

## PERILS OF THE FUTURE: A DISCUSSION OF MARX'S SECULARIZATION THESIS

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*As both a journalist and a philosopher, Karl Marx had one eye on the present and the other on the future. This dual concern is particularly clear in On the Jewish Question, where Marx persons his theory of secularization. In this article, I claim that his account of political secularization is far more convincing; while his account of human emancipation – his wish for the future – rests on a thin reading of human rights.*

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As both a journalist and a philosopher, Karl Marx had one eye on the present and the other on the future. Much of his philosophy was devoted to imagining and predicting what the man of the future would look like: where he would work, what labor conditions would be like and what his beliefs would be. At the same time, Marx was concerned with his present moment as well. This concern for both the immediate and the future is most clear in his short piece, On the Jewish Question. As I will show, his vision of the future, though, is far less rich and appealing than his description of his own time. Indeed, his account of what the future citizen will be like does not follow from his characterization of the present.

In On the Jewish Question, Marx presents a two-step account of secularization, wherein he shows how to “emancipate” both the state and civilian from religion. Marx claims that the transformation of theological questions into political ones forms the basis of secularization, or, what he calls, emancipation. Such a transformation on the political level, however, is insufficient; individuals too must be emancipated. To depict the insufficiency of mere political emancipation, Marx must reveal the flaws of the politically secular division between state and civil society. In doing so, Marx analogizes the division between the state and civil society as the theological schism between the sacred and profane.

I will show that Marx's use of the sacred-profane analogy undermines his own project as he transitions to his discussion of “human emancipation,” the second and fuller stage of secularization. Indeed, this “re-theologization” of politics is based on an unduly rigid distinction between the state and civil society and on a threadbare exploration of human rights. As a result, his account of political emancipation – the present state of affairs – presents a far more convincing vision for secularization than does his call for this human emancipation – his vision for the future.

On the Jewish Question begins by providing a vision of political secularization in which religious citizens do not have to give up their religion in order to claim political

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rights. Maintaining that secularization is a form of emancipation, Marx expresses this by writing “a state may be a free state without man himself being a free man” (32). Marx points to America in particular, where, even as the first politically secular state, the citizenry remained (and remains) highly religious. Marx cites Gustave de Beau-mont, Alexis de Tocqueville’s travel companion, who wrote that “the state remains aloof from all religions” and yet, “no one in the United States believes that a man without religion can be an honest man” (cited on 31). American society and its values, it would seem, had little do with the political devotion to disestablishment. While the state has only public property and claims no official religion, private property and religious belief thrive in civil society. Political secularization does not create a unified system of values, Marx claims, but rather a plethora of them.

Political secularism, Marx argues, is based on this “schism” between the state and civil society. To match these two spheres, we must divide ourselves into man and citizen, such that “in the political community...[we] regard [ourselves] as communal being[s], and in civil society...as private individual[s]” [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]. Thus, a politically secular man must divide himself into “an independent...individual” on the one hand, and a citizen on the other.

It is precisely this division between state and civil society – and between citizen and man – that allows theological questions to change into political ones. The creation of two separate spheres with two sets of values allows Jews or any other religious mi-nority to enjoy the same kinds of political rights as the majority does. This presents a grand shift away from the status of religious minorities in states with official religions. A politically emancipated state does not automatically relegate religious minorities to a second-class status; their faiths have no effect on their citizenship. To be Jewish in a Christian state, for example, is a theological question; to be Jewish in an “emanci-pated” state, on the other hand, is a “secular question” (30). The root of secularization, then, lies in this transformation.

Marx’s secularization thesis does not stop at political emancipation, however; rather, he conceives of this stage as merely a step towards full “human emancipa-tion.” It is insufficient that the state alone is emancipated from religion and private property, Marx claims; the people too must be freed from these shackles. The key flaw in political emancipation, then, is that by separating civil society away from the state, man can remain religious: “man was not liberated from religion; he received religious liberty. He was not liberated from property; he received the liberty to own property” [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]. The division between civil society and the state forestalls the individual from attaining this higher level of human emancipation. In other words, political emancipation is not enough.

Human emancipation corrects the ills of political emancipation by collapsing the distinction between civil society and the state and thus between man and citizen. In this second stage of emancipation, each individual appropriates the values previously attributed only to the state. Thus, just as the state had emancipated itself from religion in political secularization so too, Marx claims, must man be “finally and completely emancipated from religion” [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]. This “final and absolute form of human emancipation” is accomplished when “real, individual man... absorb[s] into himself the abstract citizen” (46). In other words, individuals are “emancipated” from religion, private property and all the other failings of civil society. This liberation will

allow individuals to join in a political community and cease to feel alienated from one another and from their "political" self (i.e. the citizen).

Much of Marx's secularization thesis is convincing. Most effectively, Marx describes secularization as the process of transforming theological questions into political ones. The space for civil society that this secularization narrative carves out does not assume or predict a decrease in religiosity. By allowing room for religious citizens in a politically secular state, Marx explains why America remains so religious. However, the shift to the higher, fuller level of emancipation undermines Marx's overall project by dipping back into politically theological thought. After transforming "theological questions into political ones," human emancipation reneges on this trajectory and morphs the political constellation between the state and civil society back into a theological one between the sacred and profane. The key characteristic of the sacred and the profane is, according to Émile Durkheim that they "have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as separate genera, as two worlds that have nothing in common" (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 38). By incorporating this theological antagonism between sacred and the profane, Marx creates a chasm between the state and civil society, wherein the two spheres operate under two sets of incompatible values.

Marx conveys the state's sanctity by comparing it to Jesus. He writes, for example, "the state is the intermediary between man and human liberty. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his own divinity" [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]. The state, it turns out, is, like the Son of God, a sort of intermediary, a model, carrying its citizens towards the next step of human development. Thus, the state, insofar as it is an intermediary for this higher human emancipation, is untied with the sacred.

The sacredness of the state stands in contrast to the profanity of civil society: "The political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth. It stands in the same opposition to civil society, and overcomes it in the same manner as religion overcomes the narrowness of the profane world... Man, in his most intimate reality, in civil society, is a profane being" [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]<sup>1</sup>. Here, Marx clearly shows how the sacred-profane analogy maps onto the political division between the state and civil society.

It may be objected, however, that Marx uses the sacred-profane analogy to show that even political secularization has its vestiges of political theology. In other words, the politically secular division between civil society and state is merely a holdover from the state's theological past. Human emancipation, then, is not an attempt to inject a new brand of theology into politics, but rather the way to fully cleanse politics of its remaining traces of theological constellations. This final step in secularization is not a betrayal of the project, as I claim, but rather a continuation of it.

To answer this objection, we must look to Marx's description of civil society and its relation to the profane. Key to the religious account of the profane is that it can never become the sacred. In a similar vein, Marx presents a rigid account of civil society,

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<sup>1</sup> It is telling that Marx appropriates the religious sacred-profane dichotomy. As Durkheim points out in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, "All known religious beliefs... presuppose a classification of things...generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words profane and sacred" [*Marx, Engels, 1978*]. By conceiving of civil society and the state in terms of this basic religious classification, Marx takes a significant step in articulating his own brand of political theology.

wholly and permanently separate from the state. In contrast to the state's emancipated values, civil society is "the sphere of egoism," where "man...is an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest and acting in accordance with his private caprice" [Marx, Engels, 1978; Durkheim, 2008]. The rights of man and the liberty they preserve, he claims, are "not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather upon the separation of man from man" [Marx, Engels, 1978]. Civil society appears as an individualistic wasteland of self-interest and egoism.

Each individual busying himself with his own interests and preoccupations: there is something static and fossilized in this account. Marx paints such a dismal portrait of civil society in a politically emancipated state by focusing primarily on the right to private property and the freedom of conscience. Marx claims that the right to private property functions as an analog to all other rights: it insulates man from others and allows him to focus solely on his own interests. Insofar as rights preserve freedom, "the right of liberty is the right of private property. ... It is the right of self-interest" [Marx, Engels, 1978].

This more static account of civil society reveals the extent to which Marx lines it up with the "profane": as something rigidly egoistic, wholly separated from the state and without hope of ever changing. The implication, then, is that a politically emancipated state will never "grow" into a humanly emancipated one; the individualism of the civil sphere prevents against it. Because Marx conceives of civil society as unchanging, he must argue that political emancipation is in itself insufficient. Political emancipation marks a step forward from the previous theological state, Marx claims, but it does not have within it the seeds of human emancipation. Thus, human emancipation, it appears, must be brought about by some radical change; otherwise, civil society will be stuck in its isolating, profane rut<sup>2</sup>.

In this effort to portray human rights (i.e. the rights of man) as isolating, preserving values wholly separated from those of the state, Marx leaves out several fundamental rights that present a distinctly more social individual. Conspicuously absent from Marx's theory are free speech, freedom of the press and the freedom of association. Each of these (among many others) reflects man in his more Aristotelian incarnation: socialized and gregarious. Rather than imagining a society of isolated individuals, the logic behind rights like free speech presupposes that people will talk to each other, discuss their preferences and, at times, disagree with one another. Political emancipation and the rights of man it pioneers does not create a system in which individuals see each other as "the limitation on [their] own liberty." The right to free speech certainly does not imagine man as a recluse; indeed built within it is an expectation of social interaction.

Furthermore, not only do rights like free speech paint a more sociable portrait of man, they also create a dynamic and fluid civil society, where the limits between civil society and the state are not as rigid as Marx's sacred-profane analogy would have us

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<sup>2</sup> This radical shift from political to human emancipation again lines up with the religious relationship between sacred and profane. Again citing Durkheim: "The two worlds [the sacred and the profane] are not only conceived as separate, but as hostile and jealous rivals;" and thus "...when [passage from the profane to the sacred] happens... it implies a true metamorphosis" [Marx, Engels, 1978].

think. Whereas Marx presents the rights of man as purely guardians of self-interest, whose values stand in contrast to the state's, several fundamental rights transcend the distinction between "social" and "political": the right to free speech protects our free-dom to chat, as well as our freedom to dissent. These rights provide for a dynamic civil society, whose contours, policies and values are liable to change. This account of civil society rejects the sacred-profane dichotomy and imagines a more "fluid" relationship between state and civil society.

By envisioning a dynamic civil society, capable of communal spirit, this account avoids the pitfalls of political theology and thereby follows Marx's initial conception that secularization entails a rejection of political theology. His account of his own present is one we should look to. Fundamental freedoms like free speech and free press hold within them the possibility of social development and change. A civil society that trumpets these does not need an evolutionary theory of human progress. In short, we do not require a second stage of secularization. Marx's vision of the future was a bleak one.



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