

FOREWORD

On Karl Marx's Negative Meta-Theology

Enrique Dussel is unquestionably the most important living Latin American philosopher of the last half century, and arguably of the last century. Dussel was born in Mendoza, Argentina, in 1934, and as a young man he traveled to Spain, Germany, and France, to pursue his education, eventually receiving degrees in history, theology, and philosophy. Dussel spent 1959–61 working with Paul Gauthier in Nazareth, Israel, in a Palestinian cooperative, building houses for the local community. He then returned to Argentina to teach philosophy and begin his prolific intellectual corpus. His website lists more than thirty “selected works” and hundreds of essays under the rubrics of *philosophy*, *history*, and *theology*. Dussel’s contributions have been prodigious, innovative, and encyclopedic, and they have had global impact.¹ He was one of the founding members of the Latin American philosophy of liberation movement, and he is surely the most prominent of its representatives now. He has also made major contributions to the history of Latin American philosophy, theology, the church, Marxology, political theory, and, above all, ethics. In 1975, after years of persecution and the assassination of some of his students and a bomb attempt at his home, Dussel left Argentina for Mexico, where he has been teaching ever since at the Iztapalapa campus of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Metropolitan Autonomous University of Mexico) and where he is now a professor emeritus.²

From such a vast intellectual corpus it is difficult to select those works or areas that have been most impactful, innovative, and with an after-life that will secure their historical progeny. Yet two very specific areas and clusters of publications can be singled out. First and foremost, as a philosopher with many interests and areas of specialization, Dussel has devoted most of his efforts to thinking about ethics. Already in the late 1960s he began the project of the deconstruction of the history of ethics with the intent of developing an ethics of liberation in Latin America. This project became a trilogy titled *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana* (Toward an ethics of Latin American liberation; 1973–77). In 1986 he published *Ética comunitaria* (translated as *Ethics and Community*, 1998). Then, in the late 1990s, after his decade-long study of Karl Marx's four drafts of *Das Kapital* (*Capital*) and a long exchange and debate with Karl-Otto Apel, Dussel wrote *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (translated as *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, 1998). This last book, a magnum opus, is both historical and systematic. The first fifty pages offer a sketch of a world history of what Dussel called ethical systems. The remaining four hundred pages offer his architectonics of the foundations of ethics and a critical ethics, all with the intent of building an ethics of liberation that would serve not simply Latin America but all of the peoples and nations on the planet. This is not an ethics with a universal, but a planetary, intent. Thus, over several decades, the project of a deconstruction of the history of ethics became the project of *ethical critique*, which is today articulated as the *decolonization of ethics*, as a means to develop an *ethics of the community of life*. While Dussel's early works on ethics were influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, his latest works have been deeply impacted by Marx and the Apelian-Habermasian discourse of ethics.³

The second area—and group of publications—that makes Dussel one of the world's foremost thinkers and Marxologists is related to his book *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx*, which was published in 1993—coincidentally, the same year that Jacques Derrida published his *Spectres de Marx* (translated as *Specters of Marx* in 1994).⁴ Dussel's contributions to the in-depth study of Marx began with his *Filosofía de la producción* (The philosophy of production) in 1977 (and expanded in 1984), which included a translation of Marx's notebooks on technology with an extended commentary. Then followed three voluminous books, based on deep archival work, that offered thus far unsuspecting discoveries,

exegeses, and reconstructions of Marx's four drafts of *Capital*: *La producción teórica de Marx: Un comentario a los "Grundrisse"* (Marx's theoretical production: A commentary on the "Grundrisse") in 1985; *Hacia un Marx desconocido: Un comentario de los manuscritos de 61–63* (Toward an unknown Marx: A commentary on the manuscripts of 61–63) in 1988; and *El último Marx (1863–1882) y la liberación latinoamericana* (The last Marx [1863–1882] and Latin American liberation) in 1990.

Dussel's detailed reconstruction—based on archival work with manuscripts that up until the 1980s were not yet available in print in German—of the researching, writing, rewriting, and careful editing of *Capital* is the discovery of the centrality of the concept of *lebendige Arbeit* (living labor) for Marx's critique of capital. In Dussel's reading, Marx emerges not as a thinker of the Hegelian totality and the dialectics of the self-positing and self-grounding of being, qua spirit of mind, but rather as the thinker of the exteriority of capital: the exteriority of living labor to both the market and the expropriation and accumulation of surplus value. Instead of a dialectical and Hegelian Marx, Dussel slowly develops for us an analogical (analectic—i.e., with reference to what is the *other* and not the *same* of capital) and Schellingian Marx (i.e., a Marx that thinks from the exteriority of being and what is outside the logic and self-positing of the spirit). This reconstruction and rereading of Marx allows Dussel to give concreteness to the Levinasian other; this is no longer simply a metaphysical other (pure alterity) but a concrete, material, embodied, and historical other, which in Dussel's language is the poor person, the orphan, the widow, the ex-slave, and the immigrant: the wretched of Earth, of history, and of global capitalism. As Dussel traces carefully the evolution of Marx's economic and political thinking, he emphatically foregrounds the specifically *ethical* dimension of Marx's critique of capitalism. This is what is at the core of the examination of Marx's critique of capital's fetishization of all human relations. Dussel's key argument in his three volumes at the center of Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy is that the category of *lebendige Arbeit* reveals a Marx who is not simply interested in the "logic" of capital but also, and perhaps most centrally, in the unethical, fetishizing, idolatrous, and immoral character of a system that expropriates the "life" of workers, turning them into fungible commodities. For Dussel, then, Marx becomes one of the great ethical thinkers of the West. If we are attentive to the third volume of Dussel's trilogy on the genesis of *Capital*, with its focus on living labor as the ethical critique of capitalism, and read it in tandem

with *The Theological Metaphors of Marx*, we can think of these works as the elaboration of a Marxist *ethics*. Thus, Dussel's ethics of liberation is a *Marxist ethics*. We can't uncouple his ethics of liberation in the age of global immiseration and ecological crisis from his rediscovery of an ethical, and theological, Marx.

The Theological Metaphors of Marx is thus the fifth book in more than a decade of assiduous and detailed readings of Marx's theoretical laboratory, manuscripts, drafts, editions, revisions, editions of translations (as in his substantive revisions to the French translation of *Capital*), and prefaces to later editions. This book, however, is not a summary of the prior ones. It advances some original, and unsuspected, ideas about Marx's philosophical method and his deep ethical, religious, literary, and theological motivations. For the moment, let me anticipate that what makes this a major work of Marxology, theology, and ethical theory is the argument that the critique of the bourgeois political economy, as a critique of commodity fetishization, is also a theological critique of the idolatry of the commodity in bourgeois political economy. The hinge that links both is the critique of commodity fetishization as a critique of religious idolatry and as the critique of mystification of money. Capitalism is, in fact, a form of idolatry. What Dussel argues, and shows persuasively, is that implicit in Marx's critique of capital's fetishization of the commodity is a metaphorical theology that uses theological (i.e., primordially religious) metaphors to advance arguments about the critique of capitalist exploitation. What Dussel shows is that if there is a *political theology* of the modern capitalist sovereignty regime, undergirding it, as its base, is a *theological economics* or an *economic-theological* ideology that commands the expropriation of living labor.⁵ If there is a political economy of capitalism, there is also a theological economy of capitalism. Nonetheless, some preliminary remarks are required before we highlight Dussel's unique and revealing arguments and findings.

We must begin with the fact that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were incredibly prolific and consummate writers. The English edition of the *Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW)* comprises fifty volumes, of which ten volumes are devoted to the works related to and including the three volumes of *Capital*.⁶ The *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA; Complete works of Marx and Engels)*, which aims to give us a complete and rigorously annotated version of all of Marx's and Engels's writings, is projected to comprise 114 volumes, of which sixty-two have been already published. The *MEGA* is divided into four sections. The first section

contains books, articles, and drafts; the second is devoted to *Capital* and all related manuscripts and drafts; the third contains letters; and the fourth contains excerpts, notes, and marginalia. The section devoted to *Capital*, already published, comprises twenty-three volumes.⁷ Part of the reason why there are ten volumes in the *MECW* and twenty-three in the *MEGA* devoted to *Capital* is that Marx wrote several drafts, which is what Dussel calls the four drafts of *Capital*. David McLellan's *The Thought of Karl Marx* provides us with a detailed chronology of Marx's writing schedule, which gives us a sense of the incredible amount of work that went into many of his published and unpublished works.⁸ McLellan's work has been updated, while underscoring what we can take away from this careful work, by Sven-Eric Liedman's *A World to Win*.⁹

We must also begin with the realization that both Marx and Engels, and especially Marx, were great writers who developed over time a distinct, powerful, polemical, rhetorical, but also precise and scientific "literary" style. This style included references to literature, poetry, theater, the Bible (to which there are hundreds of references), and so on.¹⁰ The references, allusions, and paraphrases from Western literature are simply staggering. Marx, in particular, seems to have read everything, and anything. S. S. Praver's 1976 book *Karl Marx and World Literature*, still the best entry point into Marx's references to world literature, details the breadth and depth of Marx's uses of all kinds of literature, from Homer, to Dante, to Shakespeare and the Bible. Praver devotes a chapter to a close analysis of Marx's models and metaphors, and a chapter to the close literary analysis of books 2 and 3 of *Capital*, since they antedated book 1; in those two volumes Marx's use of similes, allegories, analogies, and metaphors is in full development, leading to the literary power of book 1, which underwent the most editing by Marx. From Praver's still unsurpassed work there are two passages that are worth quoting, as they provide a great framework for what Dussel has accomplished with this book. In the first, commenting on the style and tone of Marx's *Grundrisse*, Praver writes, "It is not difficult to discern in Marx's later work—with its demand for righteousness, its stern judgment of existing society, its vision of a battle between Good and Evil, its hope of an absolute end to historical processes as we now know them—a return to the tradition of the Hebrew prophets." In the second, commenting on Marx's use of Adalbert von Chamisso's novella *Peter Schlemihl*, Praver writes, "Marx has thus found a powerful way of conveying his sense of alienation, perversion, and inhumanity through what one might be tempted to call a

‘meta-literature’; through varying and inverting the characters and incidents invented by earlier writers and using them—effectively—in ways their creators could never have foreseen.”¹¹ The first quote is important because it anticipates a key argument in Dussel’s work—namely, that Marx activates and transforms the messianic tradition of the Hebrew prophets, which very clearly influence his thinking and writing. The second is noteworthy because it points to the incredibly important role that literature, in all of its forms, played in Marx’s writing in general. Marx very deliberately called his work on political economy a “critique.” A critique is always a metaphilosophy, as has been the case with all philosophical critiques since Plato criticized the sophists, and Aristotle criticized Plato and the Ionian philosophers. The “critique of political economy” is a form of metaphilosophy that stands both Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel on their heads, but it is one that is also undergirded by a metatheology, as Dussel argues.

An additional important prefatory remark has to do with what Ludovico Silva has called Marx’s literary style. It is incredible that his important 1971 book *El estilo literario de Marx* (The literary style of Marx) has not been translated. The book is, to my knowledge, the best and most comprehensive analysis of Marx’s writing styles and techniques. It has four chapters: first, on the literary origins of Marx’s thinking (the impact of all kinds of literature on his writing); second, the fundamental characteristics of Marx’s style, which in turn has four distinct sections: science’s architectonics, dialectical expression and the dialectics of expression, Marx’s great metaphors, and other characteristics; third, an assessment of the style of Marx’s work; and finally, an epilogue on irony and alienation. Already in the introduction, Silva makes it clear what his goal is: “Marx was a writer: he left an imposing work. This work constitutes a scientific corpus, a theoretical weave. But this corpus, in addition to its conceptual skeleton, possesses an expressive musculature; concrete literary threads have warped this theoretical weave. The scientific system is supported by an expressive system.” Indeed, Marx’s writing has an expressive, stylistic, rhetorical, metaphorical, and expressive musculature that makes him both a great thinker and a great stylist, unlike any of the great thinkers in the Western tradition. In chapter 3 Silva offers a summary of his analysis of Marx’s literary style: “Expression of an architectonic idea of society; verbal reflection of a dialectical thinking; complete design of vast metaphorical analogies; virtuous writing filled with a concrete spirit, critical-polemical and playful spirit; such are the

most salient characteristics of a writer such as Marx, in whose origin figures poetic mediation and the conception of prose as a work of art, and whose apex is constituted a scientific *corpus* literally endowed of a prodigious expressive force.”¹² Silva has captured succinctly the interdependence between the scientific and literary, or verbal, dimensions of Marx’s work: both dimensions illuminate and potentiate each other. He also highlights the energetic, polemical, rhetorical style that combines a wry and sly humor with a moral urgency to confront, denounce, and unmask exploitation and dehumanization.

These preliminary remarks were required in order to properly contextualize what Dussel has accomplished in the present work. Like very few scholars, Dussel spent a decade working through the Marx-Engels Archives, as new manuscripts were deciphered and prepared for publication. Dussel’s work on Marx are some of the closest, most forensic, and reconstructive of Marx’s writing process. *The Theological Metaphors of Marx* demonstrates this amply, for here Dussel shows the central thread that runs through Marx’s thinking and writing since the time of his youth—namely, the concept and metaphor of *fetish*. But more than tracking the rhetorical and metaphorical function of fetish, Dussel demonstrates how it also performs an epistemic, or theoretical, function. To *fetishize* requires that one *verfremdem* (alienate): turn something—and, above all, social labor—into something alien, something that seemingly acquires its own life and power. Capitalist fetishization of money and the “commodity” form is predicated on the alienation of social labor, which is the ontological condition of the possibility of all social relations, including production and market exchange.

Just as important, Dussel also shows how Marx’s work, especially the three volumes of *Capital* and the related manuscripts, are saturated by the use of religious and theological metaphors. Dussel describes Marx’s evolving metaphorical theology as one that registers a shift, from the political critique of the state to an *economic* critique of the fetish.¹³ As I have noted, this shift can also be described as the coupling of the political-economic critique of bourgeois political economy with an economic-theological critique of the capitalist fetish. The fetish is Mammon; it is the devil; it is the vampire, the anti-God, a necrological idol. For this reason, Dussel argues that inchoate in Marx’s economic writings we can discern and read a *demonology* and *infernology* (to echo William Clare Roberts’s great book, *Marx’s Inferno*) and an *antitheodicy* in Marx’s metaphorical theology and theological *metaphorology*. Dussel

does not use this word, but it aptly describes what he has unearthed in Marx's archives and theoretical laboratory; I use this word advisedly in the sense developed by Hans Blumenberg, who describes what it seeks to accomplish: "Metaphorology seeks to burrow down to the substructure of thought, the underground, the nutrient solution of systematic crystallization, but it also aims to show with what 'courage' the mind preempts itself in its images and how its history is projected in the courage of its conjectures."¹⁴ Indeed, this is what Dussel has amply demonstrated—namely, how theological metaphors are burrowed in the substructure of Marx's critiques of the capitalist system, with its sacrificial logics. Marx's relentless critique of the capitalist fetish is nourished by his theological metaphors. To "capitalism as a religion," to use that most felicitous Benjaminian formulation, Marx brought a theological critique performed by means of economic-theological critique of political economy.¹⁵ Thus, along with Marx's "meta-literature," to use Praver's term, we can discern a metatheology, a reflection on what theology aims to theorize and give voice to. This is what Dussel has forcefully and irretrievably established in this book.

Finally, in order to have a richer sense of the importance of the present work, it should be underscored that Dussel has been a major contributor to the Latin American theology of liberation. In more than one way, this book is part of that contribution. It should be noted that in 1988 he wrote a lengthy essay titled "Teología de la Liberación y Marxismo" (Theology of liberation and Marxism), which is one of the best overviews of the fruitful but also tense relationship between these two movements. In the essay Dussel guides his presentation by asking, "Which Marxism are we talking about? Why are Marxist tools used? And—the most important from a descriptive point of view—why do liberation theologians use Marxism?"¹⁶ It is very clear that *The Theological Metaphors of Marx* is a contribution to answering those questions. In this book we discover a Marx that is profoundly and avowedly humanist, and certainly not an Althusserian, structuralist Marx. We also discover that Marx is not an antagonist of either religion or theology, as is generally thought, but that his own thinking is suffused by the spirit and commitment that theologians of liberation also embody. Finally, this book shows how Marx provides political and economic tools, but also economic-theological tools to criticize and confront the idolatrous religion that is capitalism. Beyond this, the book is also a contribution to what Dussel calls in the appendix, added to this English translation, the "epistemological decolonization of

theology,” which was one of the primary tasks of both the theology and philosophy of liberation. In this way this is a book that speaks from the heart of the Latin American experience and, at the same time, beyond it to the worlds that are also aiming to decolonize themselves. This book, then, also argues that to decolonize theology by means of a Marxian negative metatheology requires that we decolonize Marx by means of a decolonized theology and ethics of liberation, and vice versa.

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