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6. Secularism as a Shadow of Capital

A Historical Materialist View

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Abstract

The lesson of historical materialism is that, to meet changing human needs, there must be a social provisioning process. “Secular society” does not describe a provisioning process. “Capitalist society” names a coherent, self-maintaining and self-reproducing provisioning process. Secular society is dependent upon a set of social principles and purposes that can organize a self-sustaining society; it is a shadow of capital. Secularism traces certain features of a capitalist society even if it leaves others in the dark, so there is reason to call a capitalist society a secular society. Historical materialism widens Charles Taylor’s focus in *A Secular Age* on “the conditions of belief” to the social form and purpose of the material conditions of belief and unbelief.

Keywords: secularism, capitalism, historical materialism, instrumental reason and action, Karl Marx, Max Weber

Introduction

Though we have reasons to call capitalist society secular, there is no self-sustaining secular society or secular age. “Secular society” and “secular age” do not identify a set of social principles and purposes by which a coherent, self-maintaining, and self-reproducing society can be organized. Secularism is a shadow because it depends upon a set of social principles and purposes around which a self-sustaining society can be organized. The same can be said of instrumental reason, which is often seen as the lever of “disenchantment” that clears the path to a secular society. “The instrumental stance, and the thoroughgoing secularization of time, go together,” writes Charles Taylor (2007: 541).¹ But there is no society organized by instrumental reason and action; there is no technocracy. Rather, instrumental reason and action are misdirected ways of thinking about capitalist rationality and action, which they disguise. Notions of instrumental reason and action crowd out the needed concepts: wealth in the commodity form, value, money, wage-labor, and capital. Karl Marx observes: “The exact development of the concept of capital [is] necessary, since it [is] the fundamental concept of modern economics, just as capital itself . . . [is] the foundation of bourgeois society” (1973: 331). To understand modern secularism, we need to understand capital.

In institutionalizing the values of liberty, equality, and property in the market, capitalism puts Enlightenment philosophy into practice: “The system of exchange values, and the money system even more so, are, in fact, a system of freedom and equality” (Marx 1987: 475-76). But Enlightenment hostility toward “superstition” – which is what Enlightenment judges religion to be – boomerangs into fetishism: the commodity is a fetish; money is a fetish; above all, capital is a fetish. Each has peculiarly abstract social powers unrelated to its natural properties or to the personal characteristics of their owners. “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production” reveals capitalism – for all its Enlightened ways – to be an enchanted world (Marx 1976: 169).

Modern capitalist society is not, as Max Weber claims, “disenchanted.” It is “enchanted” by value, the “ghostly” yet socially objective stuff that is expressed, measured, and stored by money. Value is elusive; it “does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx 1976: 167). Devaluation is the capitalist form of disenchantment. Consider what happened to Enron stocks, as the corporation collapsed into insolvency: stocks that were selling at \$80-90 a share in 2000 fell to 62 cents late in November of 2001. Tens of billions of dollars in value, that “ghostly” social objectivity that packs social power, vanished. On February 6, 2018, equities traded on the U.S. stock markets lost over one trillion dollars in value; that is a stack of \$100 bills piled 631 miles high. What social necromancy makes a disappearing act on that scale possible? For Marx, the fetish character of the commodity is its value character – its purchasing power. To identify its source, he writes, “this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them” (1976: 165). The failure to recognize the

¹ Instrumental rationality is key to what Taylor terms “the immanent frame”: “So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame’” (2007: 543).

peculiar enchantment of capitalist society results from denials. We deny the fetish character of the commodity, money, and capital because we fail to recognize the social specificity of value and the labor that produces value. In denying the objectivity of value, we do not see how capitalist society is enchanted.

Secularism is a shadow of capital in that it traces certain features of the social forms and purposes constitutive of a capitalist society, while leaving out others. As Moishe Postone observes, “in precapitalist societies . . . labor is accorded significance by overt social relations and is shaped by tradition. Because commodity-producing labor is not mediated by such relations, it is, in a sense, de-signified, ‘secularized’” (180). Calling a capitalist society “secular” captures this retreat of “overt social relations” and “tradition”; “secular society” captures these aspects of a capitalist society. But, to describe a capitalist society as a secular one leaves us in the dark about much of the content and significance of capitalism’s constitutive forms and purposes. It does not tell us that wealth is produced in the commodity form; it says nothing about value or money; it does not tell us that labor takes the form of wage-labor; it does not tell us that the point of producing wealth as commodities is to make a profit, etc. It does not recognize that capitalist society is enchanted; on the contrary, it gives the false impression that it is not. There is good reason to call a society where the capitalist mode of production is dominant a secular society, but, unlike “capitalist,” “secular” does not identify a set of categories that could be constitutive of any mode of production.

Historical Materialism: A Watershed in Human Self-Understanding

Marx’s historical materialism, which he developed as a young man in collaboration with Friedrich Engels, represents a watershed in human self-understanding. It opens a new discursive horizon for social theory. As such, it matters to thinking about religion and secularism. But historical materialism has not always been well understood, including by Marxists. Historical materialism brings the topic of the social form of the provisioning process (the mode of production) within the horizon of social theory. Historical materialism demands of researchers that “the determinate character of this social man is to be brought forward as the starting point, i.e. the determinate character of the existing community in which he lives, since production here, hence his *process of securing life*, already has some kind of social character” (Marx 1975: 189). Humans are needy creatures and cannot survive without some sustainable and reproducible social provisioning process:

Whatever the social form of the production process, it has to be continuous; it must periodically repeat the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction (Marx 1976: 711).

The opening of this passage posits that a production process always has some particular social form – “Whatever the social form.” The passage goes on to make the point that, if production is to be on-going, it must have a social form and purpose such that it can renew itself materially and formally. “Secular” does not identify any sustainable social form or purpose of production.

Marx’s historical materialism, then, does not insist simply on the uncontroversial point that wealth and its continuous production are necessary to meet human needs; it calls attention

to the social forms and purposes constitutive of specific provisioning processes. Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*:

This mode of production [*Produktionsweise*] must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* [*Lebensweise*] on their part (1976: 31).

Provisioning for human needs is a social process, and there are no social processes in general. Marx and Engels oppose those approaches that overlook or ignore the definite social form of production and wealth – as if production were production-in-general. Conventional analyses overlook the historically changing “*modes of life*” that always belong together with wealth and the processes by which it is produced. They treat production as bearing solely on the “reproduction of the physical existence of human beings.” This view finds in the provisioning for human life little food for thought. Marx’s complaint against idealist ways of thinking is that they skip over the provisioning process because they fail to see that wealth and its production always have historically specific social forms and that these forms are of great human consequence.² Materialists and economists, on the other hand, highlight material production but likewise miss the fact that a mode of production is “*a mode of life*.” As Martha Campbell characterizes Marx’s two-pronged criticism: “Marx’s case against idealist philosophy of law is that the goal of each particular way of life is realized through the process of satisfying needs; against economics, it is that satisfying needs is the means for realizing the goal of a particular way of life” (146). Historical materialism’s breakthrough is to recognize that social form and purpose reach all the way down and therefore must be elements in understanding any actual mode of production.

The Sense in which There is No Secular Society

We need to distinguish the deep grammar of “a secular society” from that of “a capitalist society.” The latter phrase refers to an actual social formation with a coherent set of constitutive social forms and purposes that allow it to maintain and reproduce itself. On the surface, the former phrase, “a secular society,” sounds comparable, but it is not, for it does not identify a set of constitutive social forms and purposes that enable “a secular society” to maintain or reproduce itself. “A secular society” is not the name of any actual mode of provisioning for human needs; it is not the name of a society that can sustain itself. It is the shadow of such a society. We can acknowledge this profound difference between talking about “a secular society” and “a capitalist society” and still fruitfully employ the phrase “a secular society.” However, we need to recognize that the description “a secular society” must always be attributed to a sustainable and reproducible social mode of provisioning for human needs, such as the capitalist mode.

² “In all forms of society there is one specific [social] kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is the general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it . . . Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society” (Marx 1973: 107).

A couple of comparisons may be helpful. Thorstein Veblen classified modern capitalist society as a “predatory society” in order to bring out what it has in common with several earlier modes of production. Veblen did not think that “a predatory society” was the name of a coherent and self-maintaining society with a specific set of constitutive social forms and purposes. Likewise, history is thick with patriarchal societies, but “patriarchal society” does not identify a specific set of social forms and purposes that could be constitutive of a coherent and self-maintaining society. “A capitalist society” is a different matter; this phrase does identify a coherent and reproducible social form of provisioning for human needs. So, when we hear talk of “our secular society” or see a title such as Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, we may nod our approval, but we still want to know what social provisioning process can be described as secular and how the social forms and purposes of that provisioning process fit the description “secular.” What actual social mode of production is compatible with, or cultivates, a kind of society that we can call “secular?” The failure to engage this question reveals that an idealist approach is being taken to the topic of secularism.

Max Weber: On Instrumental Reason and Disenchantment

Marx’s historical materialism and his joint critique of political economy and the capitalist mode of production provide contemporary social theory, including Catholic social thought, with a more accurate and profound understanding of capitalist modernity than Max Weber does. I want to challenge the reliance on Max Weber’s account of modernity by three prominent Catholic social theorists: Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Pope Francis. Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* relies on the Weberian conceptions of instrumental reason and action, which produce “the technocratic paradigm.” The technocracy thought to result from enacting that paradigm would be a disenchanted and secular society *par excellence*. But we do not live in a technocracy – nor will we. For there is no coherent, self-sustaining and reproducing provisioning process organized by instrumental reason and action. Technocracy is a myth that masks the truth that we live in a world dominated by capital. The concepts of the commodity, value, money, and capital as developed by Marx are needed to understand our present predicament. Unfortunately, they are largely missing from the discourse of contemporary social theory.

Weber’s conception of the modern world as disenchanted complements his ideas of instrumental reason and action. The void of meaning said to be created by the disenchanted world clears the space for instrumental reason and action, which are agents of disenchantment. Marx’s response is that there is no such void; Weber’s so-called disenchanted world is actually the world enchanted by capital. Instrumental reason and action are shadows of the social forms and purposes that constitute a capitalist provisioning process. The capitalist economy is not “disembedded,” as Karl Polanyi calls it; rather, the constitutive social forms and purposes within which it is “embedded” are peculiarly abstract and hard to discern. The commodity and its value are elusive: “not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value” (Marx 1976: 138-39). Capital, which is value that increases its value, engenders multiple ways of covering its tracks. The supposed void that Weber thought was opened by disenchantment is largely filled and structured by the social

forms and purposes of capital. That is why instrumental reason and action play no part in Marx's thinking: they are not found in *Capital*. Instead, we find the specific social forms and purposes that are constitutive of the capitalist provisioning process: the commodity, value, money, wage-labor, surplus value, capital, profit-making, the accumulation of capital, and more. All these forms and purposes are fraught with moral, social, and political significance.

Weber is an Enlightenment thinker: he accepts the positivistic notion that values are an element of experience that can be factored out to reveal the world as it is – utterly without value. Nothing is of inherent value. When values have been “seen through,” we recognize them to be nothing more than subjective projections with which we dress the world to suit us better. David Hume, an influential eighteenth-century value subjectivist and forerunner of Weber, blasphemously refers to the world coated with our sentiments as a “new creation.” Marx rejects, as a false move, factoring experience into the purely subjective and objective. For Marx, a world free of value is as absurd as a day without weather. To the biblical accounts that, at the end of each day of creation, God looked out and “saw how good it was” and that God so loved the created world that he gave his only son, Weber might tolerantly respond: “You’re entitled to your opinion.” We see his value subjectivism in action when Weber calls both the Protestant work ethic and the ceaseless drive for capital accumulation “irrational” – but only relative to certain standpoints – not “irrational” full stop. Weber shuns unqualified value judgments; he embraces value subjectivism and relativism, a philosophy that Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis harshly condemn. As such, Weber's core philosophical commitments are much more out of line with the Catholic intellectual tradition than are Marx's, which are indebted to the metaphysics of form of Aristotle, whom he acclaims that “giant of thinking” (1976: 175).

In his essay “The Spirit of Capitalism,” Weber highlights the role of a certain strain of Protestantism in the emergence of modern capitalism, and he does so as a criticism of “more naïve” versions of Marxist historical materialism:

This origin is what really needs explanation. Concerning the doctrine of the more naïve historical materialism, that such ideas originate as a reflection or superstructure of economic situations, we shall speak more in detail below . . . the spirit of capitalism . . . was present [in parts of New England] before the capitalistic order . . . In this case the causal relation is certainly the reverse of that suggested by the materialistic standpoint (55).

Weber appears to be working with the conventional “layer-cake” model of historical materialism, where the forces of production, the relations of production, the superstructure, and forms of consciousness are all separable but causally connected, like the bodies that make up the solar system, with the primacy of causal power attributed to the forces of production.

For Marx, these distinguishable aspects of social life are not separable. Forces of production are always constituted by specific social forms and purposes that make a mode of production a “way of life.” These constitutive forms and purposes reverberate through the different aspects of social life. For example, the many social movements for equal recognition and treatment draw on the power of capitalist practices in pressing for egalitarian reforms. Recall Marx's observation: “The system of exchange values, and the money system even more so, are, in fact, a system of freedom and equality” (1987: 475-76). By contrast, Weber attributes

to “naïve” historical materialism a one-directional and mechanical conception of causal connections between the forces of production, the relations of production, the “legal and political superstructure,” and forms of social consciousness (Marx 1970: 20). No doubt one can find this naïve sort of historical materialism in Marxism and can impute it to Marx as well, based on a superficial reading of passages such as this: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (1970: 20-21). This statement that “social existence” “determines consciousness” has widely been interpreted in a one-sided way that presumes a purist split between “social existence” and “consciousness” – the social analogue to splitting body and mind – rather than a conceptual distinction. But that sort of bifurcated thinking is exactly what Marx criticizes in the first of his “Theses on Feuerbach,” where he castigates the one-sidedness of both materialism and idealism.

Elaborating on the point about consciousness, Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*:

Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness. In the former way of looking at things one starts out from the consciousness as the living individual, in the latter way, the way corresponding to actual life, one starts out from actual living individuals themselves and takes consciousness into account only as their consciousness (1976: 37).

Their point is that consciousness is always the consciousness of someone involved in some way of life. They go on the offensive against idealists: “The actual production of life appears as a historical primitive, while the historical appears as that which is separated from common life, that which is extra-worldly, above the world” (1976: 55). The study of secularism must avoid this idealist bifurcation.

What is not widely known is that by the end of “The Spirit of Capitalism” essay, Weber makes it clear that, once capitalism’s training wheels come off and it has its own head of steam, religion is no longer needed. On the contrary, religion gets in the way: “In fact, it [capitalism] no longer needs the support of any religious forces, and feels the attempts of religion to influence economic life, in so far as they can still be felt at all, to be as much an unjustified interference as its regulation by the State” (72). For example, observance of a Sabbath obstructs production and trade. Consequently, “Any relationship between religious beliefs and conduct is generally absent, and where any exists, at least in Germany, it tends to be of the negative sort. The people filled with the spirit of capitalism today [1904-5] tend to be indifferent, if not hostile, to the Church” (70). Weber sees the fitting subjective complement to capital’s dominance as “the ability to free oneself from the common tradition, a sort of liberal enlightenment” and indifference if not hostility toward religion (70).³ Militant secularism suits the spirit of capitalism, according to Weber.

³ José Casanova observes: “the secular appears now as reality tout court, while the religious is increasingly perceived not only as the residual category, the other of the secular, but also as a superstructural and superfluous additive, which both humans and societies can do without” (56).

Charles Taylor and Instrumental Reason

After associating the rise of atomistic individualism with the disenchantment of the world as the first of the three “malaises” of modernity, Charles Taylor adds “the primacy of instrumental reason” as a second source of disenchantment:

The disenchantment of the world is connected to another massively important phenomenon of the modern age, which also greatly troubles many people. We might call this the primacy of instrumental reason. By “instrumental reason” I mean the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success (1991: 4-5).⁴

If we take “instrumental reason” and “the technocratic paradigm” as conceptually on a par, Taylor and Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* seem to agree.⁵ “Instrumental reason” aims at “efficiency.” Taylor explains what he means by “efficiency”: “cost-output ratio” serves as the “measure,” with “the best cost-output ratio” being the objective of “instrumental reason.” But an “efficiency” ratio is a relationship between two numbers having the same dimension. To know which fuel – coal or natural gas – is more efficient for producing electricity, it does no good to compare a ratio of tons of coal to kilowatt hours with a ratio of cubic meters of natural gas to kilowatt hours. What is the dimension of the numbers in this “cost-output ratio”? As a measure of “efficiency,” Taylor’s “cost-output ratio” is, in the strict sense of the terms, confused, even nonsensical. Rather than employing the expression “input-output ratio,” Taylor gives us the expression “cost-output ratio.” But on the face of it, that ratio lacks a common dimension: one term in the ratio, cost, is in the dimension of money, while the other term, output, is not. The expression is incongruous.

Two ways to change it to a consistent expression come to mind. One is to switch it to “cost of input-selling price of output ratio.” Then we have a ratio of two amounts of money, indeed a very familiar one, since this ratio, in which the terms do have a common dimension, is the key measure of success for capitalist firms. A ratio of one or more is unsustainable. But there are problems with this solution. One is that instrumental reason then turns out to be nothing more than the profit-maximizing behavior of capitalists, in which case introducing the term “instrumental reason” serves no purpose other than to mask money and moneymaking.

⁴ See also the discussion of “instrumental society” in Taylor 1989: 499-502. Marx also sees atomism as a modern malady, but he links it with the money economy: “Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way” (1976: 187).

⁵ In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis writes: “At this stage, I propose that we focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world” (101). He elaborates on the “technocratic paradigm”: “The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object . . . It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation” (106). There are, however, passages in the encyclical that associate the “technocratic paradigm” with the single-minded pursuit of profit: “The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings” (109).

A second problem is that, since only wealth in the commodity form and only labor in the wage-labor form have prices, the scope of instrumental reason would extend only to situations where all the inputs, including labor (labor-power) are commodities and all the relevant outputs – discommodities further complicate this picture – are commodities. But what would motivate anyone to engage in a “money in-money out” transaction, if the money out were less than, or even the same as, the money in? That consideration leads Marx to conclude that, in a society where inputs and outputs are all commodities, production will take the profit-seeking form. So, we are back to instrumental action turning out to be profit-seeking.

A second way to address the incongruity would be to switch to “input-output ratio.” But what is the common dimension between a tractor and a bushel of corn? If it is not price (money), what is it? Wealth? Both the tractor and the bushel of corn are useful things, wealth. But does wealth have a common and quantifiable dimension such that we could make sense of talking about a ratio of quantities of tractors and bushels of corn? What would that dimension be? Usefulness? But wealth in its diverse forms is useful in different ways. Where is the common denominator? This proposed solution forces us into a utility theory of wealth, but utility is a false conception of usefulness. There is no usefulness-in-general, as utility purports to be, no usefulness in abstraction from the features that make anything useful. There is nothing for utility to be the concept of. As Alasdair MacIntyre says, utility is “a pseudo-concept available for a variety of ideological uses, but no more than that” (62). When we probe Taylor’s conceptions of “instrumental reason” and “efficiency,” we find that “instrumental reason” turns out either to be a misleading term for profit-oriented activities or to rely on the pseudo-concept of utility.

Catherine Pickstock: Secularism, Not Capitalism, Drives the Modern World

Catherine Pickstock makes several provocative suggestions in “Capitalism or Secularism? Search for the Culprit,” her review of my anthology, *Reflections on Commercial Life* (Murray). She writes, “What is perhaps evaded here . . . is the question as to whether secularization is not more fundamental than commercialization, rather than just one of its accompanying features” (168). Perhaps capitalism is secularism’s shadow. In a Weberian spirit, she also suggests that commercialization is not as fundamental as “rationalization or formalization.” She writes, “Murray remains neutral as to whether commercialization is the driving force of modernity, or whether it is just one aspect of a wider drive towards rationalization or formalization” (168). She then takes the causal sequence back another step, arguing that formalization is a consequence of secularization:

However, if formalization in all spheres is the more fundamental phenomenon, then one must ask, why has this occurred? And the answer is clear. The public realm became increasingly mediated by a formalized *mathesis* because of the collapse, for various reasons, of belief in, and support for substantive, collective norms, which, since they necessarily exceeded the possibility of grounding in an apodictic reason, were referred to a transcendent dimension. In other words, formalization is itself the manifestation of secularization (Pickstock: 168).

Pickstock's thrust is that I have things back to front: commercialization is an aspect of formalization, and formalization is a consequence of secularization. Secularization, Pickstock contends, drives modernity.

Consider Pickstock's intermediary concept: formalization. The neo-Weberian sociologist George Ritzer, author of *The McDonaldization of Society*, writes, "Weber demonstrated in his research that the modern Western world had produced a distinctive kind of rationality . . . that Weber called formal rationality. This is the sort of rationality we refer to when we discuss McDonaldization or the rationalization process in general" (23). However, he goes on to grant that Weber argued: "ultimately, material or, more specifically, economic interests drive rationalization in capitalist societies" (168-69). Ritzer agrees with Weber: "Profit-making enterprises pursue McDonaldization because it leads to lower costs and higher profits" (168). So, Weber and some prominent neo-Weberians recognize that rationalization and formalization are derivative of commercialization. Those popular concepts mask the reality: capitalist rationality is not formal (instrumental) rationality any more than labor in capitalism is instrumental action. Capitalist rationality aims not at "efficiency" but rather at accumulating profits, and the job of labor in capitalism is to produce those profits, not to engage in instrumental action. With his concept of relative surplus value, Marx spells out how increasing the productive power of labor increases profitability. McDonaldization can serve as the trademark for capital's drive for relative surplus value. Terms such as "formalization" or "instrumentalization" are ways of talking about capital's domination that fail to mention capital. Capital's purposes and the social forms and relationships that constitute the capitalist mode of production establish a coherent, self-maintaining, and reproducing way of provisioning for social needs. The same cannot be said for a supposed rationalized or formalized society. Since there is no formalized society or "instrumental society" (as per Taylor), secularism cannot bring one about. Pickstock's link between secularism and commercialism (capitalism) is missing. Commercialization is not only more fundamental than formalization; formalization is a pseudo-concept that serves to conceal capital.

As for secularism being more fundamental than commercialism, the telling historical materialist point holds: as materially needy creatures, we cannot survive without a self-maintaining and reproducing mode of provisioning for those needs. Secularism is not a mode of production, but capitalism is. As Marx points out, "one thing is clear: the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part" (1976: 175-76). We want to know why secularism "plays the chief part" today, such that we live in "a secular age." No one can live on secularism any more than on Catholicism or politics; the investigatory challenge is to understand how "the manner in which" we gain our livelihood – our mode of production, which presently and for the most part is the capitalist one – allows for, encourages, or even requires secularism. When we examine "the manner in which" we provision for meeting human needs in capitalist societies, we find conditions ripe for secularism.

The point of a historical materialist approach is not to discount the factors that Pickstock identifies as giving rise to secularism, namely, "the collapse, for various reasons, of belief in, and support for substantive, collective norms," but to grasp them in the context of a mode of production. It is not idealism to take ideas seriously. As noted above, Moishe Postone points

out that capitalist society rests on the collapse of traditional collective norms. Money usurps overt social relations: “all bourgeois relations are gilded” (Marx 1970: 64). In other words, capitalist social relations bring about and enforce “the collapse, for various reasons, of belief in, and support for substantive, collective norms” (Postone: 180) that Pickstock identifies as opening the social space for secularism. “All that is solid melts into air; all that is holy is profaned,” proclaims *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1994: 161-62).

Capitalist production supersedes overtly social relations and “substantive, collective norms” but not social relations and collective purposes altogether. In capital’s accumulation process, profits serve to produce more profit, endlessly. That makes the purpose of capitalist production strange and not “substantive” in any traditional sense. Nevertheless, the accumulation of capital is our compulsory collective good. Facts such as these about the social forms constitutive of capitalist society should play an important part in the conversation about secularism in the modern world. Taking a historical materialist perspective extends Charles Taylor’s effort in *A Secular Age* to focus the discussion of secularism on “the conditions of belief” to the social form and purpose of the material conditions of belief.⁶ Let us look at how the originator of historical materialism thought about capitalism and secularism.

From Religion to the Logic of Religion: Marx’s “On the Jewish Question”

Marx engaged Judaism, Christianity, secularism, and the commercial world in his early essay “On the Jewish Question,” his response to two articles by Bruno Bauer. Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach were leading Young Hegelians; both were friends of Marx and influenced him during his student days in Berlin. But it was their teacher, G. W. F. Hegel, who had the more profound impact on Marx. Hegel was brilliant in his ability to recognize the form or logic of things, including thinking and social structures. Marx quickly took a greater interest in the *logic of religion*, Judaism and Christianity that is, than in religion. By the same token, Marx reframed the idea of secularism: it is not enough to overcome religion, one must overcome the logic of religion.

Bauer and Feuerbach were what José Casanova calls “stadial” thinkers: they saw religion as a stage in human development, one that they believed was ending, at least for the Europeans of their day, with the maturation of humanity.⁷ Humanity was shedding religion. That is how Marx characterizes Bauer’s position:

Once Jew and Christian recognize their respective religions as nothing more than *different stages in the evolution of the human spirit*, as different snake skins shed by *history*, and recognize *man* as the snake that wore them, they will no longer find themselves in religious antagonism but only in a critical, *scientific*, and human relationship (1994a: 3).

⁶ Of “the conditions of belief,” Taylor writes, “Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place” (2007: 3).

⁷ Casanova writes: “To be secular means to be modern, and therefore, by implication, to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical stadial consciousness, which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression” (59).

Whether Feuerbach and Bauer held what Charles Taylor calls the “subtraction theory of secularization” – as the snakeskin image suggests – is not as clear.⁸ They saw a post-religious world as humanity’s destiny. But did religion, more particularly Judaism and Christianity, play a constitutive role in the maturation of humanity? Hegel thought so, but he did not forecast religion’s disappearance. Because Marx sees the joint reality of the modern political state and the capitalist economy as the fulfillment of Christianity, in his own way, he follows Hegel in rejecting the subtraction narrative of the emergence of secularism.

In reflecting on Judaism and Christianity in this early essay, Marx leans heavily on Feuerbach’s idea that theology is misdirected anthropology and, as such, an alienated way for human beings to discover their humanity. But the Young Hegelian critique of theology does not go nearly far enough. “On the Jewish Question” anticipates the criticism that Marx makes a couple of years later in his “Theses on Feuerbach”:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious and secular world. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But the fact that the secular basis becomes separate from itself and establishes an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavage and self-contradictoriness of the secular basis. Thus the latter must be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice (1994b: 99-100).

In what Feuerbach identifies as “religious self-alienation,” Marx sees the symptom of a secular alienation – the logic of religion structuring secular life – which he identifies as the primary target of criticism and revolutionary action.

Marx finds in Feuerbach an account of religion as alienation in which humans worship the products of their own imagination – God and the kingdom of God. Marx echoes Feuerbach, saying, “*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man,” adding, “religion is only the illusory sun that revolves around man so long as he does not revolve about himself” (1994a: 28). Ironically, the prophetic critique of idolatry blankets religion: all religion is idolatry. Because Marx perceives in religion a general logic of alienation, he shifts the focus from religion to the logic of religion. “The *criticism of religion*” may be “the premise of all criticism,” as Marx wrote (1994c: 28), but that premise led Marx to the criticism of the “religious logic” of alienation wherever it is found. For Marx, the truly secular world would be a human condition freed not only from religion but also from the “religious logic” of alienation. Even here, where the meanings of “the religious” and “the secular” are being stretched on the frame of the logic of alienation, we see the truth of Casanova’s observation that “‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ are always and everywhere mutually constituted” (55).

In “On the Jewish Question,” Marx identifies “religious logic” as the deep problem and argues that religion in the ordinary sense of the term is a symptom of a secular social logic of

⁸ By “subtraction stories” Taylor means “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside” (2007: 22). Taylor argues against a subtraction narrative of secularization.

alienation. But religion is more than a symptom: “*Religious* suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time the *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people” (Marx 1994c: 28). Marx opposes the subtraction story of secularization when he adds, “Criticism has plucked imaginary flowers from the chain, not so that man will wear the chain that is without fantasy or consolation but so that he will throw it off and pluck the living flower” (1994c: 28). With Marx, the Young Hegelian criticism of religion is transformed into the criticism of alienation – whether secular or religious in the ordinary sense – and the project of superseding religion expands to the project of overcoming alienation in all forms. We might say that for Marx only a society that put an end to alienation would be the truly secular society; it would not only be post-religious, it would overcome all social logics of alienation.

Marx may be reflecting on his youthful statement that the point of the critique of religion is “not so that man will wear the chain that is without fantasy or consolation” when, years later, he describes the members of capitalist societies as caught in “a kind of fiction without fantasy, a religion of the vulgar” (1971: 453). This language suggests that Marx might well see the retreat of Judaism and Christianity in the face of the commercial “religion of the vulgar” as deflating resistance to the capitalist order. The German theologian Dorothee Sölle thinks along those lines:

I want to argue that religion is emancipatory because, very simply, it is one of the few things we have left today which can link us to transcendence and save us from banality. The outcome of the Enlightenment project (which continues through Feuerbach and others as well) to discredit religion, to see it as merely a human creation, has been that we are now left without access to anything transcendental. The “loss” of this dimension has produced a host of secondary consequences which we are only now beginning to understand. A totally secular culture, which once seemed so desirable to many thinkers, has come to be experienced by millions as something essentially shallow if not completely bankrupt. Where once people practiced religion, about the only thing many of them now engage in “religiously” is consuming (148).

We might take Sölle’s observations as updating Marx’s claim that the “religion” that capitalism spawns is a dispiriting “fiction without fantasy.”

For Bauer, the solution to “the Jewish problem” lies in the separation of church and state, what he calls “political emancipation.” Bauer believes that, without the state’s support, religion will peter out. Marx argues that, while “political emancipation” is a historic advance, it fails to achieve “human emancipation”: “The splitting of man into *public* and *private*, the *displacement* of religion from the state to civil society, is not just a step in political emancipation but its *completion*. It as little abolishes man’s *actual* religiosity as it seeks to abolish it” (1994a: 10).⁹ Marx finds the “religious logic” of alienation in both the modern state and modern commerce, which

⁹ Marx agrees with Bauer that the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, but he points out that religion thrives in the world’s most politically emancipated state, the United States. Political emancipation, Marx concludes, is not human emancipation.

he conceives of as a single, differentiated social formation: “This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world* because they are an *inverted world*” (1994c: 28). A secular schism – “the universal *secular contradiction between the political state and civil society*” – fosters religion (Marx 1994a: 14). The contradiction involved in the “religious logic” of alienation concerns the improper mediation between the universal and particular. The universal nature of the human individual is recognized in the citizen, but that universality is the political lionskin under which lives the participant in the dog-eat-dog struggle of modern commerce:

The secular conflict to which the Jewish question ultimately is reduced – the relation between the political state and its presupposition, whether the presuppositions be material elements such as private property or spiritual elements such as education and religion, the conflict between *general* and *private interest*, the split between the political state and civil society – these secular contradictions Bauer leaves untouched while attacking their religious expression (Marx 1994a: 9).

The high-minded egalitarianism and dedication to the public good of the citizen stand in stark contrast to the me-first attitude that rules commercial life. Money is the secular god of the commercial world:

Money degrades all the gods of mankind – and converts them into commodities. Money is the general, self-sufficient *value* of everything. Hence it has robbed the whole world, the human world as well as nature, of its proper worth. Money is the alienated essence of man’s labor and life, and this alien essence dominates him as he worships it (Marx 1994a: 24).

Already in this early essay, Marx sees the modern commercial world not as disenchanted but rather as enchanted by value, which displaces “the proper worth” of the human world and nature.

To recap, the two criticisms that Marx makes of Bauer and Feuerbach are that religion is not the problem so much as a symptom of the problem and that the logic of religion, not religion, should be the focus of emancipatory theory. Political emancipation does not eliminate religion or the logic of religion – on the contrary, political emancipation guarantees religious liberty while the state and commerce are structured by the logic of religion. Marx makes the startling claim:

the perfected Christian state is . . . the *atheistic* state, the *democratic* state, the state that relegates religion to the level of other elements of civil society . . . The democratic state, the real state, needs no religion for its political fulfillment. It can, rather, do without religion because it fulfills the human basis of religion in a secular way (1994a: 10-11).

So, the modern social set-up of the politically emancipated state and the capitalist mode of production are the historical fulfillment of Christianity. When it comes to the question of what is needed to put an end to religion, it is really the end of the logic of religion, as the logic of alienation, that Marx has in mind.

Marx briefly indicates what an end to the logic of religion, to alienation, would look like. It would involve a direct reconciliation in everyday life of the individual with the universal good, what Marx then called “human emancipation,” as opposed to the merely “political emancipation” promoted by Bauer:

Only when the actual, individual man has taken back into himself the abstract citizen and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships has become a *species-being*, only when he has recognized and organized his own powers as *social* powers so that social force is no longer separated from him as *political* power, only then is human emancipation complete (1994a: 21).

In *Capital*, Marx returned to the question of what is required for an end to religion and to all social logics of religion:

The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development (1976: 173).

Whether such a reconciliation of society and the individuals that compose it is attainable remains to be seen.

Conclusion: From Weber to Marx

The fundamental lesson of historical materialism is that, to meet historically changing human needs, there must always be a social provisioning process to produce and distribute what is required. Since there is no society in general, historically changing provisioning processes are always constituted by specific social forms and purposes which are thick with moral, social, political, and environmental consequences. As such, these provisioning processes cannot be dismissed as merely providing material means to support human life: they support a way of life. Since the needs of human life are constantly renewed, these provisioning processes must be sufficiently coherent to maintain and reproduce themselves or else give way to new forms that are. “Secular society” and “secular age” are phrases that do not describe any such provisioning process. “Capitalist society” and “capitalist epoch” do name a coherent, self-maintaining and self-reproducing provisioning process. No society survives on secularism, so there is no secular society in the sense that there are capitalist societies. Secularism in the modern world is not an independent phenomenon; it exists and must be studied in relationship to the capitalist provisioning process, which does stand on its own.

Secularism in the modern world is a shadow of capitalist social relations and purposes. As we saw Postone observe, “in precapitalist societies, for example, labor is accorded significance by overt social relations and is shaped by tradition. Because commodity-producing

labor is not mediated by such relations, it is, in a sense, de-signified, ‘secularized’” (180). Secularism and instrumental action are shadows cast by labor in capitalism, which is not mediated by overt social relations rooted in tradition. Rather, “all that is solid melts into air,” and labor appears “disembedded,” to use Karl Polanyi’s term. That gives rise to the Weberian notion that labor in the modern world is instrumental action that fosters a disenchanted world. But commodity-producing labor is not instrumental action. Instrumental action is a shadow of commodity-producing labor; it is a pseudo-concept. Commodity-producing labor has a definite social form and purpose (profit and the accumulation of capital), and it is far from disenchanting.¹⁰ With this understanding in mind, we can speak of a “secular society” or “secular age.”

Karl Marx’s account of capitalist society and the rationality that prevails in it reaches different conclusions than the Weberian account, which informs many approaches to modern secularism. Weber, who adopted the horizon of neoclassical economics’ subjective value theory, sees disenchantment and the dominance of formal reason and action as going hand in hand with secular society. Where Weber sees the modern world as disenchanted and dominated by formal or instrumental reason and action, Marx argues that capitalist society is bewitched by value – commodities, money, and capital are all fetishes possessed of peculiar social powers not based on their material properties or the character of their owners – and that capitalist rationality and action are determined by the compulsory purpose of profit-making and the accumulation of capital.

Beginning with his early essay “On the Jewish Question,” Marx changed the terms of the discussion by following Feuerbach’s lead in seeing Judaism and Christianity as forms of alienation and idolatry. Marx, then, shifted the focus from the Young Hegelian critique of religion to the critique of the logic of religion as a logic of alienation. When Marx recognized that “religious logic” structures modern social arrangements, which pair the politically emancipated state with the capitalist mode of provisioning for human needs, his attention shifted to them. These new social arrangements, arising from the demise of feudalism, involved separating church and state, thereby establishing a formally secular society. But, Marx argued, they did not put an end to religion or to the logic of religion, that is to the logic of alienation. On the contrary, both the public realm and the private realm, both the politically emancipated state and the capitalist provisioning process were caught up in logics of alienation. Secular capitalist society may be post-religious, but it has not escaped the logic of religion, the logic of alienation. Older forms of enchantment have given way – “all that is holy is profaned” – to the enchantment of the world by the “supersensible” social objectivity of value and capital’s endless push to make profits and accumulate capital. A truly secular society, for Marx, would overcome not only religion but the logic of religion. That would require bringing about a provisioning process not ruled by the law of value and not directed at the production and accumulation of surplus value.

¹⁰ As Postone points out, capitalist society is disenchanted in Weber’s sense, but that kind of disenchantment is one face of a world enchanted by value: “The world of commodities is one in which objects and actions are no longer imbued with sacred significance. It is a secular world of ‘thingly’ objects bound together by, and revolving around, the glittering abstractum of money. It is, to use Weber’s phrase, a disenchanted world” (175).

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