

Why Marx was not an Atheist

Andy Blunden June 2006

The title of my talk may seem surprising to some of you, but it is a simple fact that Marx rejected the label of atheist from at least the age of 23 and never described himself as an atheist. His whole attitude to religion is also not quite what it is commonly supposed to be and his attitude to philosophical materialism is also commonly misconstrued. But before I begin, I must make several small points of clarification just to make sure that we do not waste time with useless talking at cross purposes.

Points of clarification

Firstly, I am not claiming that Marx was religious or was in any way indifferent to or sympathetic to theistic ideology. It is more the case that he went much *further* than denying the existence of God.

Consequently, it should be clear that I am not claiming that Marx was an agnostic, a position which is only bettered in its stupidity by those who practice religion *just in case* it turns out that God exists.

Finally, in everything I say about atheism, the God whose existence I am talking of being denied has nothing to do with infantile conceptions of an anthropomorphic God who watches our every move and does favours for the well-behaved. This kind of conception disappeared from serious theology, let alone philosophy, centuries ago, and for a long time has been maintained only for the comforting of the ignorant and the disciplining of children.

An atheism which *limited* itself to the denial of *this* kind of God is unworthy of the name. The atheism which I am talking about is the atheism which denies the existence of a God of *any* kind, including a Deistic, non-interventionist prime mover or a Spinozist Pantheistic God. It was this kind of atheism which Marx denied.

Need I repeat however, that this does not at all mean that Marx was a Deist or a Pantheist, but rather that he foreswore *all kinds* of Theism, Deism and Pantheism, including those that clothe themselves in Atheistic or philosophical garb.

At the moment, we face a resurgence of what is called ‘fundamentalism’, and in fact Christian fundamentalism has managed to capture positions of enormous power in the world, though they remain a small minority in the population at large. These Christian fundamentalists of course promote just such a childish conception of God. My point is that Marxists and atheists of all kinds will find themselves in *alliance* with the much larger forces of mainstream Christianity in opposing this reactionary

stupidity. Fighting against puerile and intolerant dogmatism is not, in my view, anything to do with atheism. I hope we all agree on that. Atheism is posed at a higher level, so to speak. If you are an atheist, you are not only against Berkeley and the Pope, you are against Spinoza and Rousseau.

A final point of introduction. I will quote Marx a lot, because my aim is to clarify Marx's view, not my own, and specifically, to establish that Marx refused the label of 'atheist'. It is not my intention to lecture you on my own opinions about atheism. Doubtless my views will come up, but that is incidental.

Marx and French materialism

The founders of modern atheism were the French materialists of the eighteenth century: Jean Meslier, Julien La Mettrie, Denis Diderot, Holbach, Anarchasis Cloots, Jacques Hébert and company. Marx was quite explicit in identifying this current of thinkers as the source of modern communist political theory. Contrasting these writers with Cartesian "scientific" materialism, Marx wrote in *The Holy Family*:

"the other trend of French materialism leads directly to *socialism* and *communism*. There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism."

The atheists were the extreme left of the French Revolution; denial of God was the denial of all authority over man in favour the complete freedom of human beings to organise the world for the benefit of man; it was also the banner under which war was launched against God's representatives on Earth, the Christian clergy. Marx quite explicitly saw himself as *joining* a movement which, via Babeuf and Blanqui, had its origins in French materialism.

But when Marx was recruited to "True Socialism" by Moses Hess and began his political writing as a follower of Ludwig Feuerbach, his transit from this beginning to ruthless and unrelenting criticism of the communist movement of his own day was extremely rapid. Among Marx's concerns was to rescue the insights of German Idealist philosophy from being unceremoniously dumped in the enthusiasm for the new radical French atheism.

The Criticism of Religion

As Marx famously remarked in the opening words of the

Introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

“For Germany, the *criticism of religion* has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.”

While pointing out that the task of atheism had already been essentially completed by the French Revolution, he also saw the critique of religion as a model for the critique of capitalism.

As early as 1842, at the age of 23, Marx wrote to his friend Arnold Ruge that he refused

“the label ‘atheism’ (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogey man), and that instead the *content of philosophy* should be brought to the people.” [Letter to Ruge, November 24, 1842]

Marx argued in the 1844 Manuscripts that with the success of the bourgeois revolution and the emergence of the workers' movement struggling for socialism, atheism was becoming an anachronism:

“Since the *real existence* of man and nature has become evident in practice, through sense experience, because man has thus become evident for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man, the question about an *alien* being, about a being above nature and man - a question which implies admission of the unreality of nature and of man - has become **impossible** in practice. *Atheism*, as a *negation of God*, has **no longer any meaning**, and postulates the *existence of man* through this negation; but socialism as socialism **no longer stands in any need** of such a mediation.”

In politics, the most important differences are always of course, the differences you have with your closest friends. Moses Hess, who had recruited Engels to communism, and is credited as the original author of the slogan “religion is the opium of the people,” and continued to work closely with Marx even as late as the 1860s, became the target of attack in the *Communist Manifesto* for denouncing bourgeois rights even before they had been achieved in Germany. This kind of strident advocacy of the virtues of socialism in utter contradiction to the conditions for their realisation was, in Marx's eyes, tantamount to supporting reaction. Marx's opposition to atheism is connected with his opposition to this kind of ultimatistic ultra-leftism which had no regard for the state of consciousness of the German working class.

Marx's teacher in philosophy, Ludwig Feuerbach, was the most renowned German atheist, accusing Hegel of abolishing theology

only to restore it in philosophy. It was in his critique of Feuerbach's materialism that Marx formulated his own views.

Let's look at what Marx had to say about the critique of religion. He says in the famous *Introduction*:

“The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, ... its moral sanction, its solemn complement and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

“Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

Atheism was therefore not just attacking the symptom instead of the disease, but was attacking the means by which the masses bore their suffering.

Theses on Feuerbach

In this is contained the kernel of Marx's critique, not only of religion, but also of capitalism. The people, who are not philosophers, *need* religion, at least under conditions of oppression and alienation, they do, in exactly the same way that people need ideals, and heroes and even faint hopes, in order to struggle and sacrifice for a better world. To simply argue against religion rather than tackling the conditions which give rise to religion is counter-productive. As Marx says in *Theses on Feuerbach* (No. 4):

“once the **earthly family** is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, former must itself be annihilated theoretically and practically.”

Marx's critique of philosophical materialism is clear in the first thesis:

“The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that objectivity, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by **idealism** - but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such.”

Marx’s criticism of philosophical materialism is no accident. Having recognised the historically progressive role that had been played by philosophical materialism, as represented by the 18th century French atheists, this position now had to be transcended.

“The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a **practical** question. ... The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.”

Feuerbach’s kind of dogmatic materialism sets itself above and outside society (no. 3):

“The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society....”

Marx’s counter-proposal needs to be properly understood (No. 8):

“All social life is essentially **practical**. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”

It was not Reason, or Nature, or “Man” in the abstract, but:

“the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live.”

[*German Ideology*, 1a]

Pantheism and materialism

God or no God doesn’t help one iota!

The materialist who proudly proclaims that they do not believe in God, but on the contrary believe that everything is governed by Nature and determined by laws of Nature, - or laws of history it makes little difference - differs from the Pantheist in the name he

gives to God, but not *necessarily* anything else.

Let me give you some examples from the words of the great French materialists I referred to earlier.

From Jean Meslier 1742: “I will finish by begging God, so outraged by that sect, that he deign to recall us to **natural religion**, of which Christianity is the declared enemy.”

From La Mettrie 1748: “**Nature** has created us all solely to be happy... For this cause she has given all animals some share of natural law.”

From Cloots 1793: “there is no other God but Nature.”

And Robespierre of course quite deliberately resurrected the so-called Supreme Being and nominated a national day for Frenchmen to worship him. All such concepts: Matter, Nature, Gaia, History, Reason, ... are nothing other than names given by different sects to *God*, as is often indicated by capitalising the first letter of the word.

Well not quite. Of course, implicit in the *name* given to God, is a whole theory about the nature of God and how He may be known, and it is *here* that the substantive differences are located. When the French revolutionaries deified Reason and expropriated the property of the Christian Church, this was of course a very real and material change.

But if you simply deny the existence of any God, you leave unanswered the question of the basic premises from which the world can be made sense of. And perhaps we could discuss this more afterwards.

It is not a question of the *existence* of God. Matter, for example, is the name given to the Absolute by materialism; to simply give matter priority over consciousness may still be a cover for some form of Pantheism. Science differs from religion in the theory of knowledge that follows.

It makes no sense to simply deny that God exists. What does it mean to say “exist”? To affirm that an entity, divine or otherwise, exists, independently of the meaning that such an existence has in human practice, is to implicitly posit some form of Deism.

Denial of existence has exactly the same import. You have to specify what it means to say that something exists, before it makes any sense to say that it does not exist.

For example, I was myself for many years an advocate of so-called “dialectics of nature” which like social Darwinism pretended to deduce laws of society from laws of Nature. But really this is a stupid position, which we can go into some other day. But it is this kind of conception, that ascribes certain properties to Nature (God)

in order to prove that such properties must be applied to human life, it is this kind of conception which I describe as not being substantially different from Deism or Pantheism.

The notion of “God,” like that of “Nature,” is simply the Absolute within a given system of ideas, or ideology, the “universal signifier” as the postmodernists say. For the socialists, the Absolute is human activity, practice, which is both subjective and objective. This conception of things differs as chalk and cheese from all forms of Theism and Deism, whether idealist or materialist.

Conclusion

In conclusion I must remark that Marx retained an uncompromising hostility to clericalism and all the institutions of the old regime which were used to keep the masses in subjection and ignorance, and never made any compromise with the institutions of clerical reaction. As he said:

“Christian Socialism is but the holy water with
which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of
the aristocrat.” [*Communist Manifesto*]

He opposed the influence of religion in the working class but only as one of any number of forms in which mysticism manifested itself, among which he numbered also the atheism of his day.

He also foresaw a time in the future when God would have no place in human affairs, because *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion would have been abolished. But that is still a question for the future.