

PROLOGUE TO THE  
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

*The Criticism of Theology  
as the Criticism of Economics*

Karl Marx has written that “the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.”<sup>1</sup> It would be completely consistent to extend this more broadly to argue that the criticism of theology also becomes the criticism of philosophy, economics, or politics.

I want to build on Marx’s reflection as a basis for my updated introduction to *The Theological Metaphors of Marx*, a work originally written over thirty years ago. My inspiration is grounded in Marx himself. From his perspective, history, philosophy, and theology were all related within the overall framework of critical thinking. As he wrote about these three epistemological dimensions in one of his most well-known texts, “The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms.”<sup>2</sup>

So let us therefore explore the relation between these three epistemes: history, philosophy, and theology. My approach is likely to scandalize both orthodox Marxist-Leninists and anti-Marxist Christians, as well as traditional Muslims, Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists, and others.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have written that Thomas Münzer “relied on the Bible to confront the feudal Christianity of his day with

the simple Christian beliefs of its earliest practitioners.” Engels notes that “the peasants had made extensive use of this weapon against the princes, the nobility, and the clergy.” This “weapon” involved a return to the “first few centuries” of Christianity, prior to its institutionalization as an *ekklesia* (church).<sup>3</sup>

I believe that this is what I have tried to do throughout my life. What Marx and Engels were referring to, long before its emergence, is something very similar to what we today refer to as the theology of liberation, in its most radical version, along the lines of what Walter Benjamin described as messianic materialism, for example.<sup>4</sup>

In this book I want to reflect about this, not by situating myself subjectively as a believer who belongs to a religious community—nor by denying this—but instead by situating this question within the framework of the objectivity of a contemporary sociopolitical, cultural, and economic reality: a postsecularist age at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Jürgen Habermas suggests something along these lines in some of his later work, although still from a Eurocentric perspective. Marx and Engels have also written something that is especially provocative today for certain Marxists: “This is why [Thomas Münzer] thought that Heaven is not something that belongs to another world, but something that must be sought for in this life. The task of believers is to establish here, on the Earth, that Heaven that is the Kingdom of God.”<sup>5</sup>

It is this purpose, and not simply a subjective wish, that provides a guiding thread throughout my work. My intention is to make it possible for even the most unbelieving leftist critic, whom my work is directed toward, to become aware of a theological historical discourse that can destroy the theological religious justifications deployed by the Global Right of the world’s prevailing systems of domination. This includes both capitalism itself and the liberal individualist brand of modern politics that usually passes muster as “Christian.”

It is in this sense, for me, that the “criticism of theology [becomes] the criticism of politics” as well as the criticism of other fields of praxis of human existence such as critiques of the economy, of gender or patriarchy, of racism and Eurocentrism, and so on. My goal is to defetishize and decolonize this theological justification of domination. Many other reasons could be provided to justify this critical project to other disciplines, but in this book, I will focus principally on the *economic* dimensions of criticism.

Once again, we can turn to Marx's own writing, in a more obscure text that has been marginalized within both the dominant Marxist and Christian traditions, which I will explore in greater detail in the body of this book:

It is because of this that criticism is well founded when it compels the [Prussian Christian] State which invokes the Bible, to recognize the twisted nature of its consciousness . . . from the very moment when the vileness of its secular ends, which it seeks to conceal with [the mantle] of religion, comes into flagrant contradiction with the purity of its religious consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

It might seem strange that Marx writes here about the "purity of religious consciousness" expressed in a text that is sacred for Christians. This text must be interpreted, at minimum, as a positive recognition of "primitive Christianity," which he refers to earlier in the same text. What exactly is the contradiction that Marx is alluding to here? Why does Marx want to make this contradiction evident? Is clarity about such themes of any interest today in our present political and economic context?

Let's begin with an outline summarizing four possible contradictions or relationships between Christianity (as a religion, ethics, or theology) and politics, economics, sociology, or other fields of praxis.

1. The first dimension relates to the context in which a believer accepts the practical expressions of political, economic, social, or cultural domination, because they have ignored, forgotten, or theoretically concealed aspects of their own religion (primitive Christianity) when it is characterized by a commitment to the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. From this perspective there is no contradiction between the dominant, inverted form of Christianity, which has prevailed at least since the fourth century of the common era,<sup>7</sup> and bourgeois political economy, together with other forms of domination related to racism, gender, cultural differences, and the like. This inverted version of Christianity does not conflict with or oppose capitalism.
2. A second dimension relates to the moment when a believer accepts the practical domination of capitalism, since the science of economics that emerged together with the consolidation of this system—for example, in the work of a Presbyterian Calvinist philosopher like Adam Smith—assumes a consistency between

inverted Christianity and capitalism. It does this by concealing the capitalist economy's components of injustice, domination, or exploitation and by failing to consider how surplus value incorporates a portion of unpaid wage labor. The fetishized version of economic science is not opposed to Christianity.

3. The third dimension relates to a situation in which there is an economist who is opposed to the economic domination of capitalism, because of a critique of political economy (such as that undertaken by Marx), which demonstrates the injustice or perversity of capitalism's exploitation of workers. This includes the accumulation of profit through the appropriation of the worker's unpaid wage in the form of surplus value. This would lead a believer to oppose capitalism, because of these injustices, based on rational arguments. A critical form of political economy makes evident a contradiction between capitalism and the authentic Christianity of its initial centuries.
4. In the fourth possible dimension, the same believer, who rediscovers the critical meaning of the message of messianic Christianity, and who is opposed to the injustices imposed on the poor and the weak—a task undertaken by the earliest members of foundational religious communities, be they Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and so on—becomes aware of the contradiction between critical forms of religion (which invert the inversion) and capitalism. This is what Marx refers to as the critique of theology. This is a critique that involves a messianic return to the origins of these beliefs, which in Latin America has been undertaken by the theology of liberation. A critical Christianity of this kind, which inverts its inversion, is in contradiction with capitalism.

Marx takes on the task of suggesting how a critique of theology makes it possible for Christians who have become critical as to their own structures of belief (as reflected in the fourth dimension, above) to situate themselves in contradiction with capitalism. Marx did this through his continuous use of theological metaphors. These provide a theoretical path for the believer to navigate and discover the contradiction between capitalism and the earliest forms of Christianity, ascertain whether these earliest forms are authentic, and invert the inversion of later forms that are prevalent today. This in turn makes it possible to combine a critical reinterpretation of theology—which critical

believers who are theologians must undertake—with the defetishization of economics.

Marx indicates the kind of methodology needed for this reinterpretation, which begins with putting theology “right side up” again, as it has been “standing on its head” since the fourth century. Christianity became inverted—together with Islam during the caliphate, among similar examples—because most of its believers accepted its complicity with the domination of prevailing systems (feudalism during Christianity’s period of scholastic theology, or the mercantilism that coincided with that of Muslim Aristotelianism).

This was because the dominant form of Christianity during this period abandoned the critical (or, as Walter Benjamin put it, messianic) core of its sacred texts (the Bible in the European context or the Koran in the context of Islam), which correlated with the failure of economics to demonstrate capitalism’s injustice. As Christianity became medieval, it undertook an inversion of the messianism at its origins, while the Muslim caliphate had in its own way inverted the message of the prophet of Mecca. Similar processes took place within Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other religions. In this way the “true believer” and the planetary “dominator”—for example, today’s Christian capitalist in the United States, or the Muslim enriched by oil wealth—do not experience any contradiction between their beliefs and capitalism because both have been inverted, even epistemologically, in terms of the ideological construction of their respective discourses.

In the scientific domain, this involves the exclusion from economics of the contradiction between capital and labor that is reflected in the hidden origins of surplus value in unpaid labor. What was hidden was that the foundational revelation of all these religions was directed first of all to the poor and those suffering from domination, which framed an ultimate contradiction with capitalism. On the other hand, believers—Christians, in the case I am alluding to here, but with dimensions that are equally applicable to Confucians, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, or Muslims—can return to the most ancient sources of their beliefs and take sacred texts as their point of departure, as Thomas Münzer did, among Germanic Christians. These texts can then be used as a basis to oppose many forms of domination, concretely including capitalism, liberalism, racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, among others, that are consistent with religions that have been inverted and have themselves become fetishized.

This is the position that Marx seeks to clearly articulate for an audience of Christian European believers through a “criticism of theology.” This is also the framework that should be applied to illuminate the intention behind my own work and its historical and theological character. All of this also includes the criticism of what Marx describes as the fetishization or attribution of a divine character to “profane forms [*unheiligen*].” This means that contrary to what is thought traditionally, on both the left and the right, it must be understood that those who secularized science and the institutions of the secular age of the Enlightenment also eliminated the “earthly gods” whose principal expression, according to Marx, is capitalism itself.

What has been negated or secularized in the profane theology of “In God we trust” (which should be written instead as “In gold we trust”) is a god or fetish immersed in everyday life and not the God of the Christian Sunday, the Jewish Sabbath, or the Muslim Friday prayers. The true divinity here is gold, for capital is an everyday god who constitutes the ontological-economic foundation of modern existence. For the founder of Christianity (or “primitive Christians”) or the founder of Islam, as well as for Marx, it was money that was the god “made by human hands” known as the fetish of Mammon. But in the secularism of European modernity Mammon has also been secularized and appears simply as an economic moment.<sup>8</sup>

For Marx, on the other hand, as for the primitive believers and today’s critical equivalents, money was a true god, but one of a profane character, an Antichrist, as I seek to explain at length in this book—which was written long ago, but which is more relevant now than when I first published it.

For example (and I will return to this theme later), Marx refers to a text by Paul of Tarsus when he writes in the *Grundrisse*, “[Money] evolves from its role as a slave [*Knechtsgestalt*] when it is manifested as a simple medium of circulation, unexpectedly becomes a sovereign god [*Gott*] in the world of commodities.”<sup>9</sup>

Money has varied functions in the context of circulation, but this does not include its accumulation. It is an instrument of exchange. But within the framework of capital, it becomes a veritable god because of its infinite powers of accumulation. What passed without notice here was that Marx was referring to Saint Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, in which he wrote, “He [Christ] despite his divine character [*Gestalt Gottes*], did not cling to his holy form, and to the contrary alienated himself and took on the form of a slave [*Knechtsgestalt*].”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, money, which had been a slave, was transformed into a god; and Christ, who had been God, became a slave. The inevitable conclusion of this kind of criticism of theology is that money is the Antichrist for Marx, as a metaphor for his criticism of profane theology or the concealment of fetishism, as well as of a profane criticism of theological economics, such as that of Adam Smith.<sup>11</sup> It may seem even more odd, for both the Left and the Right, that it was Engels who wrote, with reference to an economic crisis in England, “This crisis is the final combat between God and the Antichrist, as others have described it. The decisive aspects are Chapters 13 and 17 in the book of Revelation.”<sup>12</sup>

None of this demonstrates that Marx or Engels were believers, but it does not negate, either, that believers can adopt Marx’s critical stance toward capitalism. In my own case I gradually came to slowly understand and discover these theoretical positions as part of my journey during the last fifty years. There was no instantaneous moment of rupture nor any intellectual inheritance from my family or my teachers. What I experienced was a slow process of opening myself up to the most critical dimensions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, such as that of Marx, without negating the potential horizons of a religious world. I did this from within a concrete historical and cultural community that constitutes a totality of meaning that provides a breath of hope woven into the daily life for our peoples—the peoples of Latin America.

This has also meant engagement with a critical reinterpretation of the world from the perspective of the renewed discourse of a community of believers who seek to recover the message of the “earliest beginnings of Christianity.” This was an extremely crucial moment when messianism—which is to say, Christianity, given that in Greek *khristianoi* meant “messianics”—was experienced in a particularly exemplary and militant way in the face of the prevailing domination of the system of slavery embedded in the Roman Empire, which is strikingly similar to what we currently bear the consequences of in the twenty-first century.

For Karl Marx, then, religion provided the foundation for, and negated, a certain kind of praxis. For example, Calvinism reformulated Christianity in order to make it compatible with economics and with the capitalism that was born within its core. It is crucial to remember that Scotland was where the Presbyterian Calvinism of John Knox was practiced, which was the context and homeland for Adam Smith.

Marx first criticized the theological and practical inversion of Christianity, which had ceased to be messianic and critical, as it has been



initially and as was understood by Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky. In order to undertake a theological criticism, it is necessary to “enter” into the logic of theological discourse. Marx understood this very well, but this is precisely what contemporary Marxism has completely ignored until now. This is necessary in order to demonstrate that if Christian theology is critical, it must oppose liberalism in politics and capitalism in economics. This is also Walter Benjamin’s position, which is an interpretation that is being actively debated.

We must then focus on the theme of fetishism within the context of “profane forms.” First, it was the theology of early modernity in Spain, during the sixteenth century, that criticized medieval theology. This was around the same time that Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda provided a theological foundation for both colonialism and emergent capitalism. Later it was Calvinism, among other faiths, that criticized the theology of early, preindustrial modernity; this laid the foundation for a complete identification between Christianity and capitalism, which beginning in the eighteenth century took on an industrial character through the creation and accumulation of surplus value. It was this Scottish and Calvinist Christianity that was Marx’s first target.

Today it is religious fundamentalisms that justify and seek to make absolute a politics, economics, culture, race, and gender that dominates, using weapons instead of reasonable arguments. Together they constitute the return of a god (or of a polytheism, as Max Weber described it) that has become modern. It is the US variety of fundamentalism that deploys military force most singularly in the world instead of reasonable argumentation that might be understandable to others. This seeks to impose “democracy” with wars instead of arguments from within the tradition of the other—for example, based on the Koran for the believers of Islam.<sup>13</sup> Fundamentalism cannot be defeated through force of arms. And we cannot forget that it was the US Central Intelligence Agency that first unleashed the force of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union—an origin that is widely ignored—thereby planting the seed for the consequences we continue to experience.

What we need are arguments based on reason that are accompanied by a praxis of honesty, as Bartolomé de Las Casas taught us regarding the Spanish Conquest, beginning in 1514. But this recognition does not fit within the horizon of interests of today’s empire. The supposed irrationality of Islamist violence is used to justify wars and the exploitation



of other people. This is precisely why honest sectors on the left today must discover the importance of a criticism of theology as a moment within the broader critique of liberal politics and capitalist economics, which Marx exemplified.

But none of this was discovered in Latin America, nor in the passages of my own life, in an immediate or clear way. Instead we had to follow winding paths where it gradually became possible to glimpse that, in addition to everything else we had explored, colonial domination had to be included as part of a broader epistemological decolonization: “Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar” (Traveler, there is no path, we make the path by walking).<sup>14</sup> To discover and understand “coloniality” and the complexities of existence in a colonial world (adding to Martin Heidegger, I’d say “being-in-the-colonial-world”), and to think of coloniality through the prisms of personal, family, community, cultural, and historical experience takes time. And it takes even longer to achieve a clarity of critical consciousness regarding Eurocentrism and modernity, together with everything implied by the “epistemological decolonization” of philosophy, and now of history and theology. The epistemological decolonization of theology is then the final stage, which I address not in the body of this book but in the appendix. But from the beginning of this process, the theological dimension was an essential travel companion as I undertook the decolonization of philosophy and of history.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is possible for us to discern those stages that had been stored discreetly, without great publicity and during a period when a militant secularization was hegemonic on the left, as an ambiguous fruit of the Eurocentric Enlightenment. A postsecularist moment is opening on the horizon that is foreshadowed intriguingly by the themes I explore here.

In my old age, the current biographical stage of my life, it has become possible again to embody the experiences of my youth, which had mystical tonalities at certain moments and today have a new resonance. All of this has its origins in the experiences I have lived and in my reading of authors who filled the revolutionary militance of my youth with beauty and joy, within horizons opened by voices like those of Walter Benjamin, Jacobo Taubes, or Giorgio Agamben (the latter two, inevitably Eurocentric), who were preceded by Martin Buber or by Emmanuel Levinas. But the most radical premonitions came long ago, during the dialogues

I had with Paul Gauthier in Nazareth, Israel, where we worked together as manual laborers in a Palestinian cooperative to build houses for the community between 1959 and 1961.

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