

Roland Boer

Luther and Marxism

In our own day we are approaching an era of
revolution analogous to that of the sixteenth
century.
Karl Marx¹

I even incline somewhat to old Luther's view
that a man who does not love wine will never be
good for anything.
Karl Marx²

The relation between Luther and Marxism ranges from profound philosophical tensions to a positive, albeit critical, appreciation. In order to examine these engagements, this study distinguishes between three topics that illustrate the range of possibilities: the differences concerning human nature between Lutheranism and Marxism; the ambivalent depiction of Luther as the ideologue of the bourgeoisie in Engels' early study of the German Peasant Revolution of 1525; and Marx's dialectical appraisal of Luther as the inaugurator of the first phase of the German revolution, thereby setting up the second stage, which Marx saw beginning in his own time.

1 Human Nature

In order to analyze the differences between Luther and Marxism on the question of human nature, I need to set the scene somewhat more broadly. In societies shaped by Christianity, the understanding of human nature turns on the following question: Can human beings do some good on their own initiative, or are human beings unable to do good, relying completely on God? We may reframe the question in terms of evil and sin: Is evil limited, thereby providing some possibility of good works, or is evil more powerful than human beings, which means that human effort is futile? The terms of these questions in Latin Christianity were set in the debate between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century. Although the disagreements were subtle and

¹ Karl Marx, "Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality: A Contribution to German Cultural History Contra Karl Heinzen," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow, 1847 [1976]), 6:312–40, here 312; Marx, "Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritisierende Moral. Beitrag zur Deutschen Kulturgeschichte. Gegen Karl Heinzen von Karl Marx," in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1847 [1972]), 4:331–60, here 331.
² Marx, "Marx to François Lafargue in Bordeaux, London, 12 November 1866," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow, 1866 [1987]), 42:334–35, here 334; Marx, "Marx an François Lafargue 12. November 1866," in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1866 [1973]), 31:536–57, here 536.

complex,³ the names “Augustine” and “Pelagius” came to indicate two contrasting positions. While the former argued that only God’s grace was able to overcome the inescapable evil of human existence, the latter argued that good works were possible since evil was more limited.⁴

Luther falls on the Augustinian side, which has implications for the understanding of human nature. The core question was the transformation of a fallen human nature, but the means for such a transformation were open to debate. Augustine argued that the new human nature could be achieved only through God’s grace, for human beings were unable to achieve transformation on their own. Pelagius countered by arguing that human discipline and cultivation could achieve transformation, although not without divine assistance. His own much-admired asceticism was an indication as to how a person might become more holy. As his slogan would have it: if perfection is possible, then it is obligatory.

This early theological debate has also been seen in political terms, with – for some Marxists – Augustine coming to embody an aristocratic or ruling class perspective and Pelagius the perspective of those exploited. Thus Augustine’s argument becomes one for leaving the world as it is, a welcome message to the wealthy and powerful, for they need not work to change the world. By contrast, Pelagius (and indeed other “heretics”) become champions for the downtrodden, urging that the only way to abolish poverty is to get rid of the rich.⁵ Anti-socialists from Søren Kierkegaard to Eric Voegelin have agreed, each in their own ways, condemning socialism as a Pelagian heresy.⁶ If we consider a few examples from the Marxist tradition, then this assessment may seem justified, although it was mediated by the European Enlightenment’s assertion of the inherent goodness of human beings. Thus the proletariat and the peasants possess an inherent goodness, which will be released from its exploitation by their masters when the communists have taken the reigns of history. With this opportunity, workers and peasants will wholeheartedly engage in creating a new so-

³ For a sense of the intricacy, see some of the key works: Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. J. Mourant (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992); Pelagius, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, trans. T. De Bruyn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Brinley R. Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Martleshamr: Boydell & Brewer, 1998); William E. Mann, “Augustine on Evil and Original Sin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40–48; James Wetzel, “Predestination, Pelagianism and Foreknowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 49–58.

⁴ I leave aside the Greek (Orthodox) effort to mediate: since salvation is a divine gift, one cannot earn salvation; yet the gift can be accepted or refused, and so human activity is involved.

⁵ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 436–47; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Verso, 2008), 160.

⁶ Joachim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. B. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 486–90, 502–5; Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989–2009), 4:125, 6:135 and 145.

ciety and economy for mutual benefit. In other words, a Pelagian approach valued the works that one can do now, especially the works of the exploited. This understanding can be seen in Marx's image of throwing off the chain and plucking the living flower;⁷ in the old slogan "from each according to ability, to each according to need;"⁸ in Anatoly Lunacharsky's notion of the ideal of human existence (represented by the gods of religion) for which one strives through revolution and education;⁹ in Lenin's sense that patient and logical argumentation, backed up by "facts, facts, facts," would persuade anyone who listened;¹⁰ in Stalin's early observation that "it is obvious that free and comradely labour should result in an equally comradely, and complete, satisfaction of all needs in the future socialist society;"¹¹ or indeed in the whole phenomenon of Stakhanovism and the new Soviet man and woman of the 1930s.¹²

2 Engels, Luther, and Thomas Müntzer

The implications for Luther should be obvious. As an Augustinian, he stressed the power of sin and evil, the inability of human beings to do good works on their own,¹³ and an utter reliance on God's grace through faith. In the terms examined above, this would place Luther firmly with the ruling class, with the wealthy and powerful. Indeed, this is the assessment of Engels – to whom I now turn – in *The*

7 Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844, repr. 1975), 3:175–87, here 176; Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1844, repr. 1974), 1:378–91, here 379.

8 Cited by every communist leader since Marx, the well-known slogan in its current form first appears with Louis Blanc, after the Paris commune of 1848: "*de chacun selon ses facultés, à chacun selon ses besoins*," although it can be traced back through socialist circles in other forms. See Blanc, *Plus de Girondins* (Paris: Charles Joubert, 1851), 92; Norman Bowie, *Towards a New Theory of Distributive Justice* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 82. The slogan is actually a gloss on the biblical text of Acts 4:35: "They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

9 Anatoly Vasil'evich Lunacharsky, *On Education: Selected Articles and Speeches* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 57, 165, 245, and 247.

10 V.I. Lenin, "Statistics and Sociology," in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917, repr. 1964), 23:271–77, here 272.

11 I.V. Stalin, "Anarchism or Socialism?," in *Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1906–7, repr. 1954), 1:297–373, here 338.

12 Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

13 Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, *Luther and Erasmus: On the Bondage of the Will and On the Freedom of the Will*, eds. E.G. Rupp and P.S. Watson, vol. 17, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM, 1969).

Peasant War in Germany.¹⁴ This work is the first historical materialist analysis of the Protestant Reformation, with a focus on the radical developments embodied in the Peasant Revolution and its theologian, Thomas Müntzer.¹⁵

Engels' effort at class analysis determines the structure of the essay, with princes, nobility, clergy, burghers, plebeians, and peasants identified in the opening pages, to be followed by an assessment of the war's effects on these classes. As for Luther, he represents the wishes of a nascent ruling class, of burghers seeking reform and of princes with similar hopes. By contrast, Müntzer is the mouthpiece of radical peasants and nascent proletarians. Thus, Luther infamously betrayed the Peasant Revolution, calling on all and sundry to eradicate the peasants, miners, and others who had joined the movement.

Yet, despite the apparent symmetry between Luther and the first shoots of the bourgeoisie, Engels' analysis betrays a greater complexity – if not ambivalence – over Luther. Engels traces the way Luther's rhetoric and practice changed over time. Initially, this Augustinian monk of peasant background voiced staunch condemnations of the Church and its cozy arrangement with the powerful. Indeed, Luther's early statements evince a revolutionary zeal, which – according to Engels – brought together a united front of exploited peasants, plebeians, burghers, lesser nobility, and even some princes. But when the situation became too heated, Luther opted for his real allies: burghers, nobility, and princes. This entailed a watering down of his fervor, a preference for peaceful reform, and condemnation of the radical extremes. This is, suggests Engels, the real Luther, who became a staunch advocate of the new burgher church. In this light, his earlier fiery statements and acts indicate that he had not yet clarified his true position.

Engels works hard to paint Luther into this corner, but he cannot quite do so. In distinguishing between the radical and the moderately liberal Luther, Engels attempts a temporal progression from youthful radicalism to mature moderation. Yet Engels's analysis betrays a more ambivalent approach to Luther. Let me give the example of Engels's observation on Luther's translation of the Bible:

Luther had put a powerful tool into the hands of the plebeian movement by translating the Bible. Through the Bible he contrasted the feudalised Christianity of his day with the moderate Christianity of the first centuries, and the decaying feudal society with a picture of a society that

14 Friedrich Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1850, repr. 1978), 10:397–482; Engels, "Der deutsche Bauernkrieg," in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1850, repr. 1973), 7:327–413.

15 Under Engels' influence, an interest in Müntzer was developed by Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch; see Karl Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus II: Der Kommunismus in der deutschen Reformation* (Berlin: Dietz, 1895–97, repr. 1976), 7–103; Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution*, vol. 2, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969). See further Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–56; Boer, "Karl Kautsky's Fore-runners of Modern Socialism," *Chiasma: A Site for Thought* 1 no. 1 (2014): 129–37, available at: <http://chiasmaasiteforthought.com>.

knew nothing of the ramified and artificial feudal hierarchy. The peasants had made extensive use of this instrument against the princes, the nobility, and the clergy. Now Luther turned it against the peasants, extracting from the Bible such a veritable hymn to the God-ordained authorities as no bootlicker of absolute monarchy had ever been able to match.¹⁶

Engels seeks to reveal Luther's betrayal, but in attempting to do so he identifies what may be called the political ambivalence – if not multivocality – of the Bible itself. It is not for nothing that the Bible has provided inspiration for one revolutionary movement after another at the same time that it has given easy support to sundry tyrants and despots.¹⁷ In this light, the positions of both Luther and Müntzer could be justified by the Bible, without distorting the relevant texts.

Might Luther too be more radical than Engels is willing to admit? Let me quote once again the opening sentence of Engels' text: "Luther had put a powerful tool into the hands of the plebeian movement by translating the Bible." Engels reveals more than he seems to intend: one cause of the Peasant Revolt may be found in none other than Luther. As we saw, Engels is more than keen to link Luther with the burghers and princes, while Müntzer was the radical theologian and political agitator through and through. Yet this bifurcation misses the fact that Luther first fostered Müntzer's creative political imagination, firing up his radicalism through the Bible and new forms of theological thought. Luther's teaching and practice were the spark for Müntzer. Going beyond Engels, I suggest that Müntzer brought to its logical conclusion one dimension of the political ambivalence of theology that Luther had discovered and then sought to shut down. Might it be said that Engels also unwittingly recognizes that Luther had rediscovered a deep theological and political tension at the heart of theology?¹⁸ Theology and indeed the Bible are neither exclusively the preserve of the oppressors and powers that be, nor are they clearly on the side of the downtrodden. Instead, both possibilities open up, so that it becomes very difficult to distinguish reaction from revolution in the biblical texts or theological formulations in question. Luther plays with both, glimpsing the radical possibilities of the Bible only to become alarmed at what he had unleashed.

All of this requires a reading of Engels' text that is sensitive to his ambivalence over Luther. He prefers to condemn Luther for invoking the wrath of God – in the

¹⁶ Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany," 419; Engels, "Der deutsche Bauernkrieg," 350–51.

¹⁷ Alongside the references to Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch in note 15 above, see also Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, trans. J. L. Mulliken and E. G. Mulliken (London: Fisher and Unwin, 1897); Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus I: Kommunistische Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Dietz, 1895–97, repr. 1976; Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus II*; Kautsky and Paul Lafargue, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus III: Die beiden ersten grossen Utopisten* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1922, repr. 1977).

¹⁸ This awareness comes to the fore in Engels, "On the History of Early Christianity," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 27:445–69; Engels, "Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums," in *Marx Engels Werke*, 22:447–73. See further, Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 273–306.

hands of the princes – on Müntzer and the peasants, but he also unwittingly recognizes that Luther had identified the radical – if not revolutionary – dimensions of the Bible and theology, enough for Müntzer to gain inspiration.

3 Marx and Luther

The previous analysis has gradually moved from an outright opposition between Luther and Marxism to the first hints of a rapprochement in Engels' assessment of Luther. I now turn to Marx, since his response to Luther is – perhaps surprisingly – much more positive than one would initially expect. This is particularly the case when Marx cites Luther's work from 1540, *An die Pfarrherrn wider den Wucher zu predigen*.¹⁹ Marx cites Luther approvingly, especially on the topic of interest and the medieval ban on usury,²⁰ so much so that Marx observes that Luther provides “an excellent picture, it fits the capitalist in general.”²¹ Nonetheless, I am more interested in Marx's earlier engagement with Luther in the 1840s. Here we find a complex and dialectical appreciation of the contribution made by Luther. I begin with the following:

Germany's *revolutionary* past is theoretical, it is the *Reformation*. As the revolution then began in the brain of the *monk*, so now it begins in the brain of the *philosopher* [. . .] But if Protestantism was not the true solution it was at least the true setting of the problem.²²

19 Luther, *An die Pfarrherrn wider den Wucher zu predigen* (Wittenberg, 1540).

20 Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859, repr. 1987), 29:257–417, here 364 and 448–49); Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63 (Continuation): A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1861–63, repr. 1989), 32:531–41; Marx, *Theorie über den Mehrwert (Vierter Band des “Kapitals”)*. *Dritter Teil*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1861–63, repr. 1974), .26.3:516–24; Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1867, repr. 1996), 35:146, 203, 314, 388–89, and 741; Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band Buch I: Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals*, in *Marx Engels Werke*, Berlin: Dietz, 1867, repr. 1972), 23:149, 207, 328, 619, and 781; Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. III*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894, repr. 1998), 37:329, 345, 391–92, 594, 606, and 889; Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Dritter Band Buch III. Der Gesamtprozeß der kapitalistischen Produktion*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1894, repr. 1973), 25:343–44, 359, 407, 613, 624–25, and 911.

21 Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63 (Continuation)*, 539; Marx, *Theorie über den Mehrwert*, 525.

22 Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” 182; Marx, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung,” 385. This text comes from Marx's most well-known observations on religion (written in his early twenties), where we find his lyrical statements that religion is the illusory sun, spiritual aroma, heart of a heartless world, soul of a soulless condition, and the ambivalent metaphor of the opium of the people (which was simultaneously medicine and drug, panacea and curse).

Luther is of course the monk, but I would like identify the key points of this text, which will structure the following analysis: 1) the Reformation was revolutionary in a theoretical sense; 2) the Reformation marks the initial phase of revolution in Germany, with the second due to a philosopher; 3) the Reformation may have set the question in a true fashion, but it was also incomplete. For this reason, the second revolutionary stage is needed. These three points may be reduced to two: the revolution in Germany has two phases, in which the Reformation plays a central role; and the Reformation was revolutionary, although the nature of this revolution remains open to question.

3.1 Two Revolutionary Stages

Let us examine the question of two revolutionary phases in more detail. Elsewhere in the same text, Marx speaks of the criticism of religion and indeed of heaven. But what does he mean by the “criticism of religion”? Does he mean the recent work of the Young Hegelians, with Feuerbach the champion at the time? But Feuerbach is the “philosopher” mentioned in the text quoted above, and the criticism of religion is certainly older than Feuerbach. I propose that Marx actually sees the criticism of religion as beginning with none other than Luther. The first revolutionary stage is the criticism of religion. In this light, we can make sense of the following statements:

For Germany, the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism (*Für Deutschland ist die Kritik der Religion im wesentlichen beendet, und die Kritik der Religion ist die Voraussetzung aller Kritik*).²³

The evident proof of the radicalism of German theory, and hence of its practical energy, is that it proceeds from a resolute *positive* sublation of religion. The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*, hence with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being (*Der evidente Beweis für den Radikalismus der deutschen Theorie, also für ihre praktische Energie, ist ihr Ausgang von der entschiedenen positiven Aufhebung der Religion. Die Kritik der Religion endet mit der Lehre, daß der Mensch das höchste Wesen für den Menschen sei, also mit dem kategorischen Imperativ, alle Verhältnisse umzuwerfen, in denen der Mensch ein erniedrigtes, ein geknechtetes, ein verlassenes, ein verächtliches Wesen ist*).²⁴

The relationship between the two revolutions is captured by the tension between the two terms Marx uses to speak of the criticism of religion: *enden* or *beenden* (*beenden*), with the sense of finishing or completing, and *Aufhebung*, the Hegelian sublation with the implication that it carries on into another level, albeit thoroughly transformed. The first indicates a distinct completion, an end beyond which nothing more

²³ K. Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” 175; Marx, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung,” 378.

²⁴ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” 182, trans. modified; Marx, “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung,” 385.

can be done or said. The second suggests transition and transformation; what is transformed may continue, but not in any fashion to which we have become accustomed. As Marx puts it elsewhere, *Aufhebung* indicates a process in “which denial and preservation, i.e., affirmation, are bound up together (*worin die Verneinung und die Aufbewahrung, die Bejahung verknüpft sind*).”²⁵

The terminological difference indicates the structure of both passages (even though *Aufhebung* appears only in the second). In the first passage, “premise” or “prerequisite” (*Voraussetzung*) signals the presence of a sense of *Aufhebung*. Thus, the criticism of religion is simultaneously “complete” (*beendet*) and functions as a “premise” (*Voraussetzung*) for all criticism – but not as it was. The second passage makes a similar point: the radicalism of theory in Germany arises from the fact that it “proceeds from a resolute *positive* sublation (*Aufhebung*) of religion.” At the same time, the criticism of religion ends (*endet*) with the teaching that human beings are the highest beings.

If we accept my proposal that the criticism of religion designates the Reformation and its legacy (the first revolutionary phase), then what are the implications for understanding its relation to the new revolutionary stage? We may argue that Marx is torn between a resolute effort to end the criticism of religion once and for all – if not to pronounce the end of religion as so many have done since the Enlightenment – and the need to appreciate its transformed presence.²⁶ But I suggest that the two terms are actually related, as Marx’s text reveals. Simply put, one cannot have sublation and transformation (*Aufhebung*) without the former coming to an end (*beenden*). It cannot continue in its former state, so it must be completed, brought to an end, so that sublation can take place and it can take on an entirely new form that has an indirect and dialectical connection with the former state. Thus the first revolutionary stage, stemming from Luther, must come to an end so that it can be sublated by a second and more substantial revolution. At the same time, this latter revolution could not have happened and cannot be understood without the former. So the criticism of religion may be complete, but it has been sublated so as to become the premise of all criticism that follows. The later revolution transforms the former.

3.2 A Revolutionary Reformation?

Thus far, I have dealt with the relationship between the two revolutions, but the question remains: How was the Reformation itself revolutionary? Let us return to

²⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844, repr. 1975), 3:229–346, here 340; Marx, “Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844,” in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1844, repr. 1990), 40:465–588, here 581.

²⁶ Arendt Theodoor van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2002), 184.

Marx, where he seeks to identify this revolutionary nature in terms of the shift from external to internal religious expression.

Luther, we grant, overcame the bondage of *piety* by replacing it by the bondage of *conviction*. He shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith. He turned priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests. He freed man from outer religiosity because he made religiosity the inner man. He freed the body from chains because he enchained the heart.²⁷

These sentences have a distinct dialectical balance, emphasising the profound shift brought about by Luther. All the external forms of religious expression – such as piety, authority, priests, and the body – were internalised. Religion became a matter of conviction, faith, laity, the heart, and the inner person. We may recast the distinction in terms of the shift from the public to the private, insofar as the private was not a given but was invented in the process itself. Luther did operate with a given distinction, but in many respects reinvented the internal and the private – which is very much part of the first stage of radical revolutionary criticism. At the same time, the dialectical point is not that all of this was simply internalized, as though one had retreated into a cloister. No, this internalization was a very public and indeed democratic move. Private inwardness of religious expression was made available for all as a common experience. The monk became a man of the world.

I am not the first to note the anticipation of Max Weber's point that monastic discipline became universalized.²⁸ Indeed, elsewhere Marx makes the connection between Luther and Adam Smith – picking up Engels' point that Smith was the "new Luther"²⁹ – to suggest that Luther's internalization of faith, the priesthood, and religiosity has an analogous expression in Smith's proposal that private property is an internal reality rather than an external condition.³⁰ In *Capital*, this point becomes an undeveloped aside: Roman Catholicism is an externalized form of expression, suitable for a monetary system, while Protestantism is appropriate to the internalized realities of credit and commodities.³¹ Yet this point is less dialectical than Marx's observations on Luther, which I have been examining in some detail. Instead of homologies between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Marx's argument is

²⁷ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," 182; Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," 386.

²⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1904–5, repr. 1992); Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991).

²⁹ Engels, "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 3:418–43, here 422; Engels, "Umrisse zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie," in *Marx Engels Werke*, 1:499–524, here 503.

³⁰ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 290–91; Marx, "Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844," 530–31.

³¹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 90; Marx, *Das Kapital. Erster Band*, 93; Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, 587; Marx, *Das Kapital. Dritter Band*, 606.

that Luther universalizes Christianity by internalizing it and in the process creating, as it were, a whole new category of religious and indeed human existence. This constitutes the first stage of revolution.

At the same time, this acknowledgement of Luther also identifies the limits of his revolution. Let us return to the earlier quotation: the first and last sentences indicate that the Lutheran revolution brought with it new types of servitude. Luther may have liberated people from external forms of religious expression, but he enabled a completely new way to be enslaved. This was through the heart, through conviction.³²

3.3 The New Revolution

Luther's revolution may have been necessary, a first stage without which the second would not have been possible, but this revolution is by no means enough, falling short and leading to new forms of enslavement. So what should the new revolution, the second stage, seek to achieve? It must focus on both internal and external dimensions. If internalization has been universalized so that laypeople have become priests, the struggle for liberation must deal with the internalized priest. Further, since Luther was a theologian, he focused on other-worldly matters, thereby missing the materialist basis. Or if there was some impact on the world of class and economics, then it was secondary to Luther's main agenda. Marx seeks to make this aspect primary.

An internal – if not personalized – revolution? Is not Marx the great analyst of economics, of the forces and relations of production, and of the need for a socialist revolution? Yet here we find him arguing for precisely such an internal revolution in response to Luther. The new form of servitude is not merely one of economic exploitation, but also one of the heart, due to Luther's internalization of religious conviction and practice. Marx's point is far from petty-bourgeois urgings to change one's personal attitude as a key to changing the world. Instead, he identifies an internal alienation: Luther had internalized the earlier contradictions between layperson and priest, outer religiosity and internal piety, so that they became contradictions embodied within each person (analogous to the tension between the private individual and the citizen of a state that Marx credits to Hegel and seeks to overcome elsewhere³³). The solution? On the one hand, this requires attention to the external conditions of existence, which need to be revolutionized so that the internal contradiction may be overcome. On the other hand, such a transformation requires

³² Here we find an anticipation of the point that would be developed by Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³³ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 3:3–129; Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts," in *Marx Engels Werke*, 1:203–333; Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 3:146–74; Marx, "Zur Judenfrage," in *Marx Engels Werke*, 1:347–77.

a subjective intervention in the very conditions of existence. The conditions do not merely shape who we are, but we can reshape the conditions themselves so that we ourselves can be transformed.

In relation to Luther, Marx argues that the missing element in Luther and the Reformation as such was a popular, mass base. The revolution in Luther's hands was restricted to faith and knowledge, so much so that a common heart could not be found to match the theologian's head. For Marx, this common, popular basis would be found in the proletariat. In this respect, Marx advocates for philosophy to "grip" the masses, for the liberation of the proletariat from its radical chains in a way that will abolish its very status as a class.

Is this charge against Luther fair? To some extent it may be, but if we recall the earlier discussion of Engels, it becomes clear that Luther too had – albeit unwittingly – a more radical edge, which set on their way radical theologians and activists such as Thomas Müntzer and indeed a host of revolutionary Anabaptists (witness the Revolution of Münster in 1534 and 1535). These movements certainly found a way to grip the masses. And in the Italian context, we find none other than Antonio Gramsci longing for an earlier revolution – like the Reformation – in Italy, one that would have grasped the whole of society from bottom to top so that everything changed. As Gramsci observes, "In Italy there has never been an intellectual and moral reform involving the popular masses."³⁴ Like the Protestant Reformation, a communist revolution must shake up all levels of society.

The previous points question Marx's assertion that he is one of the first to discover a mass basis (in the proletariat). Might it be the case that Marx not so much discovered but rediscovered the question of mass appeal? If the Reformation too had such an appeal, albeit in a different register, then Marx's discovery of the proletariat as a revolutionary force constitutes a rediscovery. Therefore, I suggest that "the monk" is more present in "the philosopher" – a second Luther, no less – in Marx's thought than he would care to admit. In other words, Marx's reflections on Luther constitute more of an *Aufhebung* of Luther's revolution. The theological nature of that first stage has been both brought to an end and transformed (*beenden* and *aufheben*). Marx's last sentence of the text I have been exegeting is full of implications: "When all the inner requisites are fulfilled the *day of German resurrection* will be proclaimed by the *ringing of the Gallic cock*."³⁵ The German revolution is none other than a resurrection and the Gallic cock (an allusion to Mark 14:29–31; Matt 26:33–35; Luke 22:33–34) signals the completion of the proletarian revolution that was tasted but stalled with the French Revolution. The resurrection and the crowing cock are of course biblical allusions: Luther would be present in a German revolution, albeit in a way that he would by no means have anticipated.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2:243–44. See additionally Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 258–73.

³⁵ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," 187; Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," 391.

4 Conclusion

Sometimes, however, when I commence
whistling, Dicky treats me as Luther treated the
devil – he turns his ... on me.
Karl Marx³⁶

My analysis has moved from the significant differences between Luther and Marxism on the question of human nature, with the one following a more Augustinian line and the other tending towards Pelagianism, to a greater interaction between them. Engels may still have kept his distance from Luther, whom he identifies as the ideologue of the emergent bourgeoisie (in terms of burghers and progressive princes), but, at the same time, Engels recognizes at some level the radical potential of Luther's message – to be taken up by Thomas Müntzer and other radicals. But it was Marx who provided the most significant engagement with Luther, in terms of the dialectical interaction with the champion of the first German revolution. This is not to say that Marxism is in some way a secularized form of Christian thought, or indeed eschatology,³⁷ but that the relation between Marxism and theology is a far more dialectical and conflicted one. The engagement with Luther is but one example of this relation, albeit a good one.

36 Marx, "Marx to Eleanor Marx in Paris, London, 26 April 1869," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1869, repr. 1988), 43:270–71, here 270–71; Marx, "Marx an seine Tochter Eleanor, 26. April 1869," in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1869, repr. 1973), 32:601–2, here 601.
37 Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev, *Wahrheit und Lüge des Kommunismus*, trans. Ives Schor (Lucerne: Vita Nova, 1934). For a full analysis, see Boer, "Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered," *Mediations* 25 no. 1 (2011): 39–60, available at: <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/marxism-and-eschatology-reconsidered>.