theories and methodologies

"Philosophy Has Become Worldly": Marx on Ruthless Critique

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MARX'S EARLY ARTICLE "FOR A RUTHLESS CRITIQUE OF EVERYTHING EXISTING" WAS WRITTEN AS A LETTER TO ARNOLD RUGE, A YOUNG Hegelian, in September 1843 and then printed in the *Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbücher* in 1844. It is one of several letters that Marx wrote to Ruge during that period on the need to upend philosophical authority. Translated into English, the essay is often taken to be an exuberant and ironic prefiguration of the writings that came to be known as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. The essay's title is taken from Marx's letter, in which he remarks that we must undertake "die rücksichtlose Kritik alles Bestehenden"—the ruthless critique not of "everything existing," exactly, but of everything established, even institutionalized as the establishment over time.

Philosophy makes its appearance in the second paragraph, where Marx applauds Ruge for thinking in a forward way and for doing this in Paris, "the old university of philosophy (*absit omen*!)" and "the new capital of the world."[1] Marx is pleased to be going to Paris in a few weeks, noting that "free activity" is nowhere to be found in Germany, where repression, a true anarchy of the spirit, uncritical obedience, and a regime of stupidity ("Regiment der Dummheit") prevail (12; "Briefe" 343). It is unclear whether there is less stupidity in Paris, but, according to Marx, the city may offer "a new gathering point . . . for the really thinking and independent minds" (12). Marx considers that the plan he has begun to make with Ruge is neither repressive stupidity nor a naive communist utopia. His plan must be "serious" and "meet a real need" (13). The old university of philosophy can no longer serve as a model, and something about the new capital of the world, Paris, promises a "new gathering point." But gathering for what purpose? Marx makes plain he is against anarchy in these brief pages, since anarchists cannot say clearly in what direction they seek to take the world, and he thinks the direction should be made clear. The anarchists are confused; yet, there is something important to be gleaned from their sense of disori-

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entation about the future. Invoking a plural pronoun, Marx makes clear that "we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future." So now it seems that there are two unacceptable opponents: the disoriented anarchists, for whom there is no "clear conception of what the future should be," and the dogmatists, who proclaim what the future must be. The plural "we" becomes a grammatical gathering point, as it were, for those who "want to find the new world only through criticism of the old" ("erst aus der Krik der alten Welt die neue finden wollen"). If the old university of philosophy should not prefigure the future form of thinking, does that mean that the new way of thinking will be extrainstitutional? Must philosophy leave the corridors of the university to assume its critical function? What might that be like?

The emergence of philosophy outside the terms of the old university seems to happen in tandem with the emergence of a new world. Whatever new world may come about will be neither predicted nor prefigured but discovered. The discovery happens through what Marx calls Kritik ("critique"). And yet before any definition or formulation of this forthcoming critical thinking or critical philosophy appears in the text, we encounter it in another form—namely, "critique" as a blistering attack on the old university of philosophy: "Up to now the philosophers had the solution of all riddles lying in their lectern, and the stupid uninitiated world had only to open its jaws to let the roast partridges of absolute science fly into its mouth" (13). One of Marx's most colorful phrases, it asks us to imagine that wisdom resides not in the philosophers' minds but in the lectern that confers authority on them, and that their unthinking audience swallows each serving of "absolute science" whole.

The future-oriented sense of critique will return, but first we get some rough, sarcastic prose. If we were waiting for an argument and a plan that would distinguish Marx from the disoriented anarchists, a platform that we might then discuss and dispute, we were wrong: he is giving us no prescription, and he faults the dogmatists who would. Instead, he is remarking on a passing regime of thought. He breaks with anarchists and dogmatists alike through a markedly uncivil set of outbursts that rely on an array of rhetorical substitutions: wisdom seems to reside spatially not in the mind but in the established authority of the lectern (*Pult*), the object that signifies authority; philosophical truths fly, like cooked birds, into the mouths of an audience characterized as stupid and uninitiated. Earlier we had learned of Germany's "regime of stupidity." If this acute mockery is any sign of a "really thinking and independent mind," then metaphor, irony, and aggression all have a role to play in the critique of the old university of philosophy. But does mockery also function as critique that is discovering a new world? Indeed, the scathing rhetoric enacts this form of critique, not only mocking traditional philosophy, its procedures as well as its reasonable demeanor, but also departing from its norms of argument, assailing the historical authority of the established discipline with a caustic barrage of metaphors. Marx thus breaks with philosophical protocol and the old university to inaugurate a new mode of critical thought, which has the potential "to find the new world." But is this what is happening here? This new world is not yet foreseeable and certainly not institutionalized. No one knows its future form. So there is already something both future-oriented and unknowing about this uncivil break with philosophical protocol. Are we doing something different from being suspended from school? What distinguishes Marx from the naive anarchists he rejects? Is it possible that discovery has something of the unforeseeable about it, but that it is not exactly disoriented?

There is something surely odd, or idealistic, about believing that departing from the old world of philosophy is the way to open up

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a new mode of thinking and even to find a new world.[2] Was institutionalized philosophy really the most powerful agent keeping a new world from emerging? Right after his scathing critique, Marx changes tone and continues on a serene and optimistic note. "Now philosophy has become worldly," he begins, and this is less a sociological or historical description than an announcement, a world-historical proclamation. The critical and uncivil outburst apparently constitutes, or has brought about, a new worldly philosophy. He continues, "[T]he most incontrovertible evidence of this is that the philosophical consciousness has been drawn, not only externally but also internally, into the stress of battle [*die Qual des Kampfes*]." Distinguishing his task again from that of the dogmatists who would "design" the future or who have "ready-made solutions for all time," he returns to the question of the real need that must be met and concludes that what has to be accomplished now is "a ruthless criticism of everything existing [*alles Bestehenden*]." So the double meaning of *critique* as a destructive form of discovering a new world differs from the approach of the anarchists, who break apart the existing world only to imagine an impossible one. They also stay free of the kind of "fight" or "struggle" without which that discovery seems impossible. This form of critique must have the courage to fight the powers that be, but it must also "not be afraid of its own findings [*Resultaten*]" (13).

In this sense the discovery of the new world is linked with one's own findings, or results. One has to think all the way through to the conclusions of one's thought, and many people are afraid to do so, or the historical resources are not available to them. The new world is figured as the result of a fearlessly completed set of thoughts (however that might be defined) but also as the result of a fight or struggle. Old-school philosophy is one enemy, but some new ones emerge as "Ruthless Critique" proceeds—and they are errant versions of socialism and communism, according to Marx. He opposes some communities for their "dogmatic abstractions" and fanciful future worlds. Some forms of communism are humanistic and retain a commitment to private property, and he opposes them too. The call to eliminate private property is deemed insufficient for the kind of communism he values, one drawn from socialist teachings that discover and help to realize "the reality of the true human essence." Such teachings are, we might say, maintaining a worldly philosophical dispute about the nature, or essence, of humans. We are blocked from this realization by two contemporary conditions (*Fakta*)—religion and politics. As sites of blockage, they qualify as a "starting point" for the investigation, a philosophical investigation, it turns out, that does not presume that the existing form of historical reality in which we live is the ultimate form that it should take.

Interestingly, after the episode of caustic debunking (one that will reappear throughout Marx's writings, especially in the early period), Marx invokes the importance of reason. It seems that having the courage to bring our thinking process to a conclusion is one way to think about what it means to reason. Marx claims first that reason has always existed, implying that reason and human history are coextensive. Second, he claims that reason has not always taken reasonable form (*vernünftigen Form*), implying that one might reconstruct the history of reason, distinguishing between its reasonable and unreasonable forms. Earlier I suggested that Marx seemed happy enough to depart from the protocols of reason to deliver his rhetorical challenge to the protocols of philosophy, understood as a permutation of the "regime of stupidity" that governed German culture at the time. So, was the arguably unreasonable character of Marx's own caustic critique simply a heuristic, or was he informing us that, under certain conditions, what seems reason-

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able is not so and what appears unreasonable can turn out to be very reasonable? For Marx there is no single form of reason: each historical time has a way of knowing, a "theoretical and practical consciousness," that aims to realize itself as the ultimate form of knowing.

As a result, Marx seeks a way to explain how a mode of consciousness claims to be absolute at the same time that he puts forward a "reasonable" form of reason itself. His method is to track and expose how a historical mode of knowing claims to be ultimate and comprehensive at the same time that it excludes a consideration of the material reality that makes it possible. What, he asks, are the "real preconditions" of that historical mode of knowing? Political states, in Marx's view, legitimate their own reality by claiming that they are the realization of the principle of reason: when and if reason is said to be embodied in the state, any attack on the state is considered an attack on reason itself. And yet if the state fails to represent the people it claims to represent, it is actively engaged in a contradiction and loses its status as an embodiment of reason. If it disenfranchises the poor, if it actively reproduces class hierarchies, then the critique of the state as unjust exposes the contradiction that supports the state's claim to reason. For Marx, to show that the state that defends itself as the incarnation of reason is engaged in a contradiction is the task of a philosophy that has become worldly, a "critical philosophy."

Of course, the task is not simply to expose contradiction. One has to enter into the workings of the political state to find the ways that contradiction is generated, and this involves concrete social, historical, and political analysis of state formation and legitimation. For Marx this form of critique begins as an immanent one, working within the political systems and the modes of thoughts to show how contradiction emerges as a condition of their "social truths." Critique moves beyond the immanent exposition of contradiction, however, when it lays bare its own operative version of reason. Only in and through the exposition of contradiction does a new way of thinking emerge, but so, too, does a new sense of the world. The critical philosopher is one who "finds" the new world by developing its principles from the old world. In a perverse way, we need the old philosophical schools, and we have to undertake a critique of existing state structures if we are to enact a new future. But how this is done is not exactly clear, and it is not exactly an idealist move by which thought alone generates a world. There is already a world, a set of existing preconditions, and thought has to be considered critically in the light of those conditions.

Marx's description of critique in these pages lets us see how close the relation is between what is developed and what is discovered in the course of critical thinking. He writes that we do not discover some truth and lord it over the people: "here is the truth! now bow down to it!" ("Ruthless Critique" 14). Rather, we seem to be invited to think something through together, to think it all the way through, gathering from one another the sufficient courage to think what has not yet been fully thought. Of course, I am unsure what it means to fully think anything, but let us follow him here, to see where he goes. In German the grammar strains: "Wir entwickeln der Welt aus den Prinzipien der Welt neue Prinzipien" ("Briefe" 345). The literal translation is "We develop the world out of the principles of the world new principles." The actual sense seems to be "We develop the new principles of the world out of the principles of the existing world." Or, better: "We develop the new principles for the new world out of the existing principles of the existing world." The repetition of words such as *world* and *principles* suggests that each term can, and must, mean very different things, depending on whether we are referring to existing forms or emerging ones. A new meaning can be established through new usage. The existing

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forms of the world that claim to be the ultimate expression of reason are contradicted by real historical preconditions. In grasping that contradiction, we seek to resolve it, by bringing about a new ideal, a new set of principles that uses, and actualizes, a "reasonable" form of reason, one that is not undermined by self-contradiction, and an intimation of a world that might be ordered according to such a reasonable reason. So as one process is completed, as a thought is thought through to the end, the end becomes a beginning, and a new world appears to come into being, or perhaps the intimations of a new world make themselves known.

You will remember that Marx opens with the idea that there is a promising gathering point, and that critical thought can emerge from there. And then he turns rather abruptly to a form of critique as caustic debunking, one whose aim is to expose the material contradictions that underwrite the state's forms of self-justification and self-idealization. We then return to the more hopeful tone again when a new world is intimated. The debunking mode of critique can be understood as a rude awakening. After all, Marx tells us toward the end of "Ruthless Critique" that self-understanding of the kind toward which he aspires is only possible if the world "waken[s] from its dream about itself" (15). If the world remains in the dream, it cannot gain consciousness of the real conditions that its ideals disavow. There is something important in those dream-ideals, to be sure, and Marx affirms the role of ideals elaborated by the theorists of political economy. And yet, paradoxically, only by waking can the world realize those ideals. The nascent form of realization is to be found in the past, and when we start to think a thought all the way through, we take over thoughts that did not originally belong to us, that come to us from the past. Thus, he writes that becoming critically conscious happens by the "carrying out [of] the thoughts of the past" ("die Vollziehung der Gedanken der Vergangenheit" [15; "Briefe" 346]). Marx understood himself as living in a time when thoughts were not thought through, when they remained incomplete and contradictory. Others began those thoughts, so they have a historicity, and they arrive in our minds worked over yet incomplete. So, much like a good philosophy instructor with red marker in hand, he combs through the texts of political economists (the founding justifications for what will be called capitalism), of anarchists, of socialists, and of communists, all of whom have not really completed their thinking. He thinks with them, in an incomplete way, and against them, marking the places where they failed to finish a thought, and he seeks to point the way to completion. And yet Marx cautions against drawing a clear line between the past and the present; the thoughts that belong to the past continue to belong in the minds of those who are thinking now, but they are not the individual property of those minds. All former thinkers developed from their own historical times principles for understanding the world that are carried over into our time and thinking. To complete those thoughts is to expose their contradictory character, after which a rupture with that past occurs. The rupture is necessitated by the principles that organized that past, since once the principles are thought through, the partial and contradictory version of reality proves untenable. Thought as the newer version of the world appears; it does not bring that world into being, but thought and world transform at the same time. The principles of the past, articulating a contradictory ideal, give rise to a new set of principles, a new way of organizing the world, that seeks to realize reason without contradiction. But what we call new is only the now-conscious realization of work that began in the past. The new is what happens when the world wakes from its dreams about itself.

The last formulation installs Marx firmly within a philosophical trajectory, even as his

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philosophy is released from the university and made "worldly." The term "critical philosophy" ("kritische Philosophie") emerges parenthetically as an alternative way of saying "self-understanding" ("Selbstverständigung") of the times in the light of its historical struggles and wishes (15; 346). Both terms are borne by historical currents that take us up as well, implicating us in a historical situation that we have to come to understand together by uniting forces. Only in the context of alliance is such a thought possible, but so too such a world.

It is surely surprising then that in the final two lines of "Ruthless Critique," Marx calls this self-understanding no more than a "confession" (*eine Beichte* [15; 346]). He told us earlier that religion is an obstacle to critical thought, and yet now religious terms can be used in the service of critique. What we once meant by *world* or *principle* now takes on a new meaning, and so Marx animates *catachresis*, using the religious term in a new context for a new meaning and showing that the term is not necessarily tied to the older context, that fading world. The catachrestic use of *confession* brings about a new meaning for a term saturated in the Catholic Church, operating a form of linguistic license that shows us how we might complete and subvert a former usage. In this case he is suggesting that errancy is a function of thinking historically, that there are always things we did not notice, mistakes we made, mistaken paths we followed. None of us can claim to have completed the thoughts that have been carried over from a previous time and have now become the incomplete thoughts we commonly hold. His final line, then, prefigures a possible last judgment, even though there is no indication who will do the judging: "To have its sins [*Sünden*] forgiven, mankind [*die Menschheit*] has only to declare [*erklären*] what they really are" (15; 346). In the English text, *erklären* is translated as "to declare," but the word is better translated as "to explain." It would seem to follow that a conscious and deliberate explanation of what one did not know opens up the possibility of forgiveness. So it is odd that a text that ostensibly lays out a plan for overthrowing all established institutions finds itself nevertheless calling for a conscious elaboration of forms of thinking that have been with us all along. One leaves the institutions behind, but not the historicity of thought. The move from what is unconscious to what is conscious is the same as the transition from sin to forgiveness, as Marx has now redefined these terms. As a result, we may pursue a critique of religious institutions, but that does not mean that we have escaped the grip of their fundamental terms: their rituals of cleansing and renewal, for instance, of errancy and forgiveness. At the same time, even as we receive such language as part of a historical consciousness, we rework it through various catachrestic usages, deviating from the proper to discover or facilitate the new.

Does this mean that critical philosophy is like a confession, delivering us from the unknowing dimensions of our historical life into a more conscious way of confronting the conceptual demands of our historical time? Is contradictoriness understood as a kind of sin? And is philosophical consistency with the existing world the way toward forgiveness? Or are we to understand that the critique of religion furnishes a new critical vocabulary, a taking over of the incomplete thought, the conventional usage, and that completing the thought means subjecting the vocabulary to a new set of uses?

As I mentioned, the final insistence on the religious metaphor is strange, since Marx has so many harsh words for religion. At the beginning of *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he credits Ludwig Feuerbach with understanding that criticism has to begin with something positive, that it is a mistake to associate critique with relentless negativity (68–70). And yet Marx clearly objects to accepting religion as a positive fact or

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an established doctrine. This was certainly the error of those Marx called the "critical theologians" of his day, especially Bruno Bauer, who was associated with the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*. Marx argued that such theologians begin with Hegel and uncritically build a philosophical position from the fundaments of his theory. Time and again throughout his early work, he takes aim at Bauer as a "critical critic." In this way Bauer's thought becomes a partial and undeveloped moment in the history of positive philosophy. A great burst of irony opens the section "Critique of Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole." Marx mocks the arrogance of philosophers who, like Bauer, separate themselves from the "masses," or "rabble"—Bauer's hatred of equality becomes sacralized when he prostrates himself before what Marx calls "the critical Christ." The "critical Christ" is Marx's caricature of Hegel; Marx then offers a tongue-in-cheek reference to "the critical last judgment." Religion makes Hegel look ridiculous, but is Marx also bound to the language by which he deprecates his predecessor? After all, is religion really such a joke, given that Marx reaches for the religious metaphor of confession to figure the tasks of critique itself?

It is clear that Marx admires Feuerbach for "dismantling" the theologians, and yet, at the same time, Marx applauds Feuerbach for taking distance from the philosophy of negation. Can religion be dismantled without being negated? Is Marx contradicting himself, or is he demonstrating the necessarily twofold structure of critique? For Marx, something appears in history, something has taken form in the realm of appearance, and this errant and partial form now becomes the point of departure for a present kind of thinking. So, is the task to dismantle and debunk? Yes, to a certain degree. Is the task to submit a partial understanding of reality to a critical development, converting the unthought into what can be thought, deriving a new vocabulary from an older one to undertake the task? Yes, to a certain degree. The question remains, though, in what sense critical philosophy engages forgiveness when it explains the errant or partial constructions of the past, when it takes what was only partially thought and thinks it further, and more fully. The critique of religion proves central to critical philosophy, though the final act, as it were, of critical philosophy, philosophy that has become worldly, is to give the forgiving explanation and to find and pursue the partial opening to a future only found in the past and in the present.

Wendy Brown has argued that the fundamental categories of Marx's reflection draw on the power of religious metaphor even as they seek to debunk that power. In "On the Jewish Question" (1843), Marx writes, "To be politically emancipated from religion is not to be finally and completely emancipated from religion" (32). The power of explanation shows how the partial and contradictory self-understanding belonging to earlier times emerges as the point of departure and the object for critical reflection. If this explanation promises some fuller and less contradictory form of political life, so, too, does a strange redemption emerge on the condition that even religion is subject to critical reflection and redeployment. Perhaps this early text wishes to make critical philosophy a form of forgiveness for what we did not and could not know. It starts with destructive irony and sarcastic barbs only to end with forgiveness, as if self-rending releases the principles embedded in historical life for a new philosophy in and of the world. Caustic dismantling does not exactly lead to forgiveness, but the seeds of the latter are paradoxically embedded in the former. The social task of critique is characterized as *rücksichtlos*—thoughtless, heedless, refusing to look back or to take into account the consequences of one's own deeds—at the same time critique is likened to forgiveness. Apparently, such a task cannot be undertaken alone, but only in the company of others whose destruction brings about a field of ru-

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ins in which the partial and errant thoughts of another time can be "found," taken up, done right, done over, and converted into a creative activity of world making.

Perhaps most important, this form of critique is undertaken not only by human agents but in some sense also by the world, which makes its own impress on critical practice. Marx tries to summarize his position in a few words: "the work of our time to clarify to itself (critical philosophy) the meaning of its own struggles and its own desires. This is a work," he writes, "for the world and for us" ("für die Welt und für uns" ["Ruthless Critique" 15; "Briefe" 346]). Critique is not a restrictively human action, since now human beings act in concert with the world (and not in contradiction to it). Critique draws its strength from both sources; critique names this convergence, this concerted action. Thus, critique marks the limits of anthropocentrism, of what a human can know and do considered apart from the action of the world. The reference to confession, this new alliance of critical practice with the language of confession, names this moment of a worldly impingement on consciousness, this abiding and humbling limit, one that is not "overcome" through more expansive forms of critical thought understood as proceeding from the powers of the mind alone. The invariable error by which critique proceeds follows from the historical situation of consciousness, its perspectivalism, its historicity and incompleteness, the condition of being always dislocated and limited in a world without which there can be no "reasonable" critical practice at all. The partial and errant thoughts of a former time, lived out in a present consciousness, nevertheless offer up what Marx will call principles. Those principles cannot be extracted from their historicity: they are demonstrated in the course of critique, underscoring that critique is never purely negative for Marx. Indeed, critique might be understood as part of a bloodless destruction (one later affirmed by Walter Benjamin in his "A Critique of Violence," according to which divine violence is also bloodless). Perhaps for our purposes it is enough to note that a completed thought gives rise to an enactment of the principles that became clear in the course of critically debunking a former project. At the very moment a thought is completed, it starts to act, forging a set of operative principles that rely not only on the improper use of terms but also on the departure from institutions. They arise, as it were, from the ruins of a vanishing world, but they are also nourished by those ruins.[3] Errancy is a critical occasion, but also the incipient condition for creation. For it seems to be in this act of creating what could not have happened any earlier that forgiveness and critique become oddly twinned in a worldly philosophy. The use of confession for critical purposes disobeys the lexicon of the Church, which means that language—and thought—become both improper and deinstitutionalized as they become critical. At the same time, the language of religion is part of what we live even if we think we are now perfectly secular, for the fragments of the unthought weigh on the living. So if we think we are now thinking clearly, above all errancy, we have taken ourselves outside the historicity of our thought. And if we imagine that humans alone might come up with an affirmative mode of critique beyond contradiction, that leaves us once again worldless, dreaming only of our own power.

Notes

1. Marx's interjection, *absit omen*, means "may it [the old university] not be an ill omen"—that is, may it not impede Ruge's forward thinking.

2. The resonances with the imperial conquest of the New World are unsettling here.

3. In "A Critique of Violence" and in earlier, shorter articles, Walter Benjamin presents a version of critical destruction that seems to follow on Marx's suggestions about

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critique and destruction, implying that destructiveness of this kind is not to be understood as physical violence.

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