

**MAKING HEAVEN FROM A HEARTLESS WORLD:
MARX AND HUMAN EMANCIPATION**

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ABSTRACT

Given the political and social problems of postmodernity, what can be learned from Karl Marx's theory of human emancipation? Although Marxism has largely been abandoned by the Left, Marx's insights on the illusions and oppression fostered by capitalism remain a much-needed critique of hegemonic structures in Western society. For this reason we should not shun Marx for his revolutionary politics; it is relevant now more than ever to reexamine his philosophical writings on the nature of emancipation. Whereas religion and liberal politics convince subjects they are free, Marx exposes their hidden agenda: to conceal the underlying injustices against the working classes, injustices constitutive of capitalism's very survival. Only the universal, self-transcendent, and often violent emancipation of all humans as one class can achieve real, unembellished freedoms for humanity, not just the owners of capital. At the same time, we must think not only with Marx but against him. Because Marx's own agenda relies upon outdated, Enlightenment ideals of homogeneity and objective rationality, I endorse instead a democracy of agonistic pluralism to best pursue the still incomplete project of human emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

In an age when liberal democracy has triumphed over all political alternatives, when the dream of global, proletarian revolution has crumbled with the fall of the Berlin Wall, what can contemporary thinkers learn from Karl Marx and the project of human emancipation? Marx's writing, however polarizing, continues to cast serious doubt on the virtues of capitalism and its accomplice in political liberalism. Faith, free markets, and democratic freedom – the holy trinity toward a Western conception of the good life – satisfy only the few who benefit, who control the means of production. But for Marx, a witness to the systemic oppression and exclusion of the working classes, a deepening of real equality and real freedom comes about only through the formation of class consciousness and revolutionary struggle. This struggle is not the endpoint – rather, it is the transformative journey toward “human emancipation.” What Marx means by human emancipation, however – a concept of universal self-transcendence in a post-capitalist world – has yet to be fulfilled.

Working with his early writings, I argue that, for Marx, the fullest progression of human emancipation must unfetter one and all *sans* divisions by first abolishing religion – humanity's illusory self-consciousness – and thereafter the state – humanity's illusory political liberties. Both steps must be carried out in tandem if humans are to descend from heaven's grip and back to earth, at which point they may struggle toward real happiness and against injustice in the forces and relations of production.¹ Moreover, doing so through well-organized and often violent revolution will achieve Marx's philosophical vision of a unified totality: the collapse of all social contradictions and antagonisms ensnaring humanity in complacency and alienation. One must be careful in accepting Marx's premises at face value, though. A more nuanced reading is required. While Marx's insights on emancipation and illusion have provided a useful lens for analyzing capitalism – specifically its relationship with contemporary, dubiously liberal democracies – Marx warrants his own kind of criticism for oversimplifying social relations into what I call a “fantasy of homogeneity” and neglecting the possibilities for radical democracy in place of global revolution.

SEARCHING FOR HUMAN EMANCIPATION

Human emancipation, despite its prominence in Marx's early writings, unfortunately never receives a clear definition. Marx champions the idea as the proper alternative to the rise of religious and political

emancipation in the liberal age, but only in the abstract. What can be discerned, though, is that Marx's ideal of human emancipation comes close to un-alienated labor and human codependence achieved through communal, egalitarian life – concepts Marx would explore more substantively in his later works. As far as the young Marx is concerned, human emancipation serves as a reaction not only to his theory of alienation in labor, but also to the Hegelian defense of the state as the perfection of human freedom. To Marx, rights provided by the state are disingenuous at best and oppressive at worst, and yet either way they are socially entrenched. Emancipating all humans, then, cannot be achieved by “[leaving] the pillars of the building standing”; instead, it demands the complete “dissolution of the existing social order,” whereby all spheres of civil society, all individuals, will merge into one proletariat class to both destroy and redeem humanity.² Only then can humanity discover real freedom – free from abstractions and alienation.

This claim deserves a good deal of unpacking. As Marx distinguishes between various kinds of emancipation in his writing, it is necessary to understand the relations between incomplete religious and political emancipation and that of universal, human emancipation. To do so, one must move with Marx through each stage of his argument: first, how the relations of production, or the economic base, create a superstructure of religious and political power; second, how religion and politics erect barriers to real emancipation; third, how humans must cast off religion and the state successively if they are to cast off all abstractions; and fourth, what is ultimately achieved at the end of this drive for human emancipation.

OPIATES OF THE PEOPLE: RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL EMANCIPATION

Marx is first and foremost a critic of presumptions and illusions. Observing early German society, he was appalled by how readily his contemporaries accepted religion and the state as sufficient conditions for freedom. In reality, Marx saw “man... in his uncivilized and unsocial aspect ... corrupted by the entire organization of our society, lost and alienated from himself, oppressed by inhuman relations and elements – in a word, man who is not yet an actual species being.”³ To borrow Tocqueville's phrase, individuals in liberal democratic systems are thrown back forever upon themselves: isolated from others, from their own value, and governed by abstract spiritual and political forces that are prematurely embraced.⁴

How did this illusion of freedom become so embedded in society? For Marx, the social relations of production, of humanity's economic conditions under capitalism, serve as the base from which all politics, culture, ideology, and religion bloom in the superstructure. The base generates a never-ending antagonism between worker and capitalist; the superstructure then reinforces the unjust conditions under which individuals labor, with the modern state apparatus overseeing the health of the bourgeois political economy. Together, they foster what Marx calls a “heartless world.”⁵ Given the oppressive dialectic between base and superstructure, it is no wonder humans turn to abstract concepts for a false sense of emancipation, concepts which Marx finds wholly inadequate for human dignity.

To pull apart the illusions of religious and political emancipation, Marx must begin first with his critique of religion, for at the heart of the matter, “the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.”⁶ Religion, for Marx, is but a “reflex of the real world.”⁷ It has abstracted away the foundations of society and left humans treading on air, suspended by their devotion to an alien god. For when humanity invented a god to soothe the sigh of the suffering worker, the mere idea of god developed its own sovereignty over humanity, promising emancipation in exchange for complacency on earth. Thus Marx, in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, echoes the words of the Greek hero Prometheus: “I hate all gods,” adding that they “do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity.”⁸ Marx draws this critique primarily from Feuerbach, who asserts that humanity is and must be its own deity in order to self-transcend. One must recall, however, that Marx's religious criticism is largely confined to Christianity. Just as the state is the highest form of political fulfillment for Hegel, so, too, is Christianity assumed to be the highest form of faith. Profoundly influenced by Hegel's philosophy, Marx's account of religion, which he assumes can be applied universally, can only contextually be considered within a Judeo-Christian framework.

With this in mind, if humanity is to discover the truth of the world, Marx argues they must shed that “other-world of truth,” that theological dream that always remains a dream.⁹ To overcome the illusion of religious emancipation is to face an internal and external battle. It is the “struggle against the

priest outside [man] himself, but ... [also] against his own internal priest, against his own priestly nature."¹⁰ This twofold struggle requires unprecedented self-change, a disintegration of humanity's old patterns of worship, whether to the alien god of Christianity or the alien god of profit. In doing so, Marx says, "the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions."¹¹ And when this critique of the sacred has dismantled its mystical stronghold on consciousness, humanity can advance to a critique of the secular.

Having disarmed religious emancipation, Marx can now challenge the idea of political emancipation, turning "the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics."¹² By the mid-nineteenth century, political and economic liberalism had ascended in popularity. The liberal state, in particular, began to offer a new breed of citizenship, one that theoretically positioned the rational individual at the nucleus of the system with a sacrosanct package of rights and protections. So transformative was this state-sponsored autonomy in the history of political thought that even Marx acknowledged its achievement. "Political emancipation," he remarked, "is indeed a great step forward."¹³ But once again, it is not yet human emancipation.

Marx's criticism of political emancipation relies on an objection to the social system itself: liberal values splinter society into particularistic groups which, by their very nature, prioritize the self-interest of private gain (political right) over a communal, civic-republican sense of social responsibility (political equality) – a responsibility, in Marx's words, to the "species being." Consider that liberal rights and justice rest on the premise that individuals must be protected from other individuals who threaten their rights. This social isolation, an externality of liberal citizenship, is "the splitting of man into public and private ... the disintegration of man into Jew and citizen, Protestant and citizen," and so on into increasingly pluralistic subdivisions.¹⁴ As each individual struggles for his or her own emancipation without concern for others, the community withers. Moreover, as each individual struggles in isolation against what is ultimately a consolidated class of capitalists and commodities, each individual becomes increasingly subjected to and alienated by the capitalist forces of production. Liberal citizenship is not a benevolent gift from the state to the individual: it is a sham, an untruth that allows the state – that abstract agent of the superstructure – to condition and constrain the actions of individuals in perpetual isolation. As Bentley Le Baron notes, "our capacities for 'citizenship,' by which Marx means our capacities for social creation and enjoyment, remain shriveled and stunted" when subjected to political emancipation.¹⁵ Incomplete and insincere, liberal citizenship is a far cry from Marx's idea of freedom because it so callously deceives individuals into believing their formal rights – rotten carrots from the capitalist in place of the stick – are actually for their benefit.

If religious and political emancipation is unsatisfactory to Marx, how, then, can human emancipation achieve what God and state failed to give humanity? By the binding of individuals in the "human world," as Marx calls it, rather than one filtered and concealed by abstractions; by the collapse of all dualisms and contradictions that subjugate the working class; by a call for revolution that does not just include Jews or Christians, but all men and women in a consolidated class; and the abolishment of capitalism, private property, and the aforementioned opiates administered by religion and the state. Marxists, however, should not forget that this revolution requires force against force, violence against violence. Could this drive toward human emancipation be too self-destructive for its own good, negating the community of the species-being it aspires to forge in a post-capitalist world? Perhaps – as a result, the threat of proletarian self-subversion should not be forgotten. But for Marx, given the logical insufficiencies of religious and political emancipation, the only way forward from oppression and alienation is violently out of the system that breeds it.

ILLUSIONS: AGONISM AND THE FANTASY OF HOMOGENEITY

What can be extracted from Marx's theory of human emancipation? Despite the historical failure to foment a successful, global revolution, Marx's insight into the dangers of religious and political emancipation offers a relevant lens for analyzing contemporary states. How telling it is that his critiques of religion, liberal values, and the symbiotic relationship between capitalism and the state have not lost their luster. Instead they have gained new urgency in the neoliberal age. One need only look at Foucault's studies of power and governmentality to read Marx between the lines. Individuals today are both

subjects to the state, which constrains their conduct through the strategic deployment of biopower, and also self-regulating subjects, conditioned to make rational calculations in order to maximize private interest – or, as Marx would counter, the inherent interests of the ruling capitalist class.¹⁶ The capacity of individuals for political influence and participation continues to wane under the gilded forms of late capitalism, a globalizing force which has severely devalued labor, as Marx predicted, while corporatizing liberal democracies into elite-run techno-oligarchies. This phenomenon particularly stings because, over a century after Marx's writing, late capitalism offers a disturbingly similar, if not more complex ruse of political emancipation. Humanity has not demanded an end to illusory emancipation as Marx has hoped; it has merely developed new methods of layering illusions on top of all the old, bourgeois deceptions.

Marx's analysis, however, is not without its shortcomings. His most glaring oversight follows what I have described as a "fantasy of homogeneity," or the idealistic claim that universal emancipation can be achieved by collapsing all contingent class, cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and sexual identities into one, revolutionary, proletariat class guided by a common ideology. Before interrogating Marx, we might turn to an earlier, equally polarizing philosopher for a moment: Rousseau and his development of the Social Contract. Rousseau's romance of the general will has received widespread criticism for abstracting away human differences and theorizing a society built upon omnipotent, perpetual unity. In his vision of utopia, decisions made by the general will are "always right and always tend toward the public utility."¹⁷ But this vision of harmonious decision-making resists a reality of sometimes irreducible political antagonisms, one where an inclusive, rational consensus could never be achieved without an oppression and exclusion of those who differ from democracy's "surety of self-identity."¹⁸ Marx sees this fallacy clearly. He does, in turn, endorse a politics of struggle – one that goes as far as to call human emancipation the destruction and redemption of humanity *en masse* – but ultimately, he fails to move beyond Rousseau's conceptual flaws driven by Enlightenment discourse.

If human emancipation is to empower and liberate all humans, it would be naïve to claim the inherent divisions within society could be overcome simply by dissolving different classes and groups into one revolutionary class, let alone assume such a class could reach a coherent, unanimous strategy toward utopia. One can argue this from a sociological or psychological standpoint – namely, that Marx's rejection of human nature is in fact a convenient abstraction in his very battle against abstractions. This was precisely Bakunin's critique of Marx's revolutionary program: that Marx's depiction of the proletariat and its subsequent dictatorship failed to account for the complexities in human nature, which, Bakunin thought, would always lead to the corruption of power.¹⁹ For our purposes, I will not explore the various critiques of Marx's revolutionary program. Instead, I will gesture toward a more realistic alternative to Marx's homogeneous approach, even if it lies beyond the parameters of the Marxist paradigm. This alternative requires that, above all else, we recognize difference – an understanding of politics where a multiplicity of identities among citizens are contingent and heterogeneous, where their pluralistic group conflicts are a necessity to combat oppression, and where procedural rules do not falsely equalize all groups.²⁰ In this way, the resolution of systemic injustice is not the foundations on which utopia is built – rather, justice is endlessly pursued *through* an active and combative democratic politics. If Marxists in the postmodernity wish to propose a more realistic redemption of society through revolution, they must chart an approach that organizes these natural divisions into a drive for emancipation rather than abolish them completely.

Incorporating the politics of difference into emancipation requires a more nuanced understanding of oppression and the fallacies of universality, rationality, and homogeneity – an understanding that Marx's analysis is too vague and too narrow to provide. In this new light, Marx's ambitions for global revolution might be abandoned altogether and replaced instead with a strategy toward a radical democracy of agonistic pluralism, a model championed by radical democrats such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Such an analytical tool helps to "create the conditions for a conflictual consensus" through the legitimation of pluralistic conflict and the rejection of any final, fixed, and superior conception of the good life.²¹ It also reopens democratic practice to the participation and dissent of different identities while constantly proposing counter-hegemonic alternatives to power. The ultimate goal of all of this is, simply, to "extend the principles of equality and liberty to an increasing sphere of social relations."²² Such language may lack the fire of Marx's dramatism, and yet its message shares the same, core principles as the drive for human emancipation.

Marxism, for many on the left today, is an unsalvageable project. Because of its tendency toward class reductionism and the bad stamp it received from the Soviet totalitarian model, its credibility both as a metanarrative and a revolutionary strategy has never quite recovered. But radical democratic theorists break with Marxism on an even more fundamental, aforementioned point: revolution through homogeneity might result in the negation of the species-being through the destruction of its own, possible community. Radical democratic theorists would seek instead a more grounded alternative at the level of the political that turns Marx's "antagonisms" into agonism and enemies into adversaries. What results, theoretically, is a respect for conflict that, while sometimes unanswerable, provides a legitimate, fluid forum for mediation and dissent. "While we desire an end to conflict," Mouffe says in *The Democratic Paradox*, "if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena."²³ Hence radical democrats contend they continue the "great emancipatory struggle" that Marx began by critiquing — indeed raging against — the contradictions inherent to liberal philosophy. To Marx's likely disdain, however, their project would be conducted from within the boundaries of the capitalist mode of production, not beyond. Self-transcendence would be scrapped.

Given the irreversible mark of the democratic revolution on modernity, perhaps Marx's ideal of human emancipation must remain just that — an ideal. Real, substantive, and universal freedom and equality can be more reliably achieved today by playing the democratic game, but that does not preclude the possibilities for transgression, by which I mean to "expose" and stretch the boundaries of democratic life.²⁴ From an anti-essentialist standpoint, radical democratic theory can reenvision the way citizens both engage and challenge democracy and the discursive flaws of liberalism that come saddled with it. And in practice, it is ultimately through various modes of continuous and local resistance against neoliberal power that citizens can work to further Marx's emancipatory project without taking on the ontological threat posed by global revolution.

CONCLUSIONS

Human emancipation through revolution may never have come to fruition, but Marx still laid the foundations for what Hannah Arendt would call a significant new beginning. Whereas bourgeois political economists had pulled the wool over the eyes of Marx's contemporaries, Marx himself was theorizing new ways of seeing. Religious and political emancipation, constructed by the economic base and reinforced through the superstructure, offers humans compelling illusions of freedom. Criticizing the two in tandem, however, Marx exposes first how humanity's subservience to an alien deity has obscured the truth of humanity's own divinity. Abandoning the false premises of a heavenly world, humanity can then see similar deceptions in the modern state. Hegel may have been right that the state was a profound historical achievement, but the state's allegiance has always belonged to the survival of the capitalist political economy, manipulating human liberties and labor in order to drive the system forward. And from here, Marx lays a battle plan for universal human emancipation by dissolving all social divisions, fomenting violent revolution, and forcing humanity to transcend its old, rotten husk. Marx's agenda, of course, is not without its own abstractions, the most glaring of which neglects the politics of human difference. And yet his creation of an ideal, human emancipation, impossible as it may seem, reveals how starkly humanity has twisted inadequate religious and political comforts into a fool's gold of freedom.

NOTES

¹ By forces of production I mean the union between human labor, the instruments of labor, and raw materials; by relations of production I mean Marx's idea of a set of social relations specific to a mode of production, i.e. capitalism or feudalism. Ultimately, the forces of production mold the superstructure of any given society and thus take precedence over the two. As Marx writes in "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy": "The [productive forces] of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

² Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

³ Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).

⁵ "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction," *ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Karl Marx, "Capital, Volume I," in *The Marx Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

⁸ Although quoted in the preface to this dissertation, the quote in full can be found in Leonard P. Wessell, Jr., *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony and the Proletariat: The Mythopoetic Origins of Marxism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979)

⁹ "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction," *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "On the Jewish Question," *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bentley Le Baron, "Marx on Human Emancipation," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Dec., 1971), pp. 559-570.

¹⁶ Although postmodern and poststructural philosophy have problematized all prior conclusions built upon Enlightenment thought, they nonetheless owe a great debt to Marx, whose ethical and scientific critiques of capital reveal there is indeed much ado about the totalizing force of late capitalism. For more on Marxism's influence on postmodern political thought, in particular, see, e.g. Michel Foucault, "The Subject in Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault (Vol. 3)* (New York: The New Press, 2001); and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations*, Volume 1, Issue 1, pages 11-25, December 1994.

¹⁷ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998).

¹⁸ William Connolly, *Identity \ Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Karl Marx, "After the Revolution: Marx Debates Bakunin," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

²⁰ For more on a post-liberal account of the politics of difference, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

²¹ Allan Dreyer Hansen and André Sonnichsen, "Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism: an interview with Chantal Mouffe," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 15, Iss. 3, 2014.

²² Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?" *Social Text* No. 21, Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism (1989), pp. 31-45

²³ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso Books, 2001).

²⁴ Wayne Gabardi, "Contemporary Models of Democracy," *Polity*. Vol. 33, No. 4 (Summer, 2001), pp. 547-568