

Marksizm ve Selametin Tarihi (*Heilsgeschichte*) (Marxism and Salvation History)

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The assumption that Marxist narratives of history are secularised versions of Jewish or Christian ones, or indeed that Marxism is a secularised religion, is as common as it is wrong – at least in the way it is usually presented. That qualifier will eventually become extremely important, but let us examine in some detail the initial proposition. Usually propagated with a polemical edge (you may think you are atheistic, but you are really religious deep down), this assertion has gained the authority of countless repetitions.¹ Thus, proponents of this position argue that the theological *heilsgeschichte* has influenced the Marxist narrative of history, which is but a pale copy of its original: the evils of the present age with its alienation and exploitation (sin) will be overcome by the proletariat (collective redeemer), which will usher in a glorious new age when sin is overcome, the unjust are punished and the righteous inherit the earth. The proposal, made without extended engagements with the texts of Marx and Engels, has been deployed for a wide range of purposes. In the hands of Nikolai Berdyaev, early a Marxist but later a theologically inspired anti-communist, or indeed the equally apostate Leszek Kolakowski, it has become the ammunition of anti-communist polemic (Berdyaev 1937; Kolakowski 1981). In the hands of historians such as Karl Löwith it becomes a way of negating the challenge of Marxism by including it within a wider sweep of historiographic analysis (Löwith 1949). In the hands of a philosopher like Alasdair MacIntyre, the assumption becomes an effort to find common ground between his two passions, Christianity and Marxism, for both offer a historical narrative that runs from weakness to strength, with human beings ultimately recovering the moral purity once lost so that we may live once again in a state of grace that transcends historical time (MacIntyre 1971: 111). Or in the arse of a theologian like John Milbank, it is a means for leaping over Marxism by arguing that theology is the *fons et origo* of all modern thought and politics (Milbank 1990: 177-205).²

¹ I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked this question when I have spoken on Marxism and religion in many different parts of the world. This article is a distillation of the answers I have given to those questions.

² Concerning the wider issue of Marxism as a secularised religion, critics may point to the rituals of socialist states, without noting that ritual is a common feature of human activity and thereby not necessarily religious. Or they may suggest that the fervour, utopianism and capacity for martyrdom are drawn from religious commitment, without realising that commitment to any cause may produce such fervour (Bergman 1990: 221). Or they may opine that

My response has three steps. First, I focus on the crucial moments in the texts of Marx and Engels where a secularised version of eschatological Christian history is most likely to occur, especially Engels's complex engagements with the New Testament Apocalypse, Marx's study of Isaiah and then close friendship with the biblical scholar, Bruno Bauer, and then the influence of the apocalyptically minded Moses Hess, who first introduced communism to Marx and Engels. Second, we cannot leave unquestioned the assumed common heilsgeschichte, passing via a redeemer that overcomes the fallen state of humanity in order to usher in the millennium of peace and joy. Is this really the historical narrative Marx and Engels construct? A consideration of the neglected treatment of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology* is necessary at this point. Third, the question remains as to whether Marx and Engels unwittingly used the form of theological history. A theological question requires a theological answer, now in terms of the absolute or relative status of theology and its claims.³

Calculating the Day

At a number of crucial junctures, one may be forgiven for seeing a connection between the writings of Marx and Engels and sacred history.⁴

Bruno Bauer and Marx

To begin with, Marx had occasion to study the book of Isaiah when he was a student at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin.⁵ His teacher was the young Bruno Bauer, who would become a close friend and collaborator before major differences ended the collaboration, although not the friendship. Would not the study of one of the great prophetic books of the Bible with one of Germany's leading, if somewhat radical, biblical scholars have provided Marx with a golden opportunity to appropriate not only the critique of injustice found in that biblical text but also to see the value of an eschatological view of history? The problem here is that Bauer would have been the last to explore the eschatological dimensions of Isaiah and expound on them in glowing terms. For already at this time, Bauer was developing his argument that

Marxism is an atheistic Gospel, a position that was first put forward by the left-leaning priest from the Russian Orthodox Church, Alexander Vvedensky (the Metropolitan of Moscow), in his debate with Anatoly Lunacharsky (Commissar for Enlightenment) in 1925 – without realising that atheism is a red herring within Marxism (Vvedensky 2011 [1925]: 170). For a recent example of this suggestion, see Gabel's superficial analysis (Gabel 2005: 179-83).

³ I should say that I too assumed the validity of this rapprochement between Marxist and Christian histories, but the more I read Marx and Engels as part of a much larger decade-long study of the relation between Marxism and theology, the more it became apparent that the connection fails (Boer 2011a).

⁴ This section creatively summarises a detailed investigation made elsewhere (Boer 2011c).

⁵ This fact is little known, for it can be easily missed unless one pays close attention to Marx's leaving certificate from the university. There we read, regarding the summer term of 1839: 'Isaiah with Herr Licentiate Bauer, attended' (Leaving Certificate from Berlin University 1839 [1975]: 74).

religious dogmatism and free self-consciousness were implacable antagonists. His constant target was the obscene relationship between the ossified established church and the repressive state.

What would Bauer have taught Marx? Here we may consider his book on the Hebrew Bible published the year before. In *Die Religion des alten Testaments* (1838) Bauer had begun to develop his argument that religion is caught in a tension between a false and oppressive particularity and universal free self-consciousness. Apart from bringing Marx up to speed on the rapid developments in that first wave of German biblical criticism at the time,⁶ Bauer had already come to hold that all religion was problematic. By definition, religion was a hubristic effort by a certain particularism – be that individual, group or institution – to lay claim to the abstract universal. As soon as it did so, it became a crass sectarian monopoly that brooked no opposition. One should not be surprised that the church had become close-minded and authoritarian. Even Isaiah, who was far better than the priestly material that lay (as scholarship held at the time) at the earliest layers of the Hebrew Bible, succumbed to this problem. Isaiah might have moved past the law-driven externality of the priests, he might even have expressed that ethical monotheism in which the universal was immanent in the community, but he still held to religion as such, and that was the problem. Bauer's teaching was a far cry from the idea that the prophets were harbingers of the eschaton.

Engels and the Apocalypse

Given that Marx had been divested any eschatological dimension of the biblical prophets, might it not have been Engels who gave Marxism a secularised and eschatological heilsgeschichte? After all, Engels had a lifelong fascination with the biblical Apocalypse. He had brought up as a believing Reformed (Calvinist) Protestant, read the New Testament in the original *koine* Greek and generally kept abreast of recent developments in biblical criticism. In his early texts we find extensive discussions and treatments of the Bible, especially in letters to his close friends, the pastors Friedrich and Wilhelm Graeber,⁷ and in the amusing and well-written poem, *The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible* (Engels 1842 [1975]-a, 1842 [1985]-a).

⁶ The unique social and political factors of Germany at the time, under the autocratic Prussian Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm IV and his regime of censorship, meant that public political debate took place in theological and biblical terms. Not only does this context assist in understanding the immense furor created by David Strauss's mythical and democratic Christ in his *Das Leben Jesu* (Strauss 1902, 1835), but also the first signs of the rise to global dominance of German Protestant biblical scholarship (to which the best minds were channelled by political conditions) as well as the development of Marx and Engels's thought. See also note 11.

⁷ In each case, the German reference follows the English one: (Engels 1839 [1975]-e, 1839 [2008]-d, 1839 [1975]-d, 1839 [2008]-a, 1839 [1975]-a, 1839 [2008]-f, 1839 [1975]-g, 1839 [2008]-l, 1839 [1975]-i, 1839 [2008]-j, 1839 [1975]-c, 1839 [2008]-c, 1839 [1975]-b, 1839 [2008]-b, 1839 [1975]-h, 1839 [2008]-k, 1839 [1975]-k, 1839 [2008]-g, 1839 [1975]-l, 1839 [2008]-i, 1839 [1975]-f, 1839 [2008]-e, 1839 [1975]-j, 1839 [2008]-h, 1839-40 [1975], 1839-40 [2008], 1840 [1975]-b, 1840 [2008], 1841 [1975], 1841 [2008]).

In these texts we find a number of creative engagements with the Apocalypse, yet it never appears in an eschatological sense. Thus, Engels may use its language playfully, to make fun of and attack those who would hold him back (Engels 1841 [1975], 1841 [2008], 1842 [1975]-a, 1842 [1985]-a), or to tease his friend Friedrich Graeber (Engels 1839 [1975]-e, 1839 [2008]-d), or to celebrate his own awakening (Engels 1842 [1975]-b: 238-40; 1842 [1985]-b: 312-14). In other words, Engels's use of the Apocalypse is quite idiosyncratic (see the detailed discussion in Boer 2011a). He uses it for humour, polemic and to provide a language for his own self-discovery – not quite what one would expect in terms of historical expectations, especially as the glorious march of history to an eschatological moment. It is crucial to note that these types of engagements with the Apocalypse peter out by the time he was 25, with the satirical attack on Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner appearing in the final pages of *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1845 [1975]: 210-11; 1845 [1974]: 222-3).⁸

Nonetheless, this is not the last of the Apocalypse in Engels's writings, for many years later he would deploy it in a very different fashion. In the final pages of a famous article, *On the History of Early Christianity* (Engels 1894-5 [1990], 1894-5 [1972]),⁹ published a few months before he died, Engels returns to the same biblical text but now in a very different fashion. It becomes a historical source for an unfamiliar earliest Christianity. Basing his work on Ferdinand Berner and Bruno Bauer, Engels argues that the Apocalypse is the oldest Christian document. Now he can use it as a purely historical source, mining it for information about the beliefs and practices of the early Christians. Above all, he seeks to decode the Apocalypse and show that all those who use it for speculation about the end of history are simply misguided. Assuming a date of composition between late 68 and early 69 CE, it presents a group of Jews (not Christians) who believed the end would come soon. There is no Trinity, for Jesus is subordinate to God, and certainly no Holy Spirit. There is no doctrine of original sin, baptism or sacrament of communion, no justification by faith, and no elaborate story of the death and resurrection of Christ. And there is no religion of love, for the author preaches 'sound, honest revenge' on their

⁸ Similar examples appear in equally early pieces, such as account of the struggle between the Hegelian Michelet and the Pious Leo (Engels 1839 [1975]-a, 1839 [2008]-f), the street fight between the supporters of the two ministers in Bremen, Krummacher and Paniel (Engels 1840 [1975]-b, 1840 [2008]), and his anticipation concerning the overcoming of Hegel (Engels 1844 [1982], 1844 [1973]). He also makes use of the same language laced with biblical quotations and allusions to blast the close ties between the German nobility and an arrogant Roman-Catholic Church (Engels 1840 [1975]-a: 66-7; 1840 [1985]: 98-9).

⁹ Engels had the first hunch concerning this argument as far back as 1841, when he was 21. He writes to Karl Kautsky, on 28 July, 1894: 'There is no hurry about printing the article. Once I have seen to the proofs you can print it when you wish, in September, say, or even October. I have been mulling over the thing ever since 1841 when I read a lecture by F. Benary on *Revelation*. Since then I have been in no doubt that here we have the earliest and most important book in the New Testament. After a gestation period of fifty-three years there is no great need to hasten its emergence into the world at large' (Engels 1894 [2004]: 328-9; 1894 [1973]: 276). The precursors to this final text may be found in 'The Book of Revelation' (Engels 1883 [1990], 1883 [1973]) and 'Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity' (Engels 1882 [1989], 1882 [1973]).

persecutors (Engels 1894-5 [1990]: 462; 1894-5 [1972]: 465). Following Berner, Engels suggests that the infamous number 666 (or 616 in a textual variant) can easily be deciphered through some deft playing with numbers: given that Hebrew used letters of the alphabet for numbers, all we need do is add up the value of *Neron Kesar* (Greek *Neron Kaisar*) and we have 666. So the Apocalypse predicts the end of the ‘beast’, Nero, at the hand of God and ushers in the new age.

Engels’s late engagement with the Apocalypse seems completely at odds with his earlier interest in this biblical book. Once he took up and often mocked the speculation concerning the Last Judgement, but now the book is useful as a window into the earliest form of Christianity. As for its influence on Marxist theories of history, Engels writes, ‘All this has now lost its interest, except for ignorant persons who may still try to calculate the day of the last judgement’ (Engels 1883 [1990]: 117; 1883 [1973]: 15).

Early Eschatological Communism

On two counts Marx or Engels have failed to appropriate a heilsgeschichte for their own historical narrative: while Marx found anything but an eschatological interpretation of the Hebrew prophets when he studied under Bruno Bauer, Engels effectively diffused the apocalyptic effect of the Apocalypse through his own extended engagement with that text. On a third occasion, they become even more explicit, resolutely opposing the early form of communism that leaked over the border from France. These socialists, especially Saint-Simon and Fourier, argued that the original form of Christianity was communist – as found in the legendary accounts of Acts 2:44-5 and 4:32-5 where the early communities had ‘all things in common’ – and sought to transform Christianity’s teachings into codes of ethics, of brotherly love without all the supernatural trappings. This moral vision and sense of progress in human society towards brotherly love inspired thinkers and activists like Heinrich Heine, August von Cieskowski and especially an early collaborator with Marx and Engels, Moses Hess (Breckman 1999: 131-76). It also influenced some of the early leaders of the German communist movement, such as Wilhelm Weitling, Hermann Kriege, Karl Grün and Gottfried Kinkel. Marx and Engels worked tirelessly to excise this very Christian element from the communist movement (Marx and Engels 1846 [1976], 1846 [1972]; 1845-6 [1976]: 484-530; 1845-6 [1973]: 473-520; 1852 [1979], 1852 [1973]). Marx was scornful of this French-derived socialism, which ‘sentimentally bewails the sufferings of mankind, or in Christian spirit prophesies the millennium and universal brotherly love, or in humanistic style drivels on about mind, education and freedom’ (Marx 1852 [1979]: 142; 1852 [1973]: 153).

Most significant of all, Marx and Engels consistently opposed the apocalyptic tone of this early communism, especially as it entered Germany through Moses Hess.¹⁰ In his *Die Heilige Geschichte der Menschheit* and *Europäische Trierararchie*, Hess both introduced communism to Germany and gave it a distinctly apocalyptic tone (Hess 1837, 1841, 2004; see Kouvelakis 2003: 121-66). The popular *Europäische Trierararchie* proposed that the fusion of the Young Hegelian criticism of theology, French socialist politics and English industrial materialism would bring about the total collapse of the existing order and usher in a new age. For Marx and Engels this approach to communism was seriously problematic, if not entirely unrealistic. I would suggest that those who charge Marx and Engels with a secularized eschatological framework have the wrong target in their sights. The charge applies not to Marx and Engels, but to Moses Hess and other early communists to whom Marx and Engels were opposed.

Moving Mountains: Concerning Narrative Structure

In response to the preceding argument – that Marx and Engels consciously set themselves against any version of Christian history, sacred or secularised – one may identify a ready objection: they still absorbed theology and produced a secularised heilsgeschichte, but they did so unawares, sucking up the structure of that heilsgeschichte as a plant absorbs sunshine and water. Their historical narrative is thereby one more example of (to gloss Schmitt (2005: 36)) the suggestion that all theories of history are really varieties of secularised theology. That would mean they absorbed such a narrative structure in the very process of trying to resist it.

But what narrative structure is assumed by this suggestion? Is it a passage from a fall from the state of grace, through redemption and a return to grace? Or is it, as I suggested earlier, one that focuses on the redeemer, now a collective entity (the proletariat or perhaps its revolutionary vanguard), which will save us from our state of oppression and economic injustice (sin) and bring about the glorious era after the revolution when the meek shall inherit the earth and justice abound? Or is it perhaps a version of election, in which the proletariat (the righteous) will smash the bourgeoisie (the unrighteous) and thereby establish heaven on earth? The

¹⁰ The wider political context is also worth noting. For a number of historical reasons Germany in the 1830s and 1840s dealt with a whole range of modern issues through religion, which really means Christianity and the Bible. While France had the radical atheistic criticism of Voltaire and company and while England had the deists, in Germany the debate was restricted to the nature of the Bible. So we find in the early part of the nineteenth century the bombshell of David Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* (Strauss 1902, 1835), where he argued that the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels are mythological, or the arguments of the biblical critic Bruno Bauer for an atheistic and free self-consciousness (Bauer 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1843), or those of Ludwig Feuerbach that religion is actually the projection of what is best in human beings, a projection that leads us to create an entity called 'God' (Feuerbach 1989 [1841], 1986 [1841]). Through these theological and biblical works all of the central questions were debated, such as democracy, freedom (of the press), reason, republicanism, parliamentary representation, and so on. It cannot be stressed enough that these debates took place above all on the territory of the Bible.

problem with each of these quasi-theological versions is twofold: they miss the crucial discovery made by Engels and (especially) Marx and thereby the actual Marxist historical narrative.

One of the signal problems of many assessments of Marxist historical narratives is that nearly everyone seems to know in advance precisely what they are, without having considered Marx's own arguments. So let us do precisely that and focus on a much neglected text that is really the engine-room of historical materialism, where the first breakthrough appears: the well-nigh endless pages on Max Stirner (a pseudonym for Kaspar Schmidt) in *The German Ideology*.

The I of World History: Stirner's Ego

Here Marx and Engels pull to pieces the ramshackle work by Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*. For Stirner the key to his fundamental recasting of history is that 'the individual (*Einzelne*) is of himself a world's history (*Weltgeschichte*), and possesses his property (*Eigentum*) in the rest of world history, goes beyond what is Christian' (Stirner 2005 [1845]: 365; 1845: 428). In this light he organises the work into a number of loose historical stages: child, youth and man; Negro, Mongol and Caucasian; ancients (restricted to Greeks and Romans), moderns (Christianity and especially the Roman Catholic-Protestant struggles), and then the discovery of the ego in the present (German philosophy in his own time).

However, the most significant feature of Stirner's argument is its deeply theological nature. Although much of the text is given to pointing to yet another failing of Christianity, every now and then he seeks to appropriate an element for his own project. The pertinent example for our purposes is his appropriation of the incarnation as a model for the ego:

Christ is the I of the world's history, even of the pre-Christian; in modern apprehension it is man, the figure of Christ has developed into the *figure of man*: man as such, man absolutely, is the 'central point' of history. In 'man' the imaginary beginning returns again; for 'man' is as imaginary as Christ is. 'Man' as the I of world history closes the cycle of Christian apprehensions (Stirner 2005 [1845]: 365; 1845: 427).

Stirner has neatly picked up the logic of christology, for in Christ God becomes a human being. Now it becomes interesting, for Christ is not a half-man, half-God, taking on a human body with a divine soul. No, in Christ God becomes a complete human being. Of course, this is where the logic breaks down, for according to orthodox theology Christ is also fully divine. But Stirner focuses on the human dimension – Christ is a man, man as such, man absolutely. This human Christ is the key to the ego. Further, the complete man known as Jesus Christ is also the

‘central point’ of history, the pivot on which history turns. What is good enough for Christ is even better for the ego, for Christ is the paradigmatic ego.

A few lines later Stirner tackles the other side of the christological equation. Christ may have been fully human, but he is also completely God. Human and divine meet in the one person, so Stirner can claim:

They say of God, ‘Names name thee not’. That holds good of me: no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names. Likewise they say of God that he is perfect and has no calling to strive after perfection. That too holds good of me alone (Stirner 2005 [1845]: 366; 1845: 429).

Christology opens up a two-way street: Christ may have become human, but that means human beings may go in the other direction and become divine. Stirner’s ego joins the ride, but with a twist: it is not that the ego wishes to join God or attain God’s status. The simple truth is that God has never existed, so when the ego arrives as wherever God is supposed to be, he finds that he is only one there. That means that whenever we have been talking about God – his perfection, the inability to name him and so on – we have, as Feuerbach had already pointed out (Feuerbach 1989 [1841]), been talking about nothing less than the individual human being all along.

It is not for nothing that Marx and Engels charge Stirner with being a theologian still. One crucial point remains, for now Stirner makes use of Jesus Christ as the paradigm of the lever of history:

That the individual (*Einzelne*) is of himself a world’s history (*Weltgeschichte*), and possesses his property (*Eigentum*) in the rest of world history, goes beyond what is Christian. To the Christian the world’s history is the higher thing, because it is the history of Christ or ‘man’; to the egoist only *his* history has value, because he wants to develop only *himself* (Stirner 2005 [1845]: 365; 1845: 428).

Not only is the egoist’s history the only one that has value, not only is it the principle by which Stirner offers his reinterpretation of the ages of world history, but he does so in response to the Christian schema of that history whose lever is Christ. However much he may protest, he is playing the same game.

So Stirner’s ego, the proud individual dismissing all collective and divine forces, is at a formal level a theological one. In reply, Marx and Engels level some of their strongest polemic at precisely this feature, pinpointing the fact that Stirner offers a reinterpretation of history through theology itself. Or, in more Hegelian language, the incomplete *Aufhebung* of Christology ends up

being more deeply Christological, especially in the question of history. As Marx and Engels put it with reference to 1 Corinthians 17:20), Stirner's faith, specifically in the ego, 'moves all the mountains of world history' (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 157; 1845-6 [1973]: 140).

This biblical allusion is not an isolated occurrence, for in *The German Ideology* a deluge of biblical quotations and allusions swamp the text (Engels's hand is heavy here). More distinctive still is the way the Stirner chapter is structured like the canonical sequence of the Bible. So we find that the first part is called 'The Old Testament: Man' and it includes chapters on 'The Book of Genesis' and 'The Economy of the Old Testament'. Not unexpectedly, the second part is entitled 'The New Testament: Ego' and contains chapters called 'The Economy of the New Testament' and 'The Revelation of John the Divine'. Or, as Marx and Engels put it, the division is between 'the unique history of man (the Law and the Prophets) and the inhuman history of the unique (the Gospel of the Kingdom of God)' (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 120; 1845-6 [1973]: 103). It is of course a very effective way of connecting Stirner at a formal level with the canonical structure of the Bible. The move is astute, even if heavy-handed, for that canonical ordering of a sacred text provides a structure of world history that turns around a crucial lever. That is, Marx and Engels want to make it perfectly clear that at this structural level Stirner is playing the same game, despite his assertions otherwise

Towards Contradiction

What do Marx and Engels do with all of this? They set out to produce something entirely different: a thoroughly non-theological and materialist theory of history, one that does not depend on a world spirit, or an infinite self-consciousness or an ego. Thus, in the second half of this long study on Stirner, Marx and Engels move beyond destructive to constructive criticism, supplying ever more comments and alternative proposals to those of Stirner. A major reason is that Stirner now launches attacks against property, competition, labour, money, revolution, love and freedom of the press. Above all, he maintains a persistent critique of any form of the collective, whether the closed-in circle of the family, or the collaborative hold on power by the aristocracy, or the rise in his own time of the party, or the state itself, or the fatherland, common weal, mankind and especially the communists.¹¹ Released from all these constraints is the individual, the ego, which becomes the key to history, the fulcrum on which history turns.

¹¹ The problem, argues Stirner, is that the various liberalisms really retain society and the state. One may argue for responsible citizenship, for the need to respect the rights of one another. Another may say that the state and society are undesirable, but then slips them in the back door. Why? Because the state is needed to ensure that liberal values are upheld. All of which gives Marx and Engels plenty of ammunition with which to charge Stirner with being a true liberal, defending the private individual even against state institutions that seek to protect that individual.

Marx and Engels disagree, strongly, for Stirner has mystified rather than clarified history. The problem is that he has not made a revolutionary break at all, following in the tradition of speculative, idealist German philosophy. Or, as Marx and Engels put it, Stirner is still beholden to Hegel, albeit with less finesse than his master. This argument is closely tied in with the criticism that Stirner merely expresses the particular world-view of the petty bourgeoisie. All Stirner does is provide an ideology of the individual with no sense of the social embeddedness of such an individual, who thereby is abstracted into a solipsistic world of his own, an abstract history of 'ghosts'. In other words, there is no break whatsoever with the tradition of speculative German philosophy or, most importantly, with a theological schema of history.

In reply, Marx and Engels begin to construct the various parts of their alternative history, inserting more and more sections that contain their own proposals. It may be in response to Stirner's comments on property, or money, or labour or competition, but we encounter increasingly complex and alternative presentations of a materialist version of these topics. The interventions are most persistent in the last hundred pages, where Marx and Engels begin to clarify matters for themselves. Thus, when they begin to tackle the topic of law, they weave in more and more materialist replies into their argument with Stirner. And then at certain moments there is need for a larger comment on law, which ends up being a brief history full of modes of production, class, economics and politics (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 328-30, 335-6; 1845-6 [1973]: 163-5, 170-1, 201, 207-8, 211-13, 229, 237-8). Before long, this practice becomes standard: in the context of their materialist critique of Stirner we find ever more expansive explanations. They follow one after another: crime, society, private property, competition, revolution, labour, money, exploitation, class, contradiction, as well as language, railways and food.

Rather than explore each topic in detail, I will focus on the issues of exploitation and class, for they led us to the crucial category of contradiction. Stirner's treatment of 'usefulness' is the trigger for the discussion of exploitation (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 408-14; 1845-6 [1973]: 163-5, 170-1, 201, 207-8, 211-13, 229, 237-8). For Stirner, 'usefulness' is the only way human beings actually relate to one another: you, as an object, may be useful to me or you may not. Marx points out that this theory of mutual exploitation has a long pedigree. But the theory does not appear in a vacuum, the product of pure speculation. No, it comes into its own with the growth of the bourgeoisie and commercial social relations. Without going into the detail of Marx's exposition here, let us focus on this connection between the theory of exploitation and class. In this situation, the theory becomes the necessary correlate to a rising bourgeoisie, for as the theory of exploitation became the central and over-riding universal economic concept, thereby enabling political economy to become a distinct science, so also did the bourgeoisie no

longer present itself as a particular class but as the universal class which determines all others. When it had achieved this status, the abstract and universalising theory became an explanation and apology for the capitalist relations which were spreading their roots rapidly throughout Europe.

In this brilliant analysis, Marx shows how the rise of this theory of exploitation could not happen without the assumption of class. Armed with this category, Marx shows how personal and distinctly individual interests develop into the common and general interests of a class (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 245-6; 1845-6 [1973]: 227-9). Thus Stirner too, despite his protests, finds himself located in a class situation. But Marx forestalls his protests by pointing out that this class connection takes place against the will of individuals. What we have here, he says, is a contradiction between individual and collective interests. Stirner may think he is a pure ego, independent of any class, but he cannot avoid the fact that his individual interests are in fact characteristic of a whole class, the petty bourgeoisie. The explanation for the contradiction may be found in the nature of production, for the contradiction between individual and class is but an expression of a deeper contradiction in the mode of production, and that is nothing other than the division of labour.

Another example of the way Marx's analysis moves inevitably to matters of class and contradiction appears in his later comments on class within a mode of production (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 418-20; 1845-6 [1973]: 403-5). Distinguishing between the revolutionary 'vocation' of the oppressed class and the dominating vocation of the ruling class, which tries to impose its ideology on the proletarians, Marx identifies a basic contradiction – that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In other words, class is inevitably a contradictory category, which itself arises from the conditions of production. How does this work? A little earlier (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 289-90; 1845-6 [1973]: 270-1), Marx describes a proletarian who needs to work fourteen hours a day even to survive; he is thereby reduced to a beast of burden, or even worse to an article of trade or even a thing. Opposed to this proletarian is a bourgeois who believes that the particular task of domination of the proletarian is in fact a universal human task. In response the proletarian has, given his circumstances, no option but to revolutionise his own conditions and overthrow the bourgeoisie. Or, as Marx puts it, when 'the bourgeois tells the proletarian that his, the proletarian's, human task is to work fourteen hours a day, the proletarian is quite justified in replying in the same language that on the contrary his task is to overthrow the entire bourgeois system' (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 290; 1845-6 [1973]: 271).

Thus, in this text on Stirner, Marx develops the first, albeit rough, outline of a historical materialist narrative. It follows a basic dynamic of class identity and conflict, one that operates

according to a fundamental contradiction that leads to a revolutionary communist position. In other words, Marx seeks to oust Stirner's lever of history, the ego, and produce a very different one indeed. But what is that lever? Or is it a lever at all? It is certainly not the proletariat as a secular saviour. Is it class and especially class conflict? None of these apply, although the latter comes closest, for the key is contradiction itself. Towards the close of the section of Stirner, Marx finally lays out the explanation before us (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 431-2; 1845-6 [1973]: 417-18). Within productive forces exists a contradiction, one that is based on the insufficiency of those productive forces. That insufficiency means a few who are able to satisfy their needs gain control of the limited productive forces while the rest fall under their sway. Inevitably this tension, or the desire of the oppressed class to satisfy its needs, leads to the overthrow of a narrow-minded ruling class that cannot see the problem. In Marx's words: 'Thus, society has hitherto always developed from within the framework of a contradiction – in antiquity the contradiction between free men and slaves, in the Middle Ages that between nobility and serfs, in modern times between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat' (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 432; 1845-6 [1973]: 417). No-one will miss the echo of the opening lines of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Here is a new pivot of history and thereby a historical narrative that is qualitatively different from that of Stirner, or indeed Hegel or theology, for it is a contradiction within the mode of production.¹² Contradiction becomes the Archimedean point by which history shifts from one epoch to the other, specifically in the way contradiction between productive forces and relations of production reaches a crisis, namely, the moment of revolution.

I have traced the shape of Marx's argument in some detail, for in the Marxist-theological tussle over history it is vital to be clear concerning the nature of the Marxist narrative. That narrative turns out not to be one that moves from a state of sin to grace through a redeemer, or one that sees the elect vanquishing the damned and inheriting the earth; that is, it is not derived from and thereby 'secularised' from a theological heilsgeschichte. Instead, the Marxist historical narrative turns on contradiction between the forces and relations of production, a contradiction that then opens up the possibility of a new mode of production that attempts to overcome those contradictions.

¹² A more systematic account of the division of labour, class, class conflict and the contradiction at the heart of all modes of production appears in the first section on Feuerbach, but only, as I pointed out earlier, because Marx and Engels pieced that account together from the struggle with Stirner. What are now sections III and IV of the initial chapter on Feuerbach originally emerged from the treatment of Stirner (Marx and Engels 1845-6 [1976]: 59-93; 1845-6 [1973]: 46-77). They now form part of that famous first and somewhat rough statement of historical materialism.

Conclusion: Relativising Theology

I have argued at some length that Marxism does not offer a secularised form of heilgeschichte, either at the level of explicit content or of implicit form. Does this conclusion, then, exclude all dimensions of contact, all crossovers between the two on the question of history?¹³ Or is there a bridge between the two? The point of contact may well turn out to be the very abstract question of the pivot or lever of history. As we saw, the Marxist lever or turning point is contradiction, which is a far cry from the ego, Christ, or even collective human agency. The natures of these pivots seem to be qualitatively different. Yet, if we move to a higher level of abstraction, then a likeness does begin to emerge: the very effort to construct a world history in the first place, especially one that turns on a crucial fulcrum, may be seen as analogous to the biblical and theological structure of history.

On this matter I am ready to admit that a possible connection exists, although one needs to be exceedingly careful – as the above argument shows – in identifying such a connection. Thus, while the very nature of the pivots is qualitatively different, it also indicates an abstract and formal affinity. The role of contradictions as both enabling for the rise of modes of productions and disabling, so much so that these contradictions become the mechanism for transition to other modes of production, is distinctly different from a biblical or theological narrative in which one moves from paradise, through sin and redemption to a state of grace. Yet the very existence of a pivot, if not the need for a grand historical narrative at all, is indeed a point of contact, even if we are now at a very general and abstract level.

Now at last, with a point of contact, is it time to deploy my last argument. All hitherto efforts to argue that Marxism involves a secularised heilsgeschichte assume – in stronger or weaker versions – that theology or the Bible function as sources, as origins for Marxism. The problem is that such an argument absolutises theology and gives the Bible almost divine power as the ultimate and absolute source of all conceptions of history. That is, such arguments themselves rely on a theological position. They also confuse temporal priority – in this case in regard to the Bible – with ontological priority. The latter is by no means a necessary correlate of the former, although theologians and biblical critics often seem to think so. Against such absolutising, the need for relativising the claims for theology becomes apparent: theological language is not absolute, but rather one mode for speaking of history, or indeed of the human condition, suffering, subjectivity and collectives. Other modes have existed and exist, without any need to refer to theology, thereby relegating theology to a viable place alongside many other

¹³ Here I think not of the myriad and overlaid engagements with the Bible and theology that one finds throughout the work of Marx and Engels.

discourses. As Lunacharsky points out, Christian theology is ‘only a form, one of the many forms that social-economic progress can take’ (Lunacharsky 1911: 163).

All of which makes it much easier to see how carefully and precisely identified contacts between Marxism and theology may be understood. In the context of this specific discussion concerning history, that contact is restricted to the abstract level of the pivot of history and the need for grand historical narratives. Yet those overlaps do not function in terms of origin and derivative, source and appropriation, but rather as two possible languages for speaking about history at all. Once we have this relativising move, the critiques of Marxism as a secularised heilsgeschichte lose their bite. So also may we appreciate in a different way the myriad engagements with, citations of and allusions to the Bible and theology in the Marxist tradition (Boer 2007, 2009, 2011b, 2011a). I would also extend this approach to the various efforts to introduce theological themes into Marxism, from Kautsky’s ‘new gospel [*ein neues Evangelium*]’ (Kautsky 1910 [1892]: 230-1) to Lars Lih’s ‘great awakening’ (Lih 2008 [2005]), for they too trade on the translations between two different languages or codes for speaking of history, revolution and the future. Yet in neither case is the language ontologically absolute, for each is all too aware of its relative and limited status, with its own benefits and drawbacks.

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