from the individual and place it on the society. Capitalist propaganda will not only tell us what to want—it will tell us why we don't have it.

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Anyone paying attention to capitalist discourse will come to the conclusion that they are a failure if they haven't achieved the goals of capitalism. At least this is the intention of said propaganda.

Reading Karl Marx can then be a liberating experience. He inverts these dynamics when talking about religion: "The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society."

Clearly, Mr. Marx is coming from a state of compassion with these words. He does not want people to be fooled by religion. He wants us to see the structures that create it. Furthermore, he wants to expand our imagination of the possible. Once we are able to see that the world we constructed is arbitrary we can create an entirely new world that is fairer for everybody.

From a philosophical standpoint, one has to wonder what is the basis of the claim that society creates man. Surely one can look at the diversity of individuals in our world and point to society having a vastly different effect on each one. Historical materialism fails to account for the alternative: human creates society. On what basis should this alternative be discounted? It feels exactly like a chicken and egg scenario. Marx chooses to look at individuals and concludes that society is the larger influence. However, if one were to study society they would surely find individuals to be the larger influence.

Individuals make society, and society makes individuals. This is a rather base point but also an irrefutable one. It seems clear that as Marx tried to free the individual consciousness, he pointed out the contradictions in society. But seeing that simply one is merely the collection of the other, it should be impossible to separate them in any way more meaningful than a material one. To continue with a material analogy, Marx could be sympathetic towards the individual bricks of a house. He told each brick that the house was a construct that determined their reality. A very freeing idea for these poor bricks who have been stuck in the same place their whole lives. But how would one explain the house's existence to the house? Why you could tell the house you are merely a construction of bricks and you are no more real than that. One can simply not be more true than the other.

Why make such an equation? Clearly there was some truth, and more importantly, inherent value, in Karl Marx telling the individual that they were a construct of society. When we are told that society is a construct of the individual it is often used to keep us in our place and not question the larger system of capitalism that is oppressing us. This may be true but it only gives Marx the moral high ground, it does not necessarily make him any more correct than the capitalists of today.

Marx continues: “his state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.” While surely such a statement is made for altruistic reasons, Mr. Marx has no proof of this dynamic, because there is none. In fact he contradicts himself when he writes this about religion: “Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere appearance of himself, the non-man [Unmensch], where he seeks and must seek his true reality.” Here humanity seems to find themselves in religion. The inverted state that Marx focuses on now works the other way around. Marx seems to think he resolves this contradiction in the next line by claiming that the appearance of man in religion is false and completely a construct of society.

Karl Marx maintains that religion is not real: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.” On the one hand, Marx acknowledges a sincere expression of agency of humans when he calls it an expression of real suffering. However, soon after Marx points to religion as a protest against what is actually “real”—therefore implying that society is merely replacing human’s reality with a religious reality. Here Marx is confirming the theory stated above that the humans and society cannot be separated or inverted and that they exist together as a cause-and-effect dilemma.

Marx maintains the same contradiction of himself here: “The criticism of religion disillusioned man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun.” Note that in an earlier passage Marx saw religion as man’s construction of himself as superman—admittedly a false construction. But now Marx argues for us to revolve around ourselves even though he saw religion as a construct of self. Marx may mean that we should revolve around ourselves either way. He may mean that religion creates a false self, while disavowing religion can lead to a true self.

Marx wants us to be critical of the structure that creates religion: “Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.” Here his own contradictions seem to be more flushed out. Marx then goes on to level criticism against German society precisely because it is merely a construct of itself, society, etc.

Of course in a way Marx is right. And while capitalism’s impact may be an obvious point, it is a point often forgotten. Marx calls religion the opium of the people. Like many of Marx’s theories it seems prophetic as many people have turned to drugs today to deal with the painful reality we call life. Look at how many people blame themselves. And look too to how harmful it is to blame others—whether that be immigrants, Muslims or any other scapegoated group. If we were to find out that our society was simply a construct and a myth—why that might make us treat everyone better.

Three cheers for Marx then, and three cheers for anyone spreading his ideas which are in their own way quite optimistic. But let’s maybe critique Marx more broadly than his religious criticisms, for while they have been much reflected on by the “masses”, they seemed to be merely a passing criticism for him—which is indeed part of his problem.

Much of Marx can be boiled down to this: the individual is alienated from himself (herself). This is a frustrating position because by definition it is impossible. It is specifically problematic when one begins to see that Marxism itself has more or less taken the same societal structure and illusions as a religion when it is organized. This led Karl Marx to wildly claim he was not a Marxist. This, however, is not only a ridiculous thing to say, but also severely underestimates the impact of Marx himself. Marx then saw Marxism as not only a negation of what the world is, but as a negation of how the world structures itself. All of this was somehow a construct to Marx, even when similar structures arose under the umbrella of Marx’s ideas.

This remains an underestimate of Marx and the communal and spiritual uplift his ideas have provided the masses. These ideas are like religion. Not because they are false, but because they give the individual a truth greater than what society is currently providing. If Marx was scared of this type of influence it was because he saw this influence as naturally misleading. What he misses is not only the inevitability of such influence but the realness of it. There is nothing false about a Marxist who believes in Marx. Just as there is nothing false about a religious person who believes in God. On earth, God’s

realness is not shown by God appearing on earth, but by faith in God appearing on earth. This faith changes the world and it is in this way that God has an effect. What Marx may have recognized in his own uneasiness about Marxism is that there is simply nothing more real about him than about religion itself.

This is not an original point but religion is no more of a material construct than science is. Take the basic debate about whether evolution existed. One can point to a fossil of a dinosaur to prove science correct. But believing that this means anything relies upon putting faith in the institutions of science that have supposedly discovered these artifacts—largely through methods unseen and hard to comprehend. Strip away the social context and the idea that a human could walk on water is much more plausible than the concept that we literally transformed into a different species.

In the present day science can make the claim that it knows almost everything through observation of the material world. The relationship we have with science is not so different from the one we have with religion. Socially speaking, it is top-down. We must have a faith both in history and authority to believe it and we must suspend our direct knowledge of the material world seeing as both systems prove themselves mostly through the institutional constructs described above. An individual, whether that be mad scientist or heretic, has very little authority precisely for the reasons Marx describes: the individual is seen to be constructing their own reality—not necessarily on truth, but simply based on their biased and sheltered world view.

When Marx claims the individual is alienated from himself he implies that the system, while completely dishonest, is the only place authority can come from. This is another one of those contradictions. The individual under capitalism is supposedly incapable of making “true” decisions, whether that be devotion to religion, a job, etc. This ironically strips the individual of any of the supposedly very limited power they do have. That is unless they pull off the veil and begin to see the world “as is”.

But why is the individual wrong? Because their acceptance of capitalism’s truths guarantees their suffering under capitalism? This seems to be the only explanation and is undoubtedly true. But that by no means makes a religion or any other viewpoint “false”. It simply is the reality of life under capitalism, or to take a step back, the reality of life in a historical moment where capitalism has a large influence. This argument applies Marx’s historical materialism, albeit for the exact opposite conclusion of Marx himself.

Dr. Cornel West said this about Marxism: “Marxism is both indispensable, but inadequate, insufficient. And it certainly doesn’t help us understand death, dread, despair, disillusionment, demoralization. On all these fundamental features of the human condition, Marxism has nothing to say.”

The fundamental critique of Marxism must be this: in an attempt to explain capitalism as the umbrella under which human relations function, it inverts the relationship between humanity and capitalism. Rather than capitalism is a function of human relations, human relations become a function of capitalism. Therefore these human relations become a construct for Marxism.

The omission of religion as a whole is more telling than the few words Karl Marx did say about religion. For Marx, religious beliefs could be read within the context of capitalism, but there was nothing fundamental about it to the human condition.

So what would happen if one were to recognize that everything about their lives was merely a construct of their material condition under capitalism? It seems like both an unrealistic and miserable expectation. Rather than dismissing our beliefs as constructs why not use them as the means to free the oppressed from capitalism? This is exactly the sort of connection that our dear brother Cornel West makes in his essay “Black Theology and Marxist Thought”.

Marxism simply goes too far when it attempts to free the individual from themselves. It seems to ignore historical materialism exactly when it is defining it. If historical materialism does exist, then the individual can only be a product of it and cannot be freed from it. The goal should be to channel the individual’s desires which can only a product of their material reality.

And yet even this alternative does not do anything to address the reality of what it means to be a living being. A belief in historical materialism suspends all belief in a living moment that exists as something greater than a biological reality. Such a reality is grim precisely for the same reason capitalism is grim. Marxism, like capitalism, only functions on a material production of reality, rather than for-profit, justice, or intellectual reality.

This reality, while potentially possible, cannot be fathomed. It marks existence as purposeless beyond material accomplishments and existence. This reality soon becomes alienating for the individual for precisely the same reason Marx recognized capitalism to be alienating. It takes away the individual’s ability to exist as more than an object.

Historical materialism states that the individual is simply a product of history and biology. Better to be a free object than a useful object. But why be an object at all?

Marx's only error is underestimating his own potential for human liberation. By identifying the forces that oppress us, Marx is able to shed light on what exactly we must overcome. His words were so powerful that they have propelled humanity towards the direction of liberation for centuries. Marxism charts a path for liberation from materialism.

Marx traces history accurately because he successfully detaches himself from many of the biases other historians have. These historians let their own material condition cloud their vision of what really happened in human history. Often the history tellers are so-called "winners" of history who only tell the stories of other so-called winners. By distancing himself from materialism, Marx successfully made himself an almost neutral observer. He could call out historical materialism as the force that determined the way all humans acted, and therefore was almost immune to the effects it had on him. Furthermore, once Marx pointed this out all of the alternatives to Marx were exposed.

What makes Marxism inadequate is the way it pulls the individual away from their own historical moment. The individual must become something they are not in order to see the world in its materially constructed way. Marx made such a grand contribution to his historical moment and to the immaterial urges of the human soul that his influence has transcended his own theory and perhaps has proven it false.

Marxism no longer just explains human history, it has inspired it. Across the world groups are moved by Marx's ideas. Not just because of the precarious material condition of people but because of an immaterial connection to Marx's ideas. These ideas liberate people not only because their reality is proven as a construct of capitalism. Marxism goes a step further. Marxism becomes the construct. It becomes an alternative structure in which to organize human life.

On the one hand, there is a clear material advantage for the masses when Marx is understood and applied. On the other hand, the fact that Marx could turn the tables in the way he did makes one wonder if the world can be explained in a strictly material sense.

For argument's sake let's try concluding that Marx is right. We can say that at least Marx cannot be proven wrong. That has always been the contradiction of God. You cannot prove Him to exist in the material world, and therefore you cannot prove that he does not

exist precisely because He is immaterial. On seemingly contradictory but actually parallel grounds, God can never be proven to be true and if one has no faith materialism is by definition the only way of the universe.

If the goal of Karl Marx was to liberate the individual in a material sense then it seems that by limiting his own definition of liberation to a materialist one that he greatly limited the possibilities of his argument. If the individual is actually alienated from themselves because of their materialist constructs, wouldn't the only way out of this materialist construct to enter into a state of immateriality?

If one were to simply view Marxism materially then it would be nothing more than changing the constructs around which the individual is alienated from themselves. In short, while Marxism could free the individual from oppression within materialism, a close reading seemed to do little to address the question of alienation from one's self if that self was only material. If the self is material then it must be as alienating as any other material. Liberating that material then seems like merely an object of utility. The revolution appears mechanical and lifeless. And even the goal of that revolution remains property of a material good (one's self).

Marx himself identifies materialism as the overarching reality. But his lasting legacy comes from his ability to show us the way out of this reality. There is little purpose in breaking free of the chains of capital if even this liberation remains only material, and therefore purposeless beyond its utility. The reason happiness can never be bought is that no material gains, even liberation from capital, will guarantee any form of happiness beyond a material control of a reality that ultimately still relies on the very state of materialism it has conquered. Karl Marx made the mistake of underestimating Karl Marx. To achieve an existence higher than our material one, we would be wise not to make the same mistake.

If the argument for religion seems unconvincing, then let's encourage the skeptic to take the reverse. Marxism has no utility besides liberating the individual from materialism oppression. Religion, while bringing many organizational oppressions, has the effect of liberating the individual from strictly material existence. Therefore, even if Marxism seems to be more real than God, their utilities and goals share much in common. Of course this is merely a material argument for religion, and if such an argument is needed, then it is unlikely religion will have the liberating effect it is capable of. 30.08.2019