



FROM THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION TO THE CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY :THE CONSTRUCTION OF MARX'S THEORY OF HUMAN EMANCIPATION

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Abstract

On the Jewish Question pioneered Marx's concentrated analysis of the relationship between political emancipation and human emancipation, constituting the germination of his theory of ideology. By examining the specific "Jewish Question," Marx grasped the essence of the modern state and its relationship with civil society, thereby gaining insight into the universal condition of religion in the modern world. Marx's critique of religion provided the crucial theoretical prerequisite for the founding of his theory of ideology. The ideas from the critique of religion in the text of On the Jewish Question, further developed through The German Ideology, were finally perfected into a mature theory of ideology critique in texts such as the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. This theoretical path, evolving from the critique of religion to the critique of ideology, ultimately points toward the fundamental goal of achieving human emancipation.

Keywords

On the Jewish Question; Critique of Religion; Ideology; Political Emancipation; Human Emancipation

I. Marx's Critique of Religion

In his two essays from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher period—Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction (hereafter referred to as Introduction) and On the Jewish Question—Marx systematically elaborated his critique of religion. In the Introduction, Marx advanced beyond Feuerbach's humanist critique of religion, clearly proposing a practical path for the thorough abolition of religion (Han, 2009). In On the Jewish Question, by examining the specific Jewish problem, Marx grasped the universal condition of religion in the modern world (Zhang, 2016). Through this examination, Marx not only deeply expounded on why the Young Hegelians' hope of using the state to abolish religion was bound to fail but also grasped the essence of the modern state. He believed that the modern state (political state) is necessarily separated from its foundation—civil society—and that the egoistic principles of civil society (which Marx called the secular basis of "Judaism") would, in turn, gain control over the modern state. This implies that religious or quasi-religious forms of alienation will persist in modern society.

(A) The Attempts and Shortcomings of the Young Hegelians

During the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher period, Marx still maintained close intellectual ties with the Young Hegelians. As Hegel's successors, the Young Hegelians attempted to use philosophy to criticize the realities of Germany and guide it toward becoming a modern state. Marx observed that the Young Hegelians' primary mode of engaging with reality was to engage with its various ideas, including religious concepts as well as political, legal, and moral concepts of a religious nature. They first sought to bring philosophy into the real world through the critique of religion. Through the efforts of figures like Feuerbach and Bauer, the Young Hegelians' critique successfully discredited religion and cleared the path for subsequent critiques. As Marx summarized: "For Germany, the critique of religion has been essentially completed, and the critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique. The profane existence of error is discredited after its heavenly oratio pro aris et focis [oration for altar and hearth] has been refuted." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 3)

This summary shows that Marx precisely grasped the "prerequisite" (Voraussetzung) status of the critique of religion. Religion, as the "heavenly oration" (himmlische Oratio), provides the theological justification for

"profane existence" (irdisches Dasein)—that is, for real-world suffering and irrational political and social structures. Therefore, the critique of religion is the destruction of the "divine halo" surrounding real chains. Once the theological justification is refuted, the oppressive relations of the real world lose their final line of defense, and their discrediting signifies that the "critique of the earth"—the critique of politics, law, and economics—must commence. This indicates that Marx had already clearly recognized that critique could not stop in heaven but must transition from the "critique of heaven" to the "critique of the earth."

However, Marx pointed out that although the Young Hegelians attempted to develop philosophy into a real force, they failed to achieve this goal. This was because, in their eyes, ideas, thoughts, and concepts were the real fetters of mankind, so they believed it sufficient to struggle against these illusions of consciousness. They thought that by replacing theological consciousness with a critical, egoistic, or humanist consciousness, they could eliminate the constraints of religion on people. Marx identified the problem with this view:

"They only fight against 'phrases.' They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world. The only results which this philosophical critique could achieve were some elucidations of Christianity from the point of view of religious history, and even these were one-sided." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 499)

The core critique here is that the Young Hegelians confused "phrases" (Phrasen) with the "real existing world" (wirkliche, bestehende Welt). They remained within the domain of consciousness, mistakenly believing that changing the "phrases" of ideology (e.g., replacing "God" with "Man") would change reality. Marx astutely pointed out that this critique was "in no way combating the real existing world." These "phrases" themselves, no matter how critical, were merely the ideal products of the real world. Therefore, to merely oppose "phrases with other phrases" without touching the material reality that produces them would inevitably be conservative and could not bring about true emancipation.

As a fellow traveler of the Young Hegelians, Marx started from their position but was never confined by their discourse. He sought to transcend them and explore a new path to change Germany's condition. This work began with the two essays of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* period, manifesting as a thorough abolition of religion—that is, to abolish not only religious consciousness but also the real basis that produces it.

(B) "The Jewish Question" and Marx's Critique of Religion

In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx further elaborated on this path of abolishing religion by addressing the specific Jewish question in Germany. Through Marx's critique of Bruno Bauer, we can clearly see that their dispute centered on the problem of the modern state. By critiquing Bauer's *The Jewish Question* and *The Capacity of Present-day Jews and Christians to Become Free*, Marx identified three levels of error in Bauer's thought: Bauer reduced the Jewish question to a religious question; he reduced the religious question to an abstract philosophical question; and he actualized the Hegelian path of abolishing religion through philosophy as a path of defending the modern state. In Marx's view:

"Bauer's error consists in the fact that he criticizes only the 'Christian state,' and not the 'state as such,' that he does not investigate the relationship of political emancipation to human emancipation and, therefore, sets conditions which are only explicable by his uncritical confusion of political emancipation with general human emancipation." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 32)

The essence of this critique lies in the strict distinction between "political emancipation" (politische Emanzipation) and "general human emancipation" (menschliche Emanzipation). What Bauer advocated was political emancipation: the establishment of a secular state in which the state is liberated from religion, and citizenship is no longer dependent on religious belief. Marx argued this was far from enough. Bauer criticized the "Christian state" but failed to criticize the "state as such" (Staat selbst). This "state as such," the modern political state, is the very epitome of human alienation. While it achieves political liberation, it fails to achieve "human emancipation"—that is, the liberation of human beings from the real fetters of civil society, such as egoism and private property. Bauer's error was to mistake political emancipation, a means and a stage, for the ultimate end of "general human emancipation."

To answer this question, Marx, in *On the Jewish Question*, discussed the essence and ultimate fate of the modern state. Regarding its essence, Marx argued that the modern state established on democratic principles (the political state) is the true Christian state (because it relegates religion to the private affairs of civil society, thus completing the abstract overcoming of religion in the political sphere). However, with the advance of secularization and the development of civil society, such a modern state is inevitably overcome by the principles of civil society, represented by Judaism (which Marx extends to mean "egoism" and "money-worship"). This means the

establishment of the modern state is merely a process of separation between an abstract political community (the state) and a real, egoistic civil society. The people are still not liberated from alienation; therefore, within the framework of the modern state, the resolution of the religious question can only be temporary.

Regarding the internal flaws of the modern state, Marx first pointed out Bauer's romantic illusion about it, clarifying that the formation of the modern state does not signify the true abolition of religion. Marx used the United States as an example, noting that according to Beaumont, Tocqueville, and the Englishman Hamilton, even North America, the most secularized and advanced modern nation, "is pre-eminently the country of religiosity." This empirical observation was Marx's most potent evidence against Bauer. North America, the most politically "emancipated" (i.e., the most secular state), was precisely the country where religious belief was most prevalent. This eloquently proved that political emancipation is not human emancipation, nor is it even the end of religion. The state can be "emancipated" from religion, while human beings remain "religious." The deep reason is that as long as humans live in the real alienation of "civil society," they will inevitably seek illusory solace in the "political state" or the "heaven of religion."

Why, then, can the modern state not shoulder this responsibility? Marx argued that the modern state is itself a religion of an abstract nature. On the one hand, the state declares the abolition of differences in birth, social rank, education, and occupation; on the other hand, it still allows private property, education, and occupation to exert influence in their own way. Therefore, as Marx stated: "The state abolishes these actual distinctions, only in its own way... On the contrary, the state allows private property, education, occupation to act in their way... Far from abolishing these actual distinctions, the state only exists on the presupposition of their existence; it feels itself to be a political state and asserts its universality only in opposition to these elements of its being." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 30)

Here, "universality" (*Allgemeinheit*) is the key to understanding the alienated essence of the modern state. The political state can only achieve its "universality" (i.e., declare all citizens equal before the law) precisely by "abstracting" from all "actual distinctions" (*wirklichen Unterschiede*) in civil society—such as inequalities in property, status, and education. The state does not abolish inequality; rather, inequality is its presupposition (*Voraussetzung*). It declares people equal in the political heaven (as "citizens") but allows them to remain unequal on the real earth (as "private individuals"). This structure is just like religion, which promises equality in heaven while tacitly accepting real-world servitude. Therefore, the political state is itself a secular "religion"—an abstract, illusory community that conceals a real, divided civil society.

Marx discovered the similarity between real life and religious life and argued that it is precisely because of this similarity that the modern state is not the abolition of religion but its secular foundation. Marx noted that just as traditional Christians lead a dual life, people in the modern world also lead a dual life: they live in the state, where they are interconnected, equal citizens, and simultaneously live in civil society, where they are differentiated individuals. "The former is life in the political community, in which he regards himself as a communal being; the latter is life in civil society, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as a means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 33)

This is a classic description of modern human alienation: the split between the "citizen" (*Citoyen*) and the "bourgeois" (*Bourgeois*). The core problem is man's "dual life" (*gedoppeltes Leben*): in the "political community" (*politischen Gemeinschaft*), he is an abstract, universal "communal being" (*Gemeinwesen*); whereas in "civil society" (*bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*)—his real, sensuous, material life—he is an isolated, egoistic "private individual" (*Privatmann*), a "plaything of alien powers." This split is the secular version of religious alienation. Religion splits man into a heavenly soul and an earthly body; the modern state splits him into an abstract citizen and a real egoist. This profound insight marks the transition of Marx's critique from a pure critique of religion to a critique of the social reality that produces this split—the true starting point of his critique of ideology.

Through its examination of the fate of the Jews, *On the Jewish Question* profoundly grasped the fate of the modern state and the actual condition of various religious-like ideologies in the modern world. Through the critique of religion, Marx discovered the obstructive role of false consciousness in the pursuit of emancipation, clearly revealing a problem: in a secularized modern world, how can a positive abolition of all forms of ideology be achieved?

II. Ascending from the Critique of Religion to a General Critique of Ideology

Following the path of critiquing various "false conceptions" (represented by religion) established during the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* period, Marx developed his own theoretical system of ideology in his subsequent works.

In the preface to *The German Ideology*, Marx wrote: "Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 499) This passage clearly demonstrates the expansion of the critique. The object of critique is no longer just "God" (*Gott*) but has expanded to all "false conceptions" (*falsche Vorstellungen*), including philosophical and ethical concepts like

"normal man" (der normale Mensch). Marx points out that people "arranged their relationships according to" these ideas, which is the essence of ideology—an inverted consciousness that believes ideas determine (or should determine) real relationships, whereas Marx aims to prove the opposite: real relationships determine ideas.

Subsequently, Marx explicitly proposed his view on ideology: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 525) This is the fundamental proposition of Marx's historical materialism: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being" (Das Bewußtsein kann nie etwas Andres sein als das bewußte Sein). Consciousness is not an independent kingdom; it is merely a reflection of the "actual life-process" (wirkliche Lebensprozeß). The "camera obscura" metaphor is crucial: ideology is an "upside-down" (auf den Kopf gestellt) image. This "inversion" is not a simple error or deception but a necessary phenomenon "arising from their historical life-process." Just as the physical process leads to an inverted image on the retina, the social life-process (especially the division of labor and class antagonism) necessarily produces an inverted ideology—where ideas, the state, law, and God appear to be the driving forces of history, while actual productive activity becomes their derivative. Therefore, the task of revolution is not to "correct" this inverted image, as the Young Hegelians tried to do, but to transform the "actual life-process" that produces it.

Marx's elaboration of ideology theory began with his critique of the philosophy of Strauss and Stirner. He first acknowledged the profound critique of religious ideas made by German philosophers like them: "It is an advance that the supposedly dominant metaphysical, political, legal, moral, and other concepts are reduced to the sphere of religious or theological concepts; and also that political, legal, and moral consciousness is declared to be religious..." "The domination of religion is presupposed... The world has been sanctified on an ever-increasing scale." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 515) Here, Marx affirmed the "advance" (Fortschritt) of the Young Hegelians. They recognized that not only religion but also law, the state, and morality play an equally "sacred" role in modern society; they are all "declared to be religious relations" (zu religiösen Verhältnissen erklärt). However, their limitation was that they only pointed out this phenomenon of "sanctification" (heilig gesprochen) and tried to oppose this "sacred consciousness" with "human consciousness." They failed to ask: Why do these secular relations take on a "sacred" form?

But Marx believed the Young Hegelians' critique had gone astray: "Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in short, all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness... This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in another way, i.e., to recognise it by means of another interpretation. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly 'world-shattering' phrases, are the staunchest conservatives... they are merely combating the 'phrases' of this world." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 499)

This is the sharpest critique of the Young Hegelians. Because they viewed "ideas" as the "real chains," their struggle was confined to the realm of ideas. Marx pointed out bluntly that this "demand to change consciousness" amounts to, at best, a "demand to interpret the existing world in another way," and this "interpretation" precisely "recognises" the legitimacy of the existing world. Therefore, "they are the staunchest conservatives" (die größten Konservativen). Their "world-shattering" phrases" (welterschütternd Phrasen) were merely "combating phrases with phrases," without touching the "real existing world" at all. This marked Marx's definitive break with his former philosophical allies. The critique of ideology, developed from the critique of religion, had to transcend mere critique of ideas and turn to the critique of material relations of production.

Building on the critique of old theories, Marx provided a comprehensive exposition of his theory of ideology in his 1859 Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness... In considering such transformations, a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 2, p. 591)

This is the most classic and mature formulation of Marx's theory of ideology. It clarifies the relationship between the economic "foundation" (realen Basis, or relations of production, Produktionsverhältnisse) and the "superstructure" (Überbau). The "mode of production of material life" (Produktionsweise des materiellen Lebens) "conditions" (bedingt) the "general process of... intellectual life" (geistigen Lebensprozeß). The assertion that "it is their social existence that determines their consciousness" is the mature form of the idea from *On the Jewish Question* that civil society determines the political state. More importantly, Marx identified the true function of "ideological forms" (ideologischen Formen): they are the battleground "in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out." Ideology is not purely "false"; it is the "form" and "arena" in which class conflict unfolds in the realm of ideas.

The greatest contribution of Marx's theory of ideology is its discovery of the material interest relations concealed behind ideological relations:

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production..." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 550)

This passage reveals the material mechanism by which ideology "rules." "Ruling ideas" (herrschenden Gedanken) rule not because of their inherent truth, but because they are the "ideal expression" (ideelle Ausdruck) of the "dominant material relations" (herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse). The class that controls the "means of material production" (materiellen Produktionsmittel) necessarily also controls the "means of mental production" (geistigen Produktionsmittel). This explains why the "rights of man" (like the right to private property) in *On the Jewish Question* were revered as universal truths—because they were precisely the "ideal expression" used by the rising bourgeoisie to maintain their "material relations."

At the same time, Marx noted that the bourgeoisie is adept at using class antagonisms to secure the dominance of its ideology, yet the proletariat can also emerge as the representative of all society to achieve its own emancipation. "It was this circumstance which made it possible for the representatives of the bourgeoisie to... present themselves not as representatives of a special class but as representatives of the whole of suffering humanity." In contrast, "the revolutionary class appears from the very start, merely because it is opposed to a class, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society... it gives its ideas the form of universality, and represents them as the only rational, universally valid ones." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 552)

This comparison reveals the universal strategy of ideological struggle: any revolutionary class must present its "particular interest" (besondres Interesse) as the "common interest of all members of society" (gemeinschaftliche Interesse). The bourgeoisie, in its fight against the feudal aristocracy, successfully "represented" its demand for private property and free trade "as the only rational, universally valid ones" (i.e., "human rights"). The proletariat, in its fight against the bourgeoisie, must do the same. But Marx implies a fundamental difference: the particular interest of the proletariat (the abolition of private property) is the first one that genuinely aligns with the "common interest of all" (the abolition of all classes).

III. From the Critique of Ideology to Human Emancipation

Human emancipation is the fundamental aim of Marxism, running through the entire development of Marx's theory of ideology. Building on the critique of religion, politics, and speculative philosophy, Marx elucidated the socio-historical content of human emancipation. Only by settling accounts with the errors of his predecessors on religious, political, and philosophical questions could Marx truly distinguish his theory of emancipation from theirs. Past philosophers had discovered that man makes religion, not religion man, but they failed to clearly explain why man creates religion. Marx inherited Feuerbach's rational core, affirming that religion is a form of human self-consciousness, but he went further, pointing out that this alienated self-consciousness is the product of an alienated social reality.

"After the truth of the other world has vanished, the task of history is to establish the truth of this world." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 4) This is the mission Marx declared in the Introduction. The truth of the "other world" (Jenseits)—religion—has had its critique completed; the truth of "this world" (Diesseits)—human, social relations—must now be "established" (festzustellen) by "history" (Geschichte). This completes the transition of the task from the critique of religion to social revolution.

To escape the fetters of false ideology, one must first return to concrete reality and history. As Engels wrote in his letter to Mehring (July 14, 1893): "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motive forces... He works with mere thought material, which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, and does not investigate further for a more remote source independent of thought." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 10, p. 681)

Engels's words profoundly reveal the psychological mechanism of ideology as "false consciousness" (*falschem Bewußtsein*). The ideologist (thinker) is not always deliberately lying; he thinks "consciously," but he is unaware of the "real motive forces" (*wirklichen treibenden Mächte*) impelling him. He believes his ideas come from "pure thought" (*reinem Denken*) and fails to investigate the "source independent of thought"—namely, material economic conditions. This perfectly echoes the critique of the Young Hegelians: they were precisely such "thinkers" completing a "process with a false consciousness," unaware that the "human consciousness" they championed was rooted in the very civil society they ignored.

Achieving human emancipation requires the creation of a theory that can convince people. As Marx stated: "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 11)

This passage dialectically clarifies the relationship between theory and practice. The "weapon of criticism" (*Waffe der Kritik*)—philosophical and ideological critique—is necessary, but it cannot replace "criticism by weapons" (*Kritik der Waffen*)—material, actual revolution. How does theory become a "material force" (*materielle Gewalt*)? The answer is "as soon as it has gripped the masses" (*sobald sie die Massen ergreift*). And for theory to "grip the masses," it must be "radical" (*radikal*), it must "grasp the root of the matter" (*die Sache an der Wurzel fassen*). The entire process from the critique of religion to the critique of ideology is the process of Marx's theory becoming "radical" and grasping the "root of the matter" (the economic foundation).

Achieving human emancipation requires us to create a theory that correctly guides people in transforming the world. Whether the proletariat can generate a clear class consciousness from its own nature, how to educate and cultivate this class consciousness, how to overcome petty-bourgeois ideology, and how proletarian class consciousness can function in revolution, construction, and reform—all require our theory not merely to interpret the world, but to adopt a more proactive stance, focusing on changing the world. After all, as Marx famously said: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx & Engels, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 498)

This concluding thesis from the Theses on Feuerbach is the final resting place for all of Marx's critical philosophy. "Interpreting the world" (*interpretiert*) was the task of old philosophy, including that of the theologians, Hegel, the Young Hegelians, and even Feuerbach. They "interpreted" the world using "God," "Absolute Spirit," or "human consciousness." But Marx's critique of ideology proved that all these "interpretations" are themselves "products" of this world, objects that need to be "changed." Therefore, "the point is to change it" (*Es kommt aber drauf an, sie zu verändern*). This announces the birth of a new philosophy: "practical materialism." Starting from the critique of religion, and proceeding through the dissection of the political state and ideology, Marx ultimately pointed to the only path for human emancipation: not to "interpret" the world in thought, but to "change" it in practice.

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