The Theology of Karl Marx Fall 2023

Karl Marx erected his critique of capitalism upon George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit. Hegel’s phenomenology is theological. It is incarnational. Yet, according to Marx, it was flawed. Marx faulted Hegel’s phenomenology for espousing modalism, a heresy that holds that the Father and the Son are modes of being of an ultimately ineffable God. While Marx never laid out a theology of his own, his mature social theory offers tantalizing hints of a theology compatible with the church’s ecumenical creeds. This seminar examines the conditions that gave rise to Hegel’s incarnational theology and to Marx’s critique of that theology.

Readings: You can access seminar readings at <https://newconsensus.org/marx-marks.html>.

Meetings: The seminar is held every Sunday at 3 pm in the Library of Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church, Berkeley. If you wish to participate remotely, contact the seminar leader at joseph.lough@gmail.com.

SESSION 1 (September 17): Bodies

Suggested reading: Genesis 1, Romans 8:18-25; Nicene Creed, Chalcedon Standard, Apostle's Creed; Thomas Aquinas, Part III, On Sacraments (excerpt).

As was true of all religious practitioners everywhere prior to the fourteenth century, Christians oriented themselves to their faith materially: vertically and horizontally, seasonally, diurnally, differentiating among fabric textures and fabric colors, coiffure, foods required, foods prohibited, sacred spaces and condemned. They read divine guidance and spiritual threats on the waters, in animal migrations, and in the heavens. In 1274, Saint Thomas' challenge was not showing how God could be present in things. That was obvious. His challenge was showing why God had restricted the things in which God wished to be sought and found to seven things only, the church's official sacraments.

SESSION 2 (September 24): Hours

Suggested reading: David S. Landes, Revolution in Time (excerpt); Jacques Le Goff, Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages (excerpt); Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination (excerpt).

The Chinese escapement entered Christian Europe by way of Muslim Andalusia. It found its natural home in Benedictine cloisters where, initially, it announced Hours for prayer. In 1324 it was requisitioned for another task: measuring the value of abstract time and labor. If we associate capitalism with material wealth, we are likely to miss its nativity. But the Mediterranean with its merchant families and financial houses produced material wealth, not abstract value. Italy, Spain, and Portugal, northern Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean fell ever further behind the much poorer northern and western regions of Europe, which adopted abstract time, labor, and value no later than the fourteenth century. Within decades, not centuries, they overtook their wealthier trading partners to the south and east. Modern religion was born in regions that had adopted abstract time, labor, and value.

SESSION 3 (October 1): Surface Tensions

Suggested reading: Caroline Walker Bynum, Christian Materiality (excerpt); Donna Spivey Ellington, From sacred body to angelic soul (excerpt); Margaret Miles, A complex delight (excerpt); P Widdicombe "The Wounds of the Ascended Body"; Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his world (excerpt).

With the migration of value from surfaces to abstract underlying interiors, Christian materiality grew increasingly unstable. This instability was felt in multiple domains simultaneously, most obviously in the growing instability of the church's seven sacraments. It was also felt in the fragmentation of the Holy Mother and her divine Son into degraded and often grotesque or erotic outward forms of appearance, on the one hand, and abstract androgynous value forms on the other. The ascended and glorified body of Christ, which for ten centuries had proudly displayed its wounds, suddenly shed every sign of its earthly sojourn. Feast days, which packed the Medieval church's calendar, were hit particularly hard. These authorized and unauthorized reversals reminded Christians of the sacred character of "the lower parts." With the retreat of value from surfaces to underlying value forms, sacred laughter retreated from public life into bar rooms and brothels.

SESSION 4 (October 8): Deus Absconditus

Suggested reading: Martin Luther, Bondage of the Will (excerpt); Philip Jacob Spener, Pia Desideria (excerpt); Francis Bacon, De Augmentis (excerpt); John Locke, Two Treatises on Government (excerpt); Pitirim Sorokin, Social & Cultural Dynamics. Tables.

When value retreats from surfaces it does not disappear. Rather does it supplant substantive value. This leaves all surfaces vulnerable to depredation and destruction. Christians cannot enjoy baptismal waters, cannot participate in the Eucharistic Feast, cannot pray or read the Bible without wondering whether theirs is no more than a surface encounter. The degradation of surfaces leaves creation vulnerable to exploitation for science and industry. But it also calls into question the fitness of communities whose members fail to exploit creation. John Locke famously questioned the rights of Native Americans who failed to exploit the resources on their lands. Francis Bacon praised his Lord, the King, for fearlessly exploiting the natural world. The isolation of surface from underlying value forms also leaves human bodies vulnerable. In ever greater numbers, Christian rulers are ready to send their subjects to their deaths; and Christian soldiers appear increasingly ready to sacrifice their bodies in officially sanctioned mass death.

SESSION 5 (October 15): Awakening

Suggested reading: Jonathan Edwards, A faithful narrative (excerpt); Anthony F.C. Wallace, Revitalization Movements (excerpt); Diana Butler Bass, Christianity after Religion excerpt; Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena (excerpt); Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry (excerpt); Immanuel Kant, Analysis of the Sublime (excerpt); GWF Hegel, Lectures on Aesthetics (excerpt).

Immanuel Kant was raised in a strict Pietist home. No surface form of appearance, no practice, and no subjective state adequately grasped God. In his "Prolegomena" Kant translated his Pietist upbringing into the radical, qualitative, isolation of surface forms of appearance (phenomena) from the transcendental world of ethics, freedom, and God (noumena). Later Kant drew upon the isolation of noumena from phenomena to account for the unprecedented violence of the age of enlightenment. Whenever the infinite enters the finite, the finite is threatened. Kant called awareness of this threat "the sublime" (das Erhabene). His British colleague Edmund Burke agreed. So, too, did the preacher Jonathan Edwards who saw evidence of divine violence in the lives and bodies of his parishioners. When the infinite God enters finite bodies, these bodies are slain by the spirit. American religious scholars interpret the threat God poses to bodies differently. Spiritual awakenings are social psychological responses to severe trauma. Awakenings occur when spiritual practitioners reform or abandon beliefs and practices that threaten the survival of the community. By contrast, GWF Hegel instead saw in the violence of his age evidence of divine suffering and self-emptying.

SESSION 6 (October 22): The Spirit

Suggested reading: GWF Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (excerpt); Karl Marx, Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (excerpt); Karl Marx, 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (excerpt); E Hobsbawm, The Age of Capital (excerpt); Karl Marx, Grundrisse (excerpt); Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1 (excerpt).

Christian and Jewish theologians have taken GWF Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit as a way to understand God's participation in the suffering of God's people. For Hegel the process of creation is already an process of divine self-emptying. History is the process wherein alienated and objectified spirit — humanity-creation — becomes increasingly aware of and strives to bring its divine origin to completion. From the first page of his first published work to his final correspondence, Karl Marx was captivated by Hegel's phenomenology. In the 1840s, Marx interpreted Hegel's description of self-alienation and completion of the divine as a case of misrecognition. It is not God who alienates and returns to God's self. Rather is it human beings who alienate and return to themselves. The central contradiction in history, between the socialized forces of production and the private relations of production, was destined to be overcome when the subject-object of history, labor, became both producer and owner of all things. In the 1850s Marx took Hegel in an entirely different direction, arguing that it is the commodity, not humanity or labor, that is the "subject-object" of history.

SESSION 7 (October 29): The Apocalypse

Suggested reading: Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1 (excerpt); GWF Hegel, Philosophy of Right (excerpt); Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 3 (excerpt).

Unlike Marx, traditional Marxists have not generally taken Hegel's incarnational theology as their point of departure. Nor have they taken to heart Marx's critique of labor. Where Marx looked for the end of labor, they look for its completion; where Marx dreamed of a society where human beings were freed from work, they dreamed of a working class society; where Marx saw a future of ever greater differentiation, they saw a future of ever greater uniformity; and where Marx saw only the possibility of an emancipated future, they saw the iron-clad law of dialectical materialism. But, how would an emancipated future take shape in the real world? Is the apocalypse desirable? Is it inevitable?

SESSION 8 (November 5): The Theology of Karl Marx

Suggested reading: Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1 (excerpt); GWF Hegel, Philosophy of Right (excerpt); Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 3 (excerpt); T Adorno Minima Moralia (excerpt); New Testament (excerpt).

Marx faulted Hegel's phenomenology of spirit for its modalism. In Hegel, "the Father and the Son are the same age; indeed, they are the same person." Marx grounded his critique of Hegel on the supposition that, like the commodity's surface form of appearance, Hegel's incarnate Son was no more than an emanation from the Father. The Son therefore did not enjoy his own unique identity. Nor did creation. It too was simply an expression of the alienation or objectification of the spirit — the self-differentiation of the spirit from the spirit. Religious thinkers from Franz Rosenzweig to Hans Kung, Jürgen Moltmann to Dorothee Sölle and Gillian Rose have found Hegel's incarnational Christology compelling. Not Marx. Because it fashioned its God after the two-fold form of the commodity, Marx labeled it "bourgeois religion"; the religion best suited to societies structured around commodity production and exchange. Beyond this criticism, however, Marx was silent. He refused to criticize religion prior to the birth of capitalism. Begging the question: what would Christianity look like after capitalism?