

Table Dancing in an Opium Den: Marx's Conjunction of Criticism out of "Criticism of Religion" in 1844

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Abstract

This article re-examines criticism-of-religion in Marx's "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction" and its role in his development of historical materialist criticism in the wake of Derrida's attempted revaluation of the identification of religion with ideology in Marx's later writings. It first focuses upon Marx's appropriation and use of Feuerbach's criticism of religion in "Contribution" and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Then it situates "Contribution" 's famous apothegm, religion "is the opium of the people," in relation to Marx's subsequent writings on the "Celestial Empire" China and in the context of opium's multiple contemporary significations. Marx's understandings of religion and its critique are thus seen to well exceed the assumed limitation of the latter's purview to ideology criticism and the conventional characterizations of the former as false consciousness, ineffectual protest, and/or depoliticizing consolation. Marx's criticism-of-religion is shown to exemplify what he calls "irreligious criticism."

Keywords

China – criticism-of-religion – Jacques-Derrida – Ludwig-Feuerbach – Karl-Marx – opium-of-the-people

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In 1993, in the wake of rumors of both the end of history (courtesy of Francis Fukuyama)² and the death of Marxism, Jacques Derrida undertook his first extensive public engagement with Karl Marx's work. In this text, subsequently published as *Spectres de Marx/Specters of Marx*, Derrida echoes the opening salvo of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, "A specter is haunting Europe" (1998: 33), and conjures up Marx's spectral figurations of religion, the religious, and spirituality (e.g., *Geister* [spirits], *Gespenster* [ghosts], and *Spuke* [spooks]), by which the presence of the transcendent necessarily betrays an empirical trace, that haunt many of Marx's philosophic, historical, and economic analyses. Like a good ghost hunter he follows the trail of *revenants* through Marx's corpus and its "impure impure history of ghosts" (cf. Derrida 1994: 95; Marx & Engels 1976: 176)—from Marx's *tête-à-tête* with Max Stirner in *The German Ideology* (that work itself is a bit of a *revenant*, since it was never published during Marx's lifetime) to *Capital's* analysis of commodity fetishism—in order to suggest that besides historical materialism an alternative critique of economies, political and otherwise, had also left its trace. Derrida would exhume from Marx's work another logic that is always already operational across numerous seemingly distinct regions of societal life (political, religious, aesthetic, etc.) without reducing any of these realms to derivatives, to epiphenomenal reflections of the economy and its forces, means, and relations of production under capitalism. To that end, Derrida endeavors to show how in Marx's texts "religion"—as exemplified by spiritualism and those spectral figurations—operates in the manner of the "capital contradiction" (1994: 153) by which capitalism flows, that is, in the manner of the spectral contradiction³ of commodity fetishism.

Amidst this extended exorcism of the economism as the base of Marx's analysis and deployment of religion (as well as of all other regions of social life),

2 Fukuyama has recently (2012) most regretfully reported history's untimely return.

3 The commodity is a sensuous object that bears not only crude, rude, and nude properties but also, in apparent defiance of both logic and perception, something super-sensuous: value. (Conversely, value can only enter the world via this material trace.) This supposed-to-be inert thing animatedly engages in intercourse with other commodities; it seems autonomous as it crosses the seemingly infinite distance between apples and oranges, between itself and other seemingly incommensurable things. For instance (although this is not an example Derrida chose), in *Capital's* discussion of the metamorphosis of commodities in circulation Marx offers as his first example "linen—money—Bible" (1976: 199-200). Marx clearly delights in the blasphemous materialization of the Bible (the nonfungible Word) as a bible (a commodified book)—as well as the opportunity to allude to the material conditions for "religion"—and his sacrilegious play evidently continues with his second example. He proffers an as-it-were spirit(ual) exchange whereby his Bible seller uses his earnings to purchase brandy.

Derrida also attempts to disjoint the series of identifications—of religion with ideology and ideology with false consciousness—that have possessed characterizations of religion's superstructural form. One site that Derrida does not visit in that demonstration is what might be considered the *fons et origo* of Marxian criticism of religion that chronologically precedes all of the texts that Derrida disinters: "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction." Rather than engage in a deconstruction of Derrida's discussion of religion and "religion" in Marx, this article seeks to supplement his analysis by first undertaking a pilgrimage to what has been the reliquary from which most analyses of Marx's critique of religion have sought sanction, his "Contribution." In this and other of his contemporaneous texts I divine the crucial role played by what Marx considered Ludwig Feuerbach's contribution⁴ to the materialist analysis of civil society: the theorization of a practice, i.e., "criticism-of-religion,"⁵ and not, as previous visitors to Marx's text have assumed to have found, the removal of an object, i.e., religion. The materialization of Feuerbach is not the only generally overlooked condition or element out of which Marx's own criticism-of-religion emerged in "Contribution"; hence, I will come again to *Specters* and alight upon the trace of another phantasmic locale that Derrida chose not to exorcise—the celestial empire (*das himmlische Reich*) of China—that maps onto Marx's earlier analyses. After exhuming Marx's writings on China I will then return to "Contribution" and attend to its famous apothegm, that classic emblem of his criticism-of-religion: "[Religion] is the opium of the people" (1974b: 244). Since conventional readings of the phrase are mutually implicated in conventional readings of "criticism of religion" in "Contribution," unpacking its many facets will call out the conventional understandings of what Marx understood by religion and summon forth, in a different register than Derrida, another materialization of Marx's understanding of the relation between criticism-of-religion and "irreligious" criticism.

4 On 11 August 1844 Marx sent a copy of "Contribution" to Feuerbach. In the accompanying letter, Marx writes "I do not place any special value on this article, but I am pleased to find a chance to be able to assure you of the distinguished respect and—excuse the word—love that I have for you." He then goes on to comment on Feuerbach's *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* and his supplement to the *Essence of Christianity, The Essence of Faith in Luther's Sense*: "In these books—I do not know whether intentionally or not—you have given socialism a philosophical foundation" (1979: 34-36).

5 I employ this nonce word in order to emphasize how, as I argue below, Marx inferred both a general method from Feuerbach's particular "criticism of religion" and that "religion" could not be delimited to a cognitive phenomenon and hence could be the object of "irreligious criticism" (1974b: 244).

I Criticism-of-Religion not Religious Criticism

Karl Marx opens his work *The German Ideology* (1845) with the following summary of his forebears and rivals, from David Friedrich Strauss (author of *The Life of Jesus*) through Feuerbach (author of *The Essence of Christianity*) and Bruno Bauer (author of *The Jewish Question*, which Marx famously reviewed) to Stirner (author of *The Ego and Its Own*, to which the greater part of the *German Ideology* is devoted):

German philosophical criticism from Strauss to Stirner is confined to criticism of *religious* conceptions: [that is,] including the allegedly dominant metaphysical, political, juridical, moral and other conceptions under the category of religious or theological conceptions. . . . every dominant relationship was declared to be a religious relationship and transformed into a cult, a cult of law, a cult of the state, etc. It was throughout merely a question of dogmas and belief in dogmas—to change consciousness will solve the problems of the world; to fight phrases—with other phrases. (Marx & Engels 1976: 35)

Unfortunately, the reception of Marx's criticism-of-religion has usually reduced it to the level of "German philosophical criticism": the determination of religion as religious—that is, as false consciousness and without material truth, as fantasy and illusion. According to this reading, religion provides a justification for the existing relations of domination or, at best, provides an indirect and ineffectual protest in the form of consolation in the face of the suffering effected by that domination ("... the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions"; 1974b: 244). Consequently, the function of the criticism of religion was to point out that the clothes have no king and then remove them so that the "*truth of this world*" (1974b: 244) can be established.

However, when Marx, a year earlier, asserted in the opening line of "Contribution" that the "criticism of religion is the prerequisite [*Voraussetzung*] of all criticism" (1974b: 243), he was referring to more than the necessity to clear the mist from our eyes so we can see what the mist may have been hiding. Nor was Marx arguing that religion needed to be the first object of criticism. Rather, his claim should be understood as a gloss of the main clause to which it was appended—"For Germany, the *criticism of religion* has essentially been completed"—that portends, given the retrograde historical situation of the German states, the temporal out-of-jointness, the modernity, of criticism made in Germany: "We [German critics] are the *philosophical* contemporaries

of the present without being its *historical* contemporaries. . . . Our criticism stands at the centre of those problems of which the present age says: *That is the question*" (1974b: 249). Indeed, that German theory takes the criticism of religion as its first premise indicates its timeliness: "Clear proof of the radicalism of German theory and its practical energy is the fact that it takes as its point of departure [*Ausgang*] a decisive and *positive* transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of religion. The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that *for man the supreme being is man*, and thus with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions* in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being—conditions that are best described in the exclamation of a Frenchman on the occasion of a proposed tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you like human beings!" (1974b: 251).

Further, a specific mode of such criticism, which Feuerbach employed upon religion and discourse about religion (*aka* theology) in his *Essence of Christianity*, exemplifies how to approach the criticism of any social fact. Though Feuerbach goes unnamed, it is his criticism-of-religion that is the model for how to determine the conditions of emergence of all forms of appearance by which we know and experience, not just heaven, but the earth, the material world, as well.⁶ When writing "Contribution" Marx ascribed the critique of "the relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations" (Marx & Engels 1976: 36) as the object of Feuerbachian critique of religion. Feuerbach, for his part, argued not that the concept of god is anthropomorphized, but that the essence ascribed to and as god is nothing other than misrecognized human species-being (who we are—loving, knowing, willing beings) that has been objectified and rendered alien (estranged) from the human (a misrecognition, Feuerbach discreetly implies, theology maintains in order to legitimate state power). Marx takes Feuerbach's recognition that the objects of religion are the alienated reifications of human species-being back to the Hegelian roots that Feuerbach had thought he had uprooted. Specifically, Marx returned to Hegel's discussion of the master-slave relationship—"Contribution" is rife with the language of chains borne and thrown off—and, more important, he returned to Hegel's discussion of the slaves' unrecognized self-objectification in the products of their labor. As Marx puts it a few months later in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: "The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor" (1974c: 324).

Marx inverts Feuerbach's inversion of Hegel, or more accurately, sublates it (*hebt sie auf*), and emphasizes the human praxis that creates those

6 See n. 3 above.

objects—“*Man makes religion, religion does not make man*” (1974b: 244)—recalling that, ultimately, in Hegel, it is the slave’s praxis and not the master’s expropriation and consumption of the product that furthers the development of humanity (in Hegel’s terms: of Spirit). This dialectical turning on its head of Feuerbach’s answer to the question of religion was necessary in order to address, as Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, “the question which [Feuerbach] left unanswered: how did it come about that people ‘got’ these illusions ‘into their heads’?” (Marx & Engels 1976: 253). There Marx attends to the more fundamental contradictions that he claims Feuerbach unveiled but in his privileging of “contemplation” (*sinnliche Anschauung*) nevertheless overlooked—that these predicates and the social relationships, which intrinsically rather than extrinsically condition them, are themselves rife with distortions. Hence Marx observes in his Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach (1845) that his predecessor’s “work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis” (1974a: 422).⁷

Unlike the rest of “German philosophic criticism” Marx argued in his “Contribution” that religion is indeed “an inverted consciousness of the world”; more it betrays “the logic in popular form of th[is] world” because the producers of religion, people in “this state and this society” (emphasizing Marx’s specificity here), already live in an “inverted world”: this heartless, soulless, oppressive world of suffering that denies human actualization (1974b: 244). Hence, according to Marx, the realization of Feuerbach’s soteriological expectation of what would follow the recognition of the illusory nature of religious representation required another step: “To call on [people] to give up their illusions about their condition [of alienation] is to call on them to give up a[n alienating] condition that requires illusions” (1974b: 244).

Again: The value of Marx’s understanding of criticism-of-religion for him (and hence for criticism) was not the unveiling of the empty heavens but rather the indication of a propulsion system by which those heavens were populated with illusions: “human self-estrangement.” It provided Marx with the algorithm by which he could think through the production of the means of oppression in *this* world, and his formula had the advantage that it drew upon the code that his expected audience would already have accepted as responsible for the pro-

7 Or as he articulated it in a philosophic key and without reference to Feuerbach the year before in the *Manuscripts*: “If I know religion as alienated human self-consciousness, then what I know in it as religion is not my self-consciousness but my alienated self-consciousness confirmed in it” (1974c: 393).

duction of the means of oppression in heaven, otherwise known as religious ideas. This is evident, drawing again upon the *Manuscripts*, in Marx's analysis of "estranged labor" where the alienation of the product of the worker's labor is analogized to the workings of religion:

For on this premise—that the worker is related to the *product of labor* as to an *alien* object—it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.⁸ The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. . . . Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. . . . The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him.⁹ It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (1974c: 324)

Marx then takes his supplement to the critique of religion yet one step further. Not only is the product of labor alienated and alien, so too is the labor, the praxis, itself. And again via analogy, Marx draws upon the authority and self-evidence of the Feuerbachian critique of religion.

Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.

Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him—that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical

8 In *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach wrote: "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing" (1989: 26).

9 Cf. "Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this objectified, personified—converted into a subject—being; he thinks of himself, is an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself. Thus here. Man is an object to God" (Feuerbach 1989: 29-30; translation modified).

activity—so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity.¹⁰ It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (1974c: 326-27)

II Political Economy as Theology: A Fragment

Similarly, Marx's critique of political economy, as the disciplinary discourse which "conceals the estrangement in the nature of labor by ignoring the *direct* relationship between the worker (labor) and production" (1974c: 325), reproduces Feuerbach's critique of what theology does: which is misrecognizing as absolute difference the direct relationship between, in the case of theology, human and divine nature, and then trying to occlude the contradictions generated by that misrecognition.¹¹ The political economist like the theologian "assumes as a fact in the form of history [whether 'some imaginary primordial condition' or the 'fall of man'] what it should explain" (whether private property or the origin of evil; 1974c: 323). The analogy that Marx draws between political economy and theology in the *Manuscripts* returns with a vengeance in *Capital*, where the theological face of political economy is routinely caricatured: "primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology" (1976: 873). Political economy assumes that now, as in the beginning, there are two kinds of people—the industrious elite (us) and the lazy *Lumpen* (rascals: them)—and this, as Marx suggests in *Capital's* discussion of primitive accumulation, provides a justification for British colonialism as well as its Opium Wars with China.

Marx is not simply mocking the discourse of political economy and its scientific pretensions by labeling it as trading in manufactured and unfounded dogmas to cover up its own ignorance and maintain its hegemony. He is not simply collapsing the hierarchical opposition which groups or institutions construct to legitimate their domination. He is describing functional and structural similarities between two discourses (that is, political economy and theology) that have served as hegemonic forms of interpretation and mystification ("the general theory of this [inverted] world, its encyclopedic compendium"; 1974b: 244)

10 Cf. "God is the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself; hence man can do nothing of himself, all goodness comes from God" (Feuerbach 1989: 31).

11 Cf. "that in proportion as the divine subject is in reality human, the greater is the apparent difference between God and man; that is, the more, by reflection on religion, by theology, is the identity of the divine and human denied, and the human, considered as such, is depreciated" (Feuerbach 1989: 26).

not just of different realms of societal life but of different modes of production (different social systems).

More frequently in his corpus, Marx employs religious objects—such as, idols and fetishes (and their presumed falseness)—to characterize and thereby undermine the truth claims of his civilized opponents. Derrida too notes in *Specters* Marx's use of religious tropes during the course of Derrida's own deployment of such figures in his attempt to recognize that Marx's criticism of religion is more than the delimitation of religion to false consciousness. Stepping into Derrida's path up to the point where he discovers "spiritualism" in Marx's *Capital*—or rather up to a fork in Derrida's analysis in order to follow the unacknowledged road that, of course, was not taken—will bring the analysis of Marx's criticism of religion back to his earlier "Contribution" and its famous slogan: "[Religion] is the opium of the people."

III Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Table

After performing a long series of exorcisms of the ghosts in Marx's vivisection of Stirner's *Ego*, Derrida abruptly asks: "What is ideology?" (1994: 147). Whereupon he promises ("and we will come back to this") to examine his earlier claim that "[r]eligion . . . was never one ideology among others" and elaborate upon his observation then that religion served as "the principal figure" for ideology (1994: 42).

Initially, Derrida sets a familiar stage: "It is a great moment at the beginning of *Capital* as everyone recalls: Marx is wondering in effect how to describe the sudden looming up of the mystical character of the commodity, the mystification of the thing itself" (1994: 149). Derrida then poses a pair of rhetorical questions to subvert the assumption that Marx is merely conjuring "effects of rhetoric, turns of phrase that are contingent or merely apt to convince by striking the imagination" (1994: 148): "Is it just by chance that he illustrates the principle of his explanation by causing a table to turn? Or rather by recalling the apparition of a turning table?" (1994: 149). Derrida's question-positings unleash a (further)¹² frenzy of table-trope by which Marx's example of an ordinary commodity, the table, is recognized as not your garden variety example, one particular instance of a general set of like-categorized objects, but instead is

12 Just as it was not by chance that Derrida—in apparent anticipation of the subsequent discussion—played on the morphemic-semantic field of "table" pages earlier (e.g., ~11 times on pp. 142-43 and ~9 times on p. 147)—although there were no corresponding *Tische*, tables, in Marx's German original.

seen as an exemplar, an object whose motivated selection points both to itself as this specific thing as well as portends the category as a whole (Derrida 1994: 149-153).¹³ On the one hand, the table shares with other commodities their coeval sensuous and supersensuous characteristics—"it not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas" (Marx 1976: 163)—and, on the other, "table" is overcoded with a topicality that Marx himself notes when he adds that these ideas are "far more wonderful than if [the table] were to begin dancing of its own free will" (1976: 164). Marx here alludes to the fascination with spiritualism and the dancing tables that haunted its séances in the wake of the political stasis that followed the collective failure of the revolutions of 1848.

Derrida cites Marx's confirmatory footnote that he had appended to his depiction of the animated block of wood: "One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still—*pour encourager les autres*" (Marx 1976: 164 n. 27; Derrida 1994: 153). But while Derrida is willing to go to school with Marx's historical reference to dancing tables and the spiritual, he remains silent on the other heavenly dancer in this *pas de deux* that Marx briefly choreographs: China.

IV Picking Up the Chinese Takeout

In his other writings Marx frequently referred to China as "the Celestial Kingdom" (*das himmlische Reich*)—including in his analysis of Stirner in the *German Ideology*. Its absence from Derrida's analysis may simply be a function of his desire not to exceed the legal standard of fair use in his citations from *German Ideology*,¹⁴ unlike Marx's use of Stirner's original: Marx appears to

13 Derrida's table-trope is itself no less exemplary since his exemplary exemplar is religion; that is, since ideology can only be figured by religion, religion cannot be simply one example among other such of ideology.

14 Besides, "China" had already performed yeoman service for Derrida over a quarter of a century earlier in *Of Grammatology* where he mapped European philosophy's deployment of China and Chinese nonphonetic script, whether positively (Leibniz) or negatively (Hegel), in its efforts to construct and maintain the logocentric (and ethnocentric) ideal of self-present Spirit (1976: 25-26, 76-81, 91-92, 331 n. 36). While particular iterations of "China" in Marx's work suggest that the emergence of "China" in Marx's footnote can be seen to comport, at least structurally, with Derrida's reading of Marx's "hauntology" (1994: 51, 161), the following analysis of its varied deployments in Marx's entire corpus does not justify ascribing "China" as a Derridean exemplar.

have quoted virtually all of *Ego*. Indeed, Marx's seemingly obsessive practice of extensively and serially citing extracts from Stirner's work, followed by a commentary of parodistic paraphrases, followed by more citation from *Ego* as if it were a parodistic commentary of Marx's glossing, *ad infinitum*, leads Derrida to suggest that Marx "scares himself[;] he *himself* pursues relentlessly someone who almost resembles him to the point that we could mistake one for the other: a brother, a double, thus a diabolical image" (1994: 139). Without ascribing psychological states to Derrida one might similarly characterize his own critical practice, beginning in the chapter subtitled "(impure 'impure impure history of ghosts'," with regard to one stretch of *German Ideology*. Derrida principally¹⁵ directs his analysis to the chapter Marx had subtitled "(Impure History of Spirits)" (Marx & Engels 1976: 164-72). Derrida leaves Marx's next chapter, "The Impure[] Impure History of Spirits," uncited (aside from the appropriation of its title), and it is there, among the many "clarifications" of Stirner's propositions and "historical reflections," where "China" first makes its appearance in *German Ideology* when Marx rewrites Stirner's:

There is in fact no doubt that by means of custom man protects himself against the importunity of things, of the world, and founds a world of

15 The only later passages from the *German Ideology* that Derrida cites—and then only in endnotes (1994: 189 n. 7, 188 n. 11)—are from the opening to "The Impurely Impure History of Spirits" (Marx & Engels 1976: 176) and from "Stirner Delighted in His Construction" (Marx & Engels 1976: 201), and each, curiously enough, is apposed to uncited discussion of Chinese affairs. The first supplements a rather extended reflection by Derrida on "Negroid," which Marx notes as Stirner's racial-geographic identifier of the form of concepts understood as "objective spirits having for people the character of objects" and called "apparitions" by Stirner. While finding here possible allusions to Hegel's own account of concept development, Derrida confines himself to his spectral tropology, since Marx draws upon Stirner's characterizations of these as "apparitions," rather than make reference either to Hegel's identification of this level of conceptual form with fetishism or to his own later discussion of fetishism in Marx. The passage in the endnote is actually a Stirner citation by Marx with parenthetical gloss: "The *Negroid character* represents *antiquity*, dependence on *things*' (child)." Derrida omits the attached clause of citation and gloss—"the *Mongoloid character*—the period of dependence on *thoughts*, the *Christian* epoch' (the *youth*)" (Marx & Engels 1976: 176)—that announces Marx's discussion of China. The second endnote citation begins "Stirner discovers at the end of the ancient world" and is noted by Derrida because of the play on *Gas* and *Geist* that Derrida has elsewhere remarked. Coincidentally, Marx returns to "the end of the ancient world" a couple of paragraphs later in order to comment on how as a result of Stirner's analysis "the ancients become Chinese" (Marx & Engels 1976: 202).

his own, in which alone he feels in his native element and at home, i.e., builds himself a heaven.

as

‘There is in fact no doubt’ that because China is called the Celestial Empire [*das himmlische Reich*], because ‘Stirner’ happens to be speaking of China, and as he is ‘accustomed’ by means of ignorance ‘to protect himself against the importunity of things, of the world, and to found a world of his own, in which alone he feels in his native element and at home’—therefore he ‘builds himself a heaven’ out of the Chinese Celestial Empire. (Marx & Engels 1976: 179)

Marx then goes on to gloss Stirner’s “in China *everything is provided for*; no matter what happens, the Chinese *always knows* how he should behave . . . ; *no unforeseen event* will overthrow his celestial calm [*dem Himmel seiner Ruhe*]”: “Nor any British bombardment either—he knew exactly ‘how he should behave,’ particularly in regard to the unfamiliar steamships and shrapnel bombs” (Marx & Engels 1976: 179).

The notion of a celestial kingdom (*Himmlisches Reich, Reich des Himmels*) evokes the very incarnation of the separation between, which is at the same time a confusion of, heaven and earth. Incarnation may be not quite the right word, though. Some eight years later in a 14 June 1853 article for the *New York Daily Tribune* about the Tai-Ping Rebellion, “Revolution in China and Europe,” Marx analogizes the “Celestial empire[, having] com[e] into contact with the terrestrial world” (courtesy of English cannons in 1840), to a “mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin” (1975d: 96) that had been forced open and exposed to the air. By being characterized as a “mummy,” China, like the commodity—or the ghosts, the undead, and the living dead, of which Derrida speaks—China is a sensuous, nonsensuous thing. In an 1862 article in Vienna’s *Die Presse* on the ongoing rebellion Marx resorts to a comparably uncanny figure: China as a “living fossil.” The description appears in the article’s opening line, an opening that would be echoed in the 1867 footnote to *Capital*: “A little while before the tables began to turn, China, this living fossil [*dieses lebende Fossil*], began to become revolutionary” (1975b: 216; cf. 218: on the Tai-Ping rebels as “the product of a fossil social life”).

Marx had initially celebrated the uprising as a demonstration of the progressive potential of capitalism to bring pre-capitalist societies into capitalist modernity (and therefore into a supposedly less despotic and miserable situation). Thus in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, in 1850, after the general retreat of the social and political advances promised by the revolutions that had

swept many European states less than two years earlier, Marx (and Engels) had enthused:¹⁶

Among the masses and in the insurrection [in China] appeared people who pointed to the poverty on the one side and the riches on the other, and who demanded, and are still demanding, a different division of property and even the entire abolition of private property. . . .

Chinese Socialism, bears much the same relation to European Socialism as Chinese philosophy does to Hegelian philosophy. It is, in any case, an intriguing fact that the oldest and the most unshakable empire in the world has in eight years by the cannon-balls of the English bourgeoisie been brought to the eve of a social revolution which will certainly have the most important results for civilisation. When our European reactionaries in their immediately coming flight across Asia finally come up against the Great Wall of China, who knows whether they will not find on the gates which lead to the home of ancient reaction and ancient conservatism the inscription, "Chinese Republic—liberty, equality, fraternity." (Marx & Engels 1975: 266-267)

Twelve years later, his analysis of the roots of the uprising had changed (as had his hopes for the progressive potential of capitalism's global reach). When Marx continues his report on "the living fossil" in his 1862 article he rehearses his previous analyses: "The movement had from the beginning a religious complexion, but that was a feature it had in common with all Oriental movements" (1975b: 216). Here Marx is following Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* on the identity of state and religion in the so-called "Oriental Realm."¹⁷

Marx then follows with an economic analysis that is also curiously qualified by rhetoric that signals he is describing forms of appearance and not actualities: "The immediate motives for the appearance of the movement were

16 Perhaps more historical materialistically, three years later, Marx harbored the hope that the global commercial disruption caused by the "Chinese revolution would throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent" (Marx 1975d: 98).

17 "Living fossil" may be yet another nod to Hegel, since he wrote "in the Oriental state nothing is fixed, and what is stable is fossilized [*versteinert*]; it lives therefore only in an outward movement which becomes in the end an elemental fury and desolation. Its inner calm is merely the calm of non-political life and immersion in feebleness and exhaustion" (1952: 220).

obvious—European interference, opium wars, and consequent disruption of the existing Government, the flow of silver out of the country, disturbance of the economic equilibrium through the introduction of foreign manufactures, &c.” Then comes a rather telling conundrum: “What seemed to me a paradox was that the opium animated [*aufweckte*] instead of stupefying [*einzuschläfern*]” (1975d: 216).¹⁸ Indeed, Marx queries how the forces of capitalism were able to produce a revolutionary class out of a population in which a large majority of males were seemingly wasted on opium.¹⁹ Marx resolved the paradox by declaring that it was not one: that what was happening in China was not the violent emergence of new forms of social relations and relations of production, but rather what has always happened in religiously-sustained oriental despotisms: just changing players seeking control of the unchanging structures.²⁰ Hence, when Marx returns to table-turning and China in the *Capital* footnote he appends a passage from Voltaire’s *Candide*: “in order to encourage the others.” Marx’s citation of Voltaire’s rather sardonic commentary on the British rationale behind the willingness to execute an admiral is itself rather sardonically intended. The seeming reversal of roles and structures, whether in Europe or in China, functions to ensure that everyone just shuts up, stays in their place, and does their job. Nevertheless, even though by the time he was generating footnotes for *Capital*, Marx had concluded that the apparently paradoxical

18 As Marx had put it in 1853: “It would seem as though history had first to make this whole people drunk before it could rouse them out of their hereditary stupidity” (1975d: 94).

19 An initial attempt to resolve the paradox had led Marx to recognize Chinese agency and therefore supplement the role of the West with the notion of indigenous Han Chinese seeking to overthrow the two-hundred-year-old domination by the foreign Manchus. He even came to explain—if not excuse—the rebels’ acts of seemingly barbaric cruelty perpetrated against Europeans as less a matter of “oriental” nature than a matter of: on the one hand, a response to comparable wanton acts by the British during the First Opium War and their (together with other Europeans’) subsequent support of the Manchu Emperor against the rebellion; and, on the other, a consequence of needing to find ways to combat an enemy who had an immense advantage in armaments. See Marx’s 1857 *New York Daily Tribune* articles (1975a, 1975c).

20 This conclusion forces one to reconsider the irony posed by the article’s conjunction of the Europe whose revolutionary actions had supposedly evidenced its consonance with the movement of historical rationality had instead retreated into mysticism (whereby, instead of history, tables alone were in motion), while China, the inert embodiment of the mystical, had supposedly set out on history’s road of social revolution. If China’s movement simply betrayed the monstrosity of a living fossil, what then of Europe’s mystical turn? Is it too something other than a regression? Or is Marx rather indicating a pessimistic judgment about the actual stage of Europe’s historical development? (cf. Anderson 2010: 36-37).

workings of opium in China were just an appearance, I would like to bring that paradox back to the opiated apothegm that Marx employed decades earlier in “Contribution.”

V More Paradoxical Workings of Opium

While Marx’s coinage is most famous there had been earlier correlations of religion and opium in works with which he was familiar. Heinrich Heine referred to religion as “spiritual [*geistiges*] Opium” in the *Ludwig Börne Memorial* of 1840 and pietism as the “worst [*schlimmstes*] Opium,” which had rendered the British nation as unwarlike as the Chinese in *Lutezia XVI*, also 1840. Bruno Bauer made the correlation in “The Christian State and Our Time” of 1841. Moses Hess did similarly in “The One and Only Freedom”; it appeared in the same 1843 volume of *Ein und Zwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz* as Bruno Bauer’s “The Capacity of Present-day Jews and Christians to Become Free” that was the object of the second part of Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” (see Gollwitzer 1965: 23-28). Further though China’s historical situation only first seems to have become an object of analysis for Marx when it helped him to exemplify the materialist conception of history in *The German Ideology*—“Thus, for instance, if in England a machine is invented which deprives countless workers of bread in India and China, and overturns the whole form of existence of these empires, this invention becomes a world-historical fact” (Marx & Engels 1976: 58)—I would nevertheless like to smuggle China back into consideration of “Contribution”’s opiated apothegm, because in early 1844 the widely reported on (First) Opium War had just recently concluded.

So how would Marx’s contemporaries have understood “religion as the opium of the people”? In our era of the never-ending “war on drugs” two complementary images probably come to mind: the dealer who enslaves the addict and the government that allows the war, a war that ironically ensures that the enslavement continues because,

- on the one hand, the crimes generated by the need to feed the habit create the need for a heavy police presence to maintain the security of all of us;
- and, on the other, so long as the underclass is busy either seeking a fix or getting wasted, they aren’t seeking to rebel against their oppression by narcogang, state apparatus, or capitalist system.

Yet in Marx's Europe²¹ the notion of opium as enslaving (decent types, at least) was rarely considered at the time—nor was it illegal. Opium and its derivatives were primarily seen as medicinal and used for the relief of real, physical suffering. They were used for a wide range of bronchial disorders as well as, of course, any sort of pain; and because of their constipatory effect opiates played a crucial role in combating a leading cause of death, diarrhea-inducing diseases such as cholera and dysentery. Opium was not generally conceived of as a soporific to pacify a population (aside from infants—so there is a sense of religion infantilizing the believer with Marx's figure); religion, as Marx said, indicated the existence of "real suffering" and the need for it to cease.

Opium eating and the fantastic visions that accompanied it did have an allure. While these visions may be recognized as pipe dreams, they were also seen as opening up a space of possibility, alternatives, albeit inchoate and without accompanying means of implementation, to the existing "reality" of this world. Further, while working on his "Contribution" Marx may have seen the caricatures recently circulating in Paris, where he then resided, in which a British missionary, Bible in hand, brazenly breaches the map of China while fronting for the gang of British opium merchants at his back (Betz 1971: 148-149; Robertson 1988: 69). Hence "opium" by alluding to the war initiated to spread its use indicated the role of disseminating religion—regardless of the assumed effects of either—in political and economic subjection: not because religion benumbs or generates illusions, but because it allows the intervention of those hegemonic agencies and apparati into societal realms they had not previously colonized.

Allusions to such circulating caricatures and everyday practices aside, Marx employed a figurative analogy that may also betray a Chinese character affecting his thinking about a principal object of "Contribution," Germany's contemporary political situation, in order to signal his recognition that his claim for the pertinence of German criticism—and hence the historicizing justification for his own analysis—of conditions, not only in Germany but in Europe as well, is paradoxical, if not unbelievable. He notes: "If I negate powdered wigs (*Zöpfe*), I am still left with unpowdered wigs (*Zöpfe*). If I negate the situation in Germany in 1843, then according to the French calendar I have barely reached 1789, much less the vital centre of our present age" (1974b: 245). In the 1840s, pigtails (*Zöpfe*) were as emblematic of autocratic China and the Chinese as

21 Much of this discussion of the role of opium in Europe during the second quarter of the nineteenth century draws from Andrew McKinnon (2005); he undertakes a rather different analysis than the one performed here of "Contribution" in order to develop a Marxian analysis of religion that emphasizes its protest and utopian moments.

queued wigs (*Zöpfe*) were of autocratic Prussia and the Prussians. That is, the combination of Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV's retention of autocratic rule upon his ascent to the crown in 1840 (to the great disappointment of German liberals), his cultic glorification of his great grand uncle Frederick the Great (1712-1786) and his military prowess as symbolized by the iconic queue (*Zopf*)-wearing cavalryman and enforced by requiring royal permission before any stage representation of him or his Hohenzollern predecessors in the wake of Karl Gutzkow's comedy *Zopf und Schwert* (Pigtail and Sword) about Friedrich the Great's father Friedrich Wilhelm I (1688-1740),²² the overreaching and overeducated government bureaucracy, and the weak and backward economic and political conditions led to widespread identification of Prussia, specifically, and German states, in general, with the Chinese empire and its queue-wearing mandarin (Geller 2011: 76-83). In a poem, "The Emperor of China," written in early 1844, that is, around the same time as "Contribution," Marx's friend, the poet Heinrich Heine, graphically lampooned the Prussian king:

My mandarin nobility,
Whose heads are not screwed tightly,
Regain their youthful vim and glee
And shake their pigtails [*Zöpfe*] lightly.

The great pagoda's built by prayer,
Faith's shrine from border to border;
The last of the Jews are baptized there
And get the Dragon Order. (1982: 399)²³

The poem would be published on 11 May in *Vorwärts*, which Marx was editing, and later sent by Marx to his wife Jenny. Prior to its publication Heine may even have read "Emperor" to the Marx family as he routinely visited and entertained them during their residence in Paris.

22 Although the decree was not issued until April 1844, the Prussian government had already made public its disapproval of any staging of Gutzkow's play in late 1843 (Houben 1924: 315-321).

23 In the *German Ideology* Marx in fact conjoins German and Chinese (together with Jews)—or rather the omitted conjunction of them—to point out Stirner's ignorance of political economy: Stirner does not even call attention to the usual suspects of self-interested and chauvinistic—and thus immoral—economic behavior, the bogeymen of pre- or nascent civil society rather than the real villains of modern capitalism: "Small-scale commercial and industrial swindling flourishes only in conditions of restricted competition, among the Chinese, Germans, and Jews" (Marx & Engels 1976: 390).

In sum, these numerous associations constellated about “opium” suggest that in “Contribution” Marx’s Feuerbach-inspired criticism-of-religion is not just an effort at ridding superstition and falsehood, but it is also a political intervention that engages the social (and imperial) relations with which religion is intertwined. But that is not all that the criticism (-of-religion) of religion conjures. By the time of *Capital*, Marx employs religious language and objects to describe how “religion” is always already a commodified practice—not some atavistic survival superimposed upon existent relations in order to occlude them—but is itself generated by the same forces that generated those relations. In other words, since religion is no longer viewed as an autonomous realm of society, the anachronistic basis of which having already been superseded, its workings can be displayed as consonant with the general analysis of society rather than needing to be talked about as something distinct and supposedly extinct.

Does its nonautonomy make “religion” *per se* epiphenomenal? Perhaps. But what is also signaled at that “great moment at the beginning of *Capital* as everyone recalls” (Derrida 1994: 149), when Marx realizes that “In order . . . to find an analogy [to demystify the dance of commodities] we must take flight into the misty realm of religion” (Marx 1976: 165), is that the criticism(-of-religion) of religion itself—in other words, that to which Marx must resort in order to put the commodity on display—is anything but epiphenomenal. Criticism-of-religion is, indeed, “irreligious criticism” (Marx 1974b: 244).

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