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INTRODUCTION



Turning the World Upside Down: On Marx, Religion, and Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue “Marx and Revolution” and situates its contributions at the intersection of Marxism, political theology, and the question of revolution. It traces how Karl Marx’s critique of religion developed into a critique of the modern state and political economy, and reconstructs the different figures of revolution that emerged from this trajectory. The article then introduces the contributions collected in the first part of the special issue, showing how they engage questions of emancipation, historical possibility, political theology, and revolutionary transformation from a range of Marxist and critical perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Karl Marx; revolution; political theology; religion; political economy; critical theory; history of ideas

This special issue engages with Karl Marx (1818–1883), Marxism, and critical theory in relation to the question of revolution as it intersects with political theology. That intersection is not incidental. Marx’s intellectual and political trajectory started with the critique of religion and then developed towards a critique of the critique of religion that seeks to grasp religion’s earthly conditions and effects. This became the point of departure for a critique of the modern state and the dynamics of modern civil society that ultimately led him to the problematic of political economy, which would occupy him for most of his life. A central theme that unifies Marx’s initial critique of religion and his subsequent critique of political economy is the underlying critique of the power of abstractions. Marx’s critique does not reject them as subjective errors but instead seeks to grasp the social relations that generate them, make them appear independent, and imbue them with real power. This is one of many reasons why Marx remains such a productive interlocutor in relation to political theology; it is also one of the most prominent openings for a critical dialogue with contemporary black studies, a connection that is explored at length in the second part of this special issue.

The special issue consists of ten articles that cover a multitude of different but complementary fields and approaches to the theme, as well as two response essays by Massimiliano Tomba and Franco Barchiesi. Due to the number of contributions, the editors have decided to subdivide the special issue into two parts, each consisting of five articles with dedicated introductions (this being the first of the two) and separate response essays. The first part is titled “The Inverted World” and addresses the intersection of Marxism, revolution, and political theology, while the second part, titled “Beyond Redemption,” addresses this intersection from the perspective(s) of black studies. Because none of

the articles in the special issue directly elucidate Marx's concept of revolution and its intersection with political theology, this introduction will provide a brief overview of this topic to frame the special issue and its contributions. This introduction proceeds in two parts: First, it outlines how Marx's critique of religion developed into a critique of the modern state and political economy, and how revolution emerged as the practical horizon of that critique. Second, it introduces the contributions that make up the first part of the special issue and situates them in relation to this theme.

Marx and the critiques of religion

Marx's famous assertion that the "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" serves as the prelude to his own critique of the (Young Hegelian) critique(s) of religion, which emphasized the earthly foundations and efficacy of religion, as well as his concomitant critique of political theology in his unfinished manuscript "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law."¹ In order to make sense of this statement, however, it is necessary to consider the social, political, and intellectual significance of (the critique of) religion in contemporary Prussia. Religion had been a central political issue across the German Confederation since the Reformation. Prussia was a protestant Christian state within the Confederation, where the reformed denominations had been merged and consolidated into the Prussian State Church [*Preussische Landeskirche*], which was integrated in and subjected to the state by Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840, reigned 1797–1840). The political role of religion became even more central under his son and successor, the politically and religiously conservative Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861, reigned 1840–1861), who promoted religion as the ideological foundation of the social and political order and proactively repressed dissenting voices.²

A group of radicals associated with the prominent Hegelian school of philosophy began to formulate a series of controversial critiques of religion under the relatively permissive reign of Friedrich Wilhelm III. The group later became known as the "Young Hegelians" and included figures such as Bruno Bauer (1809–1882), Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804–1872), Arnold Ruge (1802–1880), and many more. They proposed that the relationship between God and humankind traditionally depicted by religion was inverted: God did not create humankind in his image, rather humankind had created God in its image, as a projection of its universality and limitless potential.³ However, over time, this projection had gained a sort of illusory autonomy and power that stopped humankind from recognizing and realizing its true potential. The figure of God thus came to function as an abstraction from and alienation of humankind's capacities. The Young Hegelians conceived it as their task to uncover and recover this potential to humankind through the critique of religion.⁴

¹Marx, "Introduction," 175; Marx, "Critique of Hegel's"; Marx, "Heft 4," 181; see also Flohr, "From the Critique."

²Breckman, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*, 44, 63, 134–48; Heinrich, *Birth of Modern Society*, 229–30; Toews, *Hegelianism*, 253–4. Given this highly particular historical and political context, it is worth highlighting that the concept of "religion" has been fundamentally shaped by western Europe's historical experience with Christianity and should not be transposed unto other contexts without careful consideration. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 29.

³The designation "Young Hegelians" was first mobilized as a derogatory description in an 1838 pamphlet attacking their atheism. See Leo, *Die Hegeligen*; Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, 78.

⁴See among others Breckman, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*; Toews, *Hegelianism*; Heinrich, *Birth of Modern Society*, 228–321.

Feuerbach formalized this critique of religion with his method of “reformatory critique,” which involved the (re-)inversion of subject (God) and predicate (humankind) in theology, in order to reveal its underlying truth. While the other Young Hegelians conceived their critiques of religion as continuing their master’s work, Feuerbach also extended his critique to Hegel’s speculative philosophy, which he accused of being “the last refuge and the last rational mainstay of theology” on account of the central role played by “spirit” [*Geist*] elevated above humanity and determining its fate among other things.⁵

In “Introduction” Marx conceived religion as an inverted conception of the relationship between humankind and God like his Young Hegelian compatriots. However, he also insisted that a consistent critique of religion could not continue to treat its object religiously, i.e., as a matter of divine revelation. Instead he suggested that it had to consider religion’s foundations in this world, the world of humankind.⁶ Thus the criticism of heaven must turn into the criticism of the earth and Marx argued that the inverted relationship between God and humankind in religion reflected the inverted world that humankind inhabited where society was dominated by the seemingly sovereign modern state (which controlled the church and its doctrines). While the modern state’s power was rooted in society’s collective participation in and obedience to its institutions, its members were incapable of recognizing their own collective agency as the animating force behind the state since they were divided from one another by the individualizing economic competition and class antagonisms of the emerging capitalist system.⁷

The state therefore appeared as an autonomous and omnipotent subject transcending and ruling society from without – an appearance that was codified and perpetuated by contemporary political philosophy, which drew extensively on secularized theological doctrines to formulate theories of state sovereignty *qua* “political theology.”⁸ This was the result of the transfer and transformation of the idea of an absolute and transcendent power from theology into modern political thought, where it became vested in the state, conceived as an impersonal subject transcending and exercising absolute power over its various institutions and subjects. Thomas Hobbes’s (1588–1679) description of the state as a “mortal god” in *Leviathan* and G.W.F. Hegel’s (1770–1831) conceptualization of it as “objective spirit” in *Philosophy of Right* are exemplary in this regard. This political theology efficiently codified and legitimized the state’s seeming sovereignty in relation to society and sustained citizens’ participation in, and obedience to, its institutions.⁹

Marx’s analysis of the dynamics of civil society in the unfinished manuscript was rudimentary, focusing primarily on the role of private property, but he also referred to a section meant to address the dynamics of civil society in more detail that was unfortunately never completed.¹⁰ However, he continued to pursue this theme in the notebooks

⁵Feuerbach, “Preliminary Theses,” 154, 168; see also Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁶Marx, “To Ruge,” 394–5.

⁷Marx, “Introduction,” 176; Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s”; Flohr, “From the Critique of the Heavens”; Dubilet, “General Secular Contradiction.” On the historical complexities of the concept of the human being see also Wynter, “Unsettling Coloniality.”

⁸Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s”; Marx, “Heft 4,” 181. This is what Marx also describes as “the *theological* notion of the political state” in Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 119.

⁹Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 109; Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 276; see also Schmitt, *Political Theology*; Flohr, “Political Atheism.”

¹⁰Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 80, 81.

he compiled in Paris the following year and in his subsequent critiques of political economy.¹¹ The account of his intellectual trajectory in the preface to his 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, emphasized that his “critical re-examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law [*Rechtsphilosophie*]” had revealed that the key to understanding the state and the legal system were the dynamics of civil society, more specifically political economy, which would continue to occupy him for the rest of his life.¹²

His magnum opus *Capital* starts from the commodity, “the economic cell-form” of capitalism, which he insists “abounds in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” before outlining how commodities and their exchange value “appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own,” seemingly independently of “the definite social relationships between human beings” that constitute them as such.¹³ Marx’s critique of this fetish-like appearance of the commodity, reflected in political economy, but rooted in definite social relations, implies structural parallels with his previous works and the possibility of reading *Capital* on the same model, as a critique of economic theology.¹⁴

Figures of revolution in Marx’s thought

Marx’s displacement of the Young Hegelian critique of religion from the misty realm of theology into the world of humankind also suggested that this critique could only be completed insofar as it assumed an earthly or material form capable of (re-)inverting the inverted relationship between state and society, i.e., *a revolution*.¹⁵ This revolution would need to overthrow the seemingly sovereign state as well as the system of private property that underpinned it in one movement; this would lay the foundations for what he called a “true democracy” in “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law.”¹⁶

In a contemporaneous text, he criticized the French Revolution for being “partial” and “merely political” insofar as it had only attained formal legal and political freedom and equality, which concealed and supported the substantial economic “private” inequalities and social contradictions of the modern system of private property (capitalism). This was, at least in part, related to the revolution being led by the bourgeoisie and shaped by their particular interest. Marx suggested that a revolution led by the proletariat would be genuinely universal because they were both politically marginalized and impoverished and therefore had no particular interests within the present order.¹⁷

In a somewhat strange reversal, the initial calls to overthrow the modern state alongside capitalism were muted in the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that Marx

¹¹Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”; Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”; Marx, *Grundrisse*; Marx, *Capital*.

¹²Marx, “Critique of Political Economy,” 262.

¹³Marx, *Capital*, 90, 163, 165.

¹⁴The concept of fetishism denotes the worship of inanimate objects believed to be inhabited by a spirit and/or possessing supernatural powers. See Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, 15–21. For an overview of contemporary (non-Marxist) approaches to economic theology see Dean, “What is Economic Theology”; Schwarzkopf, *Handbook of Economic Theology*.

¹⁵The concept of “revolution” comes from astronomy, where it referred to a cyclical and circular movement, which Marx implicitly invokes in his reference to Nicolaus Copernicus’ *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* but also ties it to the modern political meaning of revolution. Marx, “Introduction,” 176, *passim*; see also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 42, 47; Kumar, “Revolution,” 2112–2121.

¹⁶Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 30; Flohr, “Beyond Political Theology.”

¹⁷Marx, “Introduction,” 184, 186–7; Marx, “Jewish Question,” 165–8, 153–5.

coauthored with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Here it was suggested that the state should be taken over by the proletariat and used (temporarily) to take over the means of production in order to ensure the transition to a classless communist society, where it would cease to exist as such.¹⁸ However, the experiences of the Paris Commune in 1871 made them reassess their position. The 1872 preface to the German edition of *The Manifesto* thus asserts that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes” with explicit reference to the Paris Commune.¹⁹ It was the commune itself, with its councils and imperative mandates, that, according to Marx, constituted “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.”²⁰

In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he advanced a somewhat different account of revolutions focusing on their social and economic foundations. Marx here suggested that societies’ legal, political, and intellectual structures and institutions were shaped by the historically determinate ways that a given society produced the necessities of life. He called this its “mode of production,” which was defined by the interaction between “the material forces of production,” consisting of technology, machinery, and labour power, and “the relations of production,” the property relations that define the class structure of a society and how it reproduces itself. Marx moreover suggested that the development of the productive forces would inevitably render the dominant relations of production antiquated and restraining, setting in motion a period of crisis and class struggle, which could lead to “social revolution” establishing new and more appropriate relations of production, effecting the transition from one mode of production to another along a seemingly linear path towards communism.²¹ However, Marx’s considerations in the *Grundrisse*, the 1873–75 revisions to the French edition of *Capital*, as well as his correspondence with Vera Zasulich (1849–1919), suggests a more complicated image characterized by multiple and contingent pathways (presaged by his insistence on the necessity of a “radical” revolution in the backwards states of Germany in his 1844 “Introduction”).²²

¹⁸Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 504–5. While Marx famously rejected elaborating “recipes [...] for the cook-shops of the future” he did occasionally sketch outlines of the practical transition towards communism. The exact process would later become the subject of fierce controversy within the International Workingmen’s Association. Marx, *Capital*, 99; Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program”; see also Lotte List’s contribution in this issue; on the conflict in the First International see Nimtz, “Marxism versus Anarchism.”

¹⁹Marx and Engels, “1872 Preface,” 175; with reference to Marx “Civil War in France,” 328. In one of the drafts for the latter text, he continues “The political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.” In these texts, Marx formulated himself in a manner very similar to his 1843–44 texts about the necessity of overthrowing the “supernaturalist” modern state-form. See Marx, “Drafts of the Civil War in France,” 533, 484–47; see also Kouvelakis, “Marx’s Critique of the Political,” 88–93; Colletti, “Introduction,” 42–44; Abensour, *Democracy against the State*, pp. 84–88.

²⁰Marx “Civil War in France,” 334, 330ff; see also Ross, *Communal Luxury*. Marx also emphasised three central governing principles of the Paris Commune (1) universal suffrage independent of property and income (2) capping officials’ salaries at the level of the average workers’ wage (3) making all official positions subject to election and recall. See Marx “Civil War in France,” 331; Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 235–36; Leipold, *Citizen Marx*, 372ff.

²¹Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” 263. At this juncture, Marx also suggested that the current capitalist mode of production would be the last to be characterized by class distinctions, since “the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.” Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” 264.

²²Marx, *Grundrisse*; Marx, *Le Capital*; Marx, “Letter to Zasulich”; Marx, “Drafts of Letter to Zasulich”; Marx, “Introduction”; Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 154–236; Shahin, *Late Marx*; Traverso, *Revolution*; Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*; Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 332–6; but see also Neal Spadafora’s contribution in this issue for a contending perspective.

Contributions

The first part of the special issue commences with Lotte List's "Which Human Is Needed for the Revolution? On the Role of Philosophical Anthropology for a Marxist Political Theory." List departs from Carl Schmitt's (1888–1985) polemical claim that Marxism might be able to criticize bourgeois institutions and ideology, but cannot generate a political theory of its own, because it does not start from a pessimistic anthropology.²³ List's response is neither to accept Schmitt's terms nor simply to revive a variant of Marx's early humanism.²⁴ Instead, she reconstructs and develops a philosophical anthropology from Marx's mature works, where the human is understood as a form of collective historical self-production, plastic but also historically determinate. A future revolution cannot simply reinvent the human as many revolutionaries have fantasized about. Human beings are historically determinate beings, which makes some political forms and institutions more viable than others at any given historical juncture. The "human" needed for the revolution is a determinate negation of what came before it, and any future revolution will have to build institutions where actually existing humans can prevent relapse into capitalist domination while remaining open to further collective transformations.

Isaac Bernard Horwedel's "'Hell is not something that awaits us': Inverse Theology and Critical Theory" takes Theodor W. Adorno's (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer's (1895–1973) disagreement about the continued possibility of emancipation as its point of departure. Horkheimer rejected the possibility and suggested that Adorno's refusal to do the same revealed that he "still retains a certain penchant for theology."²⁵ Horwedel elaborates Adorno's position as a form of "inverse theology" that insists on the possibility of capitalism's end without presuming it. The (inverse) theological register refers to a mode of criticizing the hellish qualities of contemporary social reality as a whole from the standpoint of its potential redemption, while refusing to turn that standpoint into a position or positive program. Horwedel explores the inferno of contemporary capitalism through Adorno's reading of Marx's critique of political economy, where the abstraction of exchange value imposes its impersonal social domination and deforms both social reality and our thoughts.

Bogdan Ovcharuk's "Faith and Revolution in Gillian Rose's Critical Marxism" considers the subjective element of revolutionary practice. Ovcharuk reconstructs Gillian Rose's (1947–1995) reading of Marx through Hegel's speculative account of religion and politics, which refuses both voluntarism and determinism. He pursues Rose's diagnosis of an "abstract faith" that reappears inside Marxist voluntarism as a materialist redeployment of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762–1814) idealist faith.²⁶ Ovcharuk shows how Rose's later engagement with Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) supplies crucial resources for thinking an alternative "concrete faith" as a mode of revolutionary praxis that is neither messianic nor quietist withdrawal. Instead, it takes the form of a concrete and inherently risky commitment to transformation that remains entangled with the social and political actuality of capitalism.²⁷

²³Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 61.

²⁴E.g., Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts."

²⁵Adorno & Horkheimer, "Towards a new Manifesto," 36.

²⁶Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*.

²⁷Rose, *The broken Middle*.

Neal Spadafora's "Calling the World Dead: Marx's Philosophy of History and the Question of Theodicy" interprets the collectively authored and incomplete notes retrospectively collected and published under the title "The German Ideology" through the optic of theodicy.²⁸ Spadafora defines modern theodicy as the attempt to reconcile thought with evil by subsuming suffering into a singular historical narrative of rational progress that presents history as the ground of human self-assertion and (retrospectively) justifies human suffering as a necessary step on the way to redemption. Spadafora reads "The German Ideology" as staging an "a-theological" version of such theodical reconciliation, where proletarian suffering is made intelligible by a historical arc that culminates in communist revolution. The argument then engages with and complicates familiar attempts to rescue Marx's later writings (namely the previously mentioned letter to Vera Zasulich). The essay then turns to juxtapose Marx with Lee Edelman and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328).²⁹ On this basis, Spadafora begins to outline what it might mean to think and live "non-theodically," refusing to let promises of future reconciliation and redemption justify present suffering.

Abdul Wahid Punakkath's article "Religion and Revolt: A Critique of Secular Supersessionism in the Communist Historiography of the Malabar Rebellion" revisits the 1836–1921 uprisings in the Malabar region of Kerala in Southern India and asks what it means for Marxist historiography to take such subaltern religious revolts seriously. It starts by outlining early communist engagements with the 1921 rebellion, which inscribed it in a legacy of communist insurgency to forge a bridge between Islamic peasant militancy and the communist movement's self-understanding. But this connection was built on brittle premises, since the latter held to a secular supersessionism, in which religious idioms were considered fundamentally "primitive," politically useful but destined to be superseded by modern secular communist rationality. Building on and criticizing Marxist accounts of the rebellion, the article reconstructs its religious forms as sites of political invention rather than historical "immaturity." On this basis, the article proposes a novel "desecularizing" vocabulary capable of rethinking the relationship between revolution and religion and recovering the messianic form of rebellious subject-formation over and against communist complicity in secularization.

Massimiliano Tomba's response essay "Teleology and Revolution" interrogates the contemporary crisis of the concept of revolution, which is frequently diluted into a synonym for any kind of invention or reduced to a trajectory of violence culminating in totalitarianism. Against both liberal and melancholic left accounts, Tomba proposes that revolution be conceived as an experiment that opens historical possibilities from within concrete struggles. Reconstructing Marx's movement between teleology and openness, he rejects both determinist philosophies of history and abstract indeterminacy. Instead, he develops a conception of revolutionary telos as the political directions opened and pursued through the recombination of heterogeneous struggles across different temporalities. Tomba's essay situates the contributions in this part of the special issue as efforts to rethink revolution beyond secular progressivism, theodicy, and the dominant legacies of European modernity.

²⁸Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology."

²⁹Edelman, *Bad Education*; Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*.

The articles in this part of the special issue do not converge on a single understanding of revolution. They approach revolution from different angles as a problem of historical possibility: how to think and practice transformation without collapsing into either teleological determinism or abstract openness. In this way, they echo the plurality of revolutionary figures in Marx's own work, from the practical overcoming of the inverted world of state and capital to the search for political forms adequate to emancipation and historically specific paths beyond capitalist domination. They explore how revolutionary horizons can emerge from the critique of domination, the refusal of theodicy, and the practical recombination of struggles, institutions, and forms of life. In that sense, they reopen the question of revolution at the intersection of Marxism, religion, and political theology by showing how new possibilities and paths must be constructed within and against the contradictions of the present.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Mikkel Flohr is a postdoctoral research fellow and lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University. His work explores the intersections of political theory, intellectual history, and historical sociology, with a particular focus on Marx, Marxism, and critical theory. He recently edited *Danish Marxism: Past, Present, Future* (2025) and is currently completing a monograph on Marx's critique of political theology and a book on the sociology of revolutions with Sune Haugbølle. His research has been published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Distinktion*, *Theory & Event*, *Telos*, *New Political Science*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, and *Rethinking Marxism*.

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