

## Remembering Marx's Secularism\*

Scholars engaged in the critique of secularism have struggled with the numerous meanings of the secular and its cognates, such as secularism, secularization, and secularity. Seeking coherence in the secular's semantic excess, they have often elided distinctions between these meanings or sought a more basic concept of the secular that can contain all of its senses (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007; see Weir 2015). Numerous scholars have observed strong similarities between secularism and Protestantism (Fessenden 2007; Modern 2011; Yelle 2013; see McCrary and Wheatley 2017), at times echoing a Christian theological tradition that has long been anti-secular (Taylor 2007; Gregory 2012; see Reynolds 2016). Unlike this anti-secular tradition, the strongest version of the critique of secularism is a critique of the conditions that produce a distinction between secular and religious and a critique of the ways that empire benefits from this distinction. Overcoming a tidy separation between secularism and religion requires fracturing both and reassembling them in new ways that allow messy life to exceed governance (Hurd 2015, 122-27). Remembering Karl Marx's secularism provides an opportunity to recover the differences within secularism and its difference from Christianity, but also its odd similarities with religion. This recovery can help refine the critique of secularism and preserve some important tools for improving material conditions.

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To remember Marx's secularism means to recall his thoroughgoing empiricism, his avowed atheism, and his critique of religion, as well as to acknowledge the anti-religious atheism of Marxists who have engaged in statecraft, such as Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. Remembering Marx's secularism also means recalling the nature of his materialism, which departs from atheistic materialism not because it disagrees with its conclusions, but because it considers ontological speculation a distraction from a more pressing focus on material conditions. Though there are forms of Marxism that are explicitly Christian or otherwise theological, Marxian secularists have had an enormous influence on the secularization of people and states around the world, and Marx's naturalism poses a challenge for those engaged in postcolonial critique (Chakrabarty 2000; see Brown 2014, 122). Surely, critique's debt to Marx does not make it inherently secular (Asad, Brown, Butler, Mahmood 2009), but the specter of his secularism cannot be ignored.

This essay begins with an attempt to distinguish some of the many meanings of the secular, emphasizing an important distinction that other scholars have recognized in recent years between worldview and political secularism (Weir 2015; Quack 2017). The following section analyzes Marx's materialism as a worldview secularism in order to demonstrate its similarity to nineteenth-century philosophical secularism and recover its debts to ancient atomism and French materialism, thereby placing Marx in a lineage that antedates Christianity (Foster 2000; Foster, Clark, and York 2008). The next section analyzes Marx's political secularism, which does not attack religion directly, but reduces it to supernatural belief and predicts its elimination with the end of alienation from labor and the concomitant end of the need for abstraction from material reality. In the final section, this essay underscores the importance of drawing distinctions within secularism. Recognizing a distinction between worldview and politics is a necessary condition

for arguing that Marx's subjective materialism can withstand the critique of secularism more effectively than his approach to religion. Drawing a distinction between kinds of secularism—between Marx and Holyoake—shows that the critique of secularism has failed to recognize a non-liberal secular tradition by equating secularism and liberalism. Placing Marx's materialism within a religion-like secular tradition also sustains and enacts the critique of secularism by deconstructing the distinction between secular and religious. Remembering Marx's secularism thus refines the critique's target, undermines the simplistic identity of Protestant and secular, and carves out much-needed space within the secular for atheistic Marxists and other non-liberal secular people.

### **Secularism's Confusion**

Secularism is confusing, which is to say, fecund. Its overdetermination has made it both politically useful and prone to miscommunication (Blankholm 2014). Secularization, its cognate, faces the same challenge, with advocates and opponents of secularization theory besting one another using the definition of the term most suited to their agenda or dataset (Casanova 1994 and 2009; Martin 2005; Voas and Chaves 2016). The persistence of disputes over nomenclature does not make talking about the secular impossible, but it signals how important definition is for setting the terms of the conflict. This work of definition and labeling is a confidence game (Wittgenstein 2009; Mckinnon 2002; McCutcheon 2007) in which religion or the secular hides under one shell at the start, but after some prestidigitation, it appears, to the mark's great surprise, beneath another. Debates over proper labels have consequences outside of universities (McCutcheon 1997), and though scholars have long played a role in defining religion and its related terms (Smith 1998), they remain less important than other definitional authorities. In the

courts of many countries, religious and secular appellation is a high-stakes game with material ramifications for minority groups seeking legal protections or trying to prevent their practices and symbols from being quarantined from public life (Sullivan 2005; Mahmood 2016; Curtis 2016; Wenger 2017). In the United States, the high stakes are literal, with the total value of tax exemptions for religious groups numbering in the tens of billions each year (Cragun, Yeager, and Vega 2012). What counts as secular or religious matters a great deal—and so does figuring out what we mean when we talk about secularism.

As the essay that introduces this forum elaborates, the critique of secularism in the twenty-first century was pioneered simultaneously by Talal Asad (2003) and Saba Mahmood (2004), on the one hand, and Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (2000; 2008) on the other. In both versions of the critique, “secularism” has begun to mean that which structures and sequesters religion from other adjacent categories like spirituality, the secular, and superstition (Dressler and Mandair 2011; McCrary and Wheatley 2017; Josephson-Storm 2018). This process of “religion-making” defines secularism for most of those engaged in critiquing it. They have provided a valuable conceptual vocabulary for observing and thinking beyond the religion-related divisions that states and other powerful actors produce, and in the process, their critique has raised worthy suspicions about anything bearing the name “secular.” Asad (2003) finds in the genealogy of secularism multiple origins that feed into the contemporary production of the secular. The critique of secularism is a new formation that adds a layer to the sediment of the term’s definitions. Academics who advocate and critique secularism are engaged in its ongoing redefinition and reappraisal, alongside judges, pollsters, and IRS officials. The high-stakes shell game that scholars play with others who label and define amounts to no less than the work of remaking religion.

Secularism has not always meant religion-making. The term was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 (Search 1851) to describe an approach to life that focuses on the material world, but stops short of the ontological certainty of atheistic materialism (Holyoake 1870). Holyoake intended something like “agnosticism,” though Thomas Huxley would not coin that term until nearly two decades later (Le Poidevin 2010) in humble acknowledgement of the limits that an empiricist epistemology imposes on a materialist ontology (Huxley 1902). Holyoake’s secularism was a philosophy and a way of life, and it grew into a social movement in Britain (Royle 1974; Rectenwald 2016), the United States (Post 1943; Warren 1943; Schmidt 2016), and India (Quack 2011). Though this movement often endorsed the political goal of keeping Christianity out of government, and though secularists and others referred to non-sectarian education as “secular” (Holyoake 1896; Weir 2015), nineteenth-century secularists considered worldview secularism, political secularism, and secular instruction to be distinct. An ex-Unitarian minister in the United States, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, was likely the first to use the term “secularism” to mean the separation of church and state and associate it with Holyoake’s, by contrast, “philosophical” secularism (Abbot 1876). By the late nineteenth-century, *political* secularism was synonymous with the separation of church and state, and *philosophical* secularism meant the beliefs of nonbelievers and their focus on living ethically in the physical world. Secularism, without adjective, could—and still can—mean either or both (Blankholm 2014), but conflating them is a misunderstanding of how they differ in origin and aim.

Drawing on these nineteenth-century distinctions, Todd Weir (2015) and Johannes Quack (2017) have framed *political* secularism and *worldview* secularism as a binary, where the former is separationism and the latter describes the ontological and epistemological beliefs of secular people. Secularism as religion-making is a recent scholarly coinage that describes the intensity

and pervasiveness of the separationist logic, though it often elides a distinction between political and worldview secularisms because it considers them interdependent. Mahmood contrasts political secularism and secularity, where the former is the state-based management of religion, and the latter is “the set of concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterize secular societies and subjectivities” (2016, 3). “Secularity” in this sense is still religion-making, though not state-based; it is a pervasive background that conditions religious believers as well as secular people (see also Taylor 2007, 13-14). It differs from worldview secularism, though it includes it, effectively erasing any way for worldview secularism to stand alone (Warner 2012). This elision also makes it difficult to explain how secular people in the United States can be a quasi-religious minority with almost no political representation despite living in a secular state under the modern condition of secularity (Edgell et al. 2016).

Asad acknowledges the gap between worldview and political secularism and sees an articulation of their relationship as one of the aims of an anthropology of secularism: “The question of how secularism as a political doctrine is related to the secular as an ontology and an epistemology is evidently at stake here” (Asad 2003, 21). Mahmood’s “secularity” is the site of articulation that Asad argues is the constitutive background of life in modern liberal nation-states. But as Weir has shown (2015), though political secularism and worldview secularism are related in their historical development, they cannot be collapsed into one another or lumped under the sign of secularity. Understanding their relationship is important and requires more historical and genealogical research. If political and worldview secularisms are sufficiently similar, then a powerful critique of one can target both; if they are sufficiently distinct, then they require separate critiques, and perhaps one can be spared, entirely or in part.

It is odd and demands explanation that secularism names both the process by which religion and the secular become distinct from one another, as well as one of the terms being realized by the work of distinction (see Warner 2012). People who are both secular and religion-like—or secular and avowedly religious—pose a special challenge to conflating these two forms of secularism. Abbot considered “absolute secularism” to be the “political side” of “free religion” (1876), the German materialist Ernst Haeckel described his scientific naturalism as “a monistic religion” (Haeckel 1879, quoted in Weir 2012, 5), and humanists like Auguste Comte (1851-1854) and Charles Francis Potter (1930) were non-theistic religious innovators who created ways for secular people to belong and behave religiously without believing in the supernatural. Because secularism structures and constrains secular people just as it does the religious (Beaman, Steele, and Pringnitz 2018), and because secular people have in many times and places considered themselves religious or religion-like and been legally recognized as such (Blankholm 2018), calling all of this “secularism” sows confusion that is difficult to clarify. Lost in this confusion is Marx’s non-liberal secularism, which looms large on the scholarly left that takes the critique of secularism seriously. Whether the critique of religion-making or separationist secularism applies to worldview secularism is an important question for deciding whether there is a Marxism that is both secular and capable of sustaining critique.

### **Marx’s Worldview Secularism**

Marx’s secularism is a matter of dispute, and it deserves attention if we want to continue to think with Marx while taking the critique of secularism seriously. Marx called himself an atheist, unequivocally, in English in 1871 (Marx, Foner, and Landor 1972, 15). Those committed to epistemological empiricism and ontological materialism have only self-described as atheists in

public since the late eighteenth-century, or about a hundred years before Marx's avowal (Kors 1992). In the preceding centuries, "atheist" was a term that Christian culture had reserved as an epithet for heretics; it was not a self-appellation (Kors 1990). Though first published under a pseudonym, Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach's *Système de la nature* (1770) is one of the first works to articulate a systematic, modern atheism—which is to say, a coherent philosophy of ontological materialism (Kors 1976). D'Holbach, along with his contemporaries Claude Adrien Helvétius, Jacques-André Naigeon, Denis Diderot, and the more senior Julien Offray de la Mettrie, comprised a group of writers later known as the French materialists. They argued that a materialist and naturalist ontology followed from a rigorous sensationalist empiricism, which they demonstrated systematically in a series of works that drew heavily from an ancient tradition that included the Greek atomist Epicurus and the Roman poet Lucretius (Kors 2016a and 2016b).

Marx is heir to both the ancient atomist tradition and French materialism, which he demonstrates in his early writings. His materialism differs, however, from that of the French materialists by turning away from the metaphysical speculation of ontology and toward the subjective activity of human life. He makes this difference clear in his dissertation, which he completed in 1841, as well as in other of his writings from the 1840s. Marx's dissertation is a comparative study of the natural philosophies of two of the ancient Greek atomists, Democritus and Epicurus (Marx 1975, 25-105). Though other scholars saw Epicurus as merely derivative of the earlier Democritus (ibid., 34, 37-38), Marx carefully distinguishes between their philosophies in order to demonstrate Epicurean innovation. In Democritus, Marx finds an empiricism that learns about the world inductively by assembling appearances into objective theories. In Epicurus, he finds the objective world present in subjective human consciousness. The mind is reflected in the atoms of the universe and vice-versa because thought and the world are both



composed of atoms. For Epicurus and for Marx, thought is real and material, rather than abstract, and by extension, deductive human reasoning is concrete self-consciousness of the actual unfolding of the world (ibid., 73).

Through Epicurus, Marx argues that he has solved the problem of separate noumena and phenomena that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel inherited from Immanuel Kant and also attempted to resolve. Marx relies heavily on Hegel's dialectical approach, but he believes that because thought is matter—literally, distinct atoms in the Epicurean system—he avoids Hegel's idealism (see Teeple 1990). Thought is not merely an inductive approximation of an ultimately incomprehensible reality, but is co-extensive with that reality and follows its same laws. Reason is the logic present in both the mind and the world, and human thought is nature's concrete self-consciousness of itself. By extension, science should always be in the service of a reasoning subject and thus subjective. It should never be objective and an end in itself because this presupposes a fallacious gap between the world and subjective thought. Marx's Epicurus unites empiricist and rationalist epistemologies and asserts the primacy of matter while centering the human subject. What he finds in Epicurus as early as 1841 reflects the entire project of his later work: to bring human life into a self-conscious understanding of its nature and into a proper relation with its material conditions, which are one and the same.

In other of his writings on materialism from the 1840s, Marx mirrors the movement that he makes in his dissertation, from a Democritean empiricism interested in knowledge for its own sake to an Epicurean materialism that centers on human subjectivity and sees in human self-consciousness a reflection of nature. He repeatedly acknowledges his debt to the materialist tradition, including the French materialists, and he describes his own role in materialism's humanization. For instance, in 1844, Marx co-wrote *The Holy Family* with Friedrich Engels,

which critiqued Bruno Bauer and the other Young Hegelians (Marx 2002, 101-107). In the book's sixth chapter, Marx wrote a brief history of materialism in which he describes the movement from an English materialism of Bacon and Hobbes that is "hostile to humanity" (ibid., 105) to the French materialism of Helvétius, focused on the species-life of human beings. In the same essay, he argues that materialism's focus on the sensuous, social reality of humans leads directly into the communism of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen (ibid., 107). "Mature communism," he writes, "comes *directly* from *French materialism*" (ibid., emphasis in original). He sees Ludwig Feuerbach's work and his own as deepening the focus of materialism on sensuous, social life:

[Metaphysics] will be defeated forever by *materialism* which has now been perfected by the work of *speculation* itself [through Hegel] and coincides with *humanism*. As *Feuerbach* represented *materialism* in the *theoretical* domain, French and English *socialism* and *communism* in the *practical* field represented *materialism* which *coincided* with *humanism*. (Ibid., 102, emphasis in original)

Writing again in 1844, in his "Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy," Marx credits Feuerbach with taking Hegel beyond idealism "by making the social relation of 'man to man' the basic principle of his theory" (Ibid., 76). He builds a persistent contrast between the speculative and theoretical on the one hand, and the sensuous, social, and practical on the other.

In these early philosophical writings, Marx positioned himself as an heir to the materialist tradition, but he also departed from its namesake ontology, i.e., the claim that reality is material. He effectively built a new understanding of the term, which he held onto because he wanted the debt that his practical materialism owed to theoretical materialism to remain clear despite its difference in focus (see Jordan 1967, *pace* Megill and Park 2017). Marx's disagreement with Feuerbach is telling. In his "Theses on Feuerbach," he criticizes him and all earlier materialists for being still too speculative and philosophical: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing

materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (Ibid., 182, emphasis in original). Because Feuerbach’s thought remains speculative, rather than applied, it fails to achieve what Epicurus did, i.e., a philosophy focused on improving subjective human life, rather than describing it objectively or in abstract terms. Marx repeats the movement he made in his dissertation, in which he argues against the proto-science of Democritus, in favor of the religion-like missionary philosophy of Epicurus (DeWitt 1954). As he writes in the final thesis on Feuerbach, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (ibid., 184, emphasis in original). The metaphor of *departure* is an apposite description of Epicurus’s relationship to Democritus and Marx’s relationship to Feuerbach. Marx continues with many of Feuerbach’s arguments and differs in smaller ways that mark the start of his own path.

Marx also departs from the materialism of d’Holbach, whose *Système de la nature* starts with a rigorous empiricist epistemology and speculates that a mechanistic materialist ontology rationally follows. Like other mechanistic materialists, such as La Mettrie, who is best known for his essay *L’homme machine* (1996), d’Holbach argues that a naturalist ontology forecloses the possibility of agency or free will. Marx’s subjective materialism brackets ontological questions and avoids the implications of mechanistic materialism, in which agentive change is impossible because free will is an illusion and every action is necessary rather than contingent. As he wrote in “Private Property and Communism” in 1844, “Communism begins with atheism (Owen), but atheism is initially far from being *communism*, and is for the most part an abstraction. The philanthropy of atheism is therefore at first nothing more than an abstract *philosophical* philanthropy, while that of communism is at once *real* and directly bent towards *action*” (Marx

2002, 131). Like Democritus's atomism that approaches nature objectively, French materialism is a starting point for understanding reality. But like the subjective philosophy focused on human well-being that Epicurus develops from Democritus, communism is concerned with human flourishing and demands action to change reality. Only after traveling a great distance with objective materialism and appropriating its name does Marx depart from it by urging a shift in focus to the subjective and to actions that improve material conditions. He does not contradict atheistic materialism so much as shift its focus to subjective human life.

### **Marx's Political Secularism**

Marx's political secularism sits in tension with his worldview secularism. David McLellan has argued that Marx's understanding of religion was influenced by his father's deistic Protestantism, to which the elder Marx converted from Judaism (1987, 7-8). Surely, Marx adopts a belief-centered understanding of religion that is consistent with Protestantism's belief-centrism and with the philosophical lineage he inherits from Hegel and Feuerbach (Mahmood 2016, 13-15, 203). This belief-centrism is on display in an oft-cited passage from Marx's "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" that is worth quoting at length because it gets to the heart of his approach to religion in his early writings:

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 encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, 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. (Marx 2002, 171, emphasis in original).

Religion—reduced to religious belief, with little regard for its practice or institutions—is the “general theory of this world” and “an inverted consciousness of the world.” It is a “fantastic realization” of a human essence that “has not acquired any true reality.” Struggling against religion is to struggle with the world only “indirectly” because religion is merely a symptom of human alienation from its own essence, rather than the cause. Religion reflects a world out of step with human life and expresses the resulting injustice in the metaphysical inversions it asserts as truth. Religion is a consequence of human alienation, and it serves as a protest against real suffering (see McKinnon 2005). Marx’s critique of religion aims beyond it, more directly to the material conditions that give rise to abstraction, or belief in the supernatural (see Toscano 2010).

Marx’s controversial essay “On the Jewish Question” (Marx 2002, 44-69) clarifies his political understanding of religion, at least in his early years, and helps explain the harshly anti-religious policies realized by several Marxist-Leninist governments. In the essay, Marx argues against the view of his onetime-mentor, Bruno Bauer, that Jews should give up pursuing political equality as Jews and instead fight for the political emancipation of all people (ibid., 46). In the style that is typical of his early writings, Marx disagrees sharply with Bauer by intensifying his thesis and arguing that Jews should not only relinquish their Jewish distinctiveness in public life, but also revolt against the very project of political emancipation, so long as it involves realizing emancipation through the state. In short, they and everyone else should foment revolutions that overthrow even democratic states, thereby doing away with the Enlightenment project of gaining equal citizenship and embracing instead a human life not alienated by its separation into the binary of political and civil (ibid., 51-53). Marx is secular, but not liberal.

Secularizing the state, according to Marx, would emancipate only the state from religion and not its citizens. He relies on the example of the United States. With a constitutional prohibition against governmental establishment of a particular religion, American citizens remain free to engage in religion in private, and the state is ostensibly free of religion. That religion thrives in the U.S., despite its having a secular state, is evidence for Marx that a secular state does not truly emancipate humans because they continue to project an illusion that reflects their oppression:

If in the land of complete political emancipation [i.e., the U.S.] we find not only that religion *exists* but that it exists in a *fresh* and *vigorous* form, that proves that the existence of religion does not contradict the perfection of the state. But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect must be looked for in the *nature* of the state itself. (ibid., 49, emphasis in original)

For a young Marx, even political life is too abstracted from humans' species-life; even privately held religious beliefs signal that human life is alienated from its essence.

For an older Marx, political identity is more complex. Despite his dispute with Bauer, he avers a private atheism, in contrast with his subjective materialism, which brackets ontological speculation as beside the point. His distinction seems practical in response to a New York reporter who asked him about religion in 1871: "On that point I cannot speak in the name of the [International] [S]ociety. I myself am an atheist" (Marx, Foner, and Landor 1972, 15). Marx is a hugely important thinker who does not believe that all those participating in the movement he helps to lead need to share his private ontology. For George Jacob Holyoake—who coined the term secularism and founded the secularist movement—secularism requires the very same distinction that Marx makes between his materialism and his private atheism. For instance, writing in 1871, Holyoake provides guidelines for Secular Societies, which are local chapters of his movement:

Christianism, Theism, Materialism, and Atheism will be regarded as open questions, subject to unreserved discussion. But these occasions will be the opportunity of the members, not the business of the society. All public proceedings accredited by the society should relate to topics consistent with the common principles of Secularism: "In necessary things, unity: in doubtful things, liberty: in all things, charity." The destruction of religious servitude may be attempted in two ways. It may be denounced, which will irritate it, or it may be superseded by the servitude of humanity. (34)

Holyoake encourages secularists to freely discuss speculative topics like ontology, but his secularism does not argue an official position one way or the other. Like Marx, Holyoake was a socialist who considered direct conflict with religion a distraction from the more pressing work of improving material conditions in this life (Holyoake 1896, 35). According to both men, ontological speculation can be harmful when made into a mission statement because demand for public agreement on ontological questions can sow discord among movement members and coalition partners who share the same material goals but different ontologies. Though scholars have sometimes identified the privatization of ontological commitments as distinctively Protestant, political expediency appears to be a better explanation for why Marx and Holyoake bracketed ontological speculation from the work of their respective movements. They did so despite engaging ontology privately and despite believing that if their movements were completely successful, belief in the supernatural would end. Like Epicurus, who antedates not only liberalism and Protestantism, but all of Christianity, they find the demand for public ontological consensus less important than the demand to improve material conditions.

Alberto Toscano has described the early Marx as "eliminativist" with respect to religion, though in his early writings it is clear that Marx believes Feuerbach and Bauer have missed the point when they attack religion directly (2010, 13-15). In his later work, Marx makes religion a worthy object of study (*ibid.*) if only to understand the history and power of abstraction, such as when he describes Christianity as "the special religion of capital" (Marx 1971, 448; quoted in

Toscano 2010, 17) and theorizes the religiosity of commodities (Brown 2014). For Marx, “religion” remains defined as belief in the supernatural, which is Feuerbachian projection and abstraction from real life, and it never warrants a full-frontal assault because it is a symptom, rather than a cause. Marx critiques the Young Hegelians for being liberal secularists because they treat religion as mere false illusion rather than “an expression of real suffering” and seek to sequester it from public life as a condition of political emancipation. The so-called New Atheists of the twenty-first century engage in a similar circumscription of religion for political purposes by binarizing religious and secular into simplistic oppositions like dogma/freethought and authority/autonomy and arguing for religion’s elimination as a condition of emancipation (see Harris 2006 and Hitchens 2007). The Young Hegelians and the New Atheists are worthy of critique as political secularists, but so is Marx, whose approach to religion should give us pause in light of the twenty-first century critique. Though Marx’s advocacy of religion’s elimination is often overstated, he still reduced it to belief and imagined it would be eliminated when humans are no longer alienated from their species-life and thus no longer in need of religion’s projection as a protest against their suffering.

Lenin was credited with a strongly “eliminativist” approach to religion in the Soviet Union, but writing in 1905, he draws a similar distinction between the worldview secularism of atheism and the political secularism of “disestablishment” or the “complete separation of Church and State” (1965). Sounding more like Bauer than Marx, he argues, “Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever,” and, “We demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned” (ibid.). Like the early Marx, he acknowledged that the teachings of his movement opposed supernaturalism: “An explanation of our Programme [...] necessarily includes an explanation of the true historical and economic



roots of the religious fog. Our propaganda necessarily includes the propaganda of atheism” (ibid.). And like the later Marx, and like Holyoake, Lenin’s reasons for making ontological disputes a private matter were eminently practical: “Unity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven” (ibid.). Lenin’s communism was atheistic, but as of 1905, his movement was not. Marx realized the same distinction in his criticism of Democritus. Even though ontological materialism is an objective consequence of empiricism, human subjective life is the only measure of practical significance.

Marx’s worldview is secularist in more than one sense, but like Holyoake, he did not seek to impose that worldview on all those in the movement he helped to lead. Marx’s subjective materialism is similar to Holyoake’s agnostic secularism because of the debts they share to the tradition of ontological materialism and the political goals they share as mid-nineteenth-century socialists. The political secularism of Marx and Holyoake is not as strong as that of Bauer or the New Atheists, who advocated for a direct attack on religion, but it still reduces religion to supernatural belief and considers it a misunderstanding and a misalignment of human life and its material conditions. Marx’s and Holyoake’s secularisms also differ from each other; Holyoake’s is liberal democratic and Marx’s is decidedly not. One of the lasting impacts of the critique of secularism will hopefully be a meaningful distinction between worldviews and political ideologies and a deeper understanding of their entangled relationship (Asad 2003; Weir 2015). Another will hopefully be a more nuanced understanding of secularism’s debts to both Protestantism and ancient philosophy and the multiple origins of distinctions like private and public.

## Marx's Secularism After Critique

The “eliminativist” Marx had an enormous influence on communist states’ policies toward religion. The secularism of Lenin and its aggressive implementation by Stalin in the Soviet Union (Luehrmann 2011; Smolkin 2018) paved the way, among other examples, for Mao’s sustained attack on “religion” and traditional culture in China (Yang 2008; Van der Veer 2014), for Castro’s establishment of an avowedly atheist state in Cuba (Crahan 1979), and for the militant atheism of Agostinho Neto in post-independence Angola (Blanes and Paxe 2015). Marx’s influence on global secularization is difficult to overstate, if secularization means a decline in belief in the supernatural and a decline in the power of institutions that appear religious through the prism of Christianity (see Casanova 1994). Still, these state-based, anti-religious Marxisms hardly exhaust the diversity of Marx’s afterlives, which Jacques Derrida has called Marx’s specters: “*there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them*” (1994, 13, emphasis in original). Surely, Derrida is right, and there is more than one Marx and many more than one Marxism.

Some of Marx’s afterlives are explicitly religious and theological, and with empirical force they challenge any attempt to reduce Marxism to an anti-religious secularism. Christian Communists in Italy (Saresella 2018), Latin America (Löwy 1988), and India (Reynolds 2018) have all wrestled with the ontological implications of Marx’s materialism while embracing his political economic diagnosis of material conditions. Alasdair MacIntyre’s early engagement with Marx (1968) laid the groundwork for his later “revolutionary Aristotelianism” (Knight 2007, quoted in Blackledge and Davidson 2008, xv), and Terry Eagleton’s Aristotelian Marx is effectively a Thomist (2016). For MacIntyre and Eagleton, Aristotle’s influence on Hegel and Marx anchors a materialism in which meaning inheres teleologically and spirit is present in the

form it gives to matter. Since the early twentieth century, continental philosophy and critical theory have explored resonances between Marxism and theology that perform the work of the critique of secularism by disrupting the binaries of philosophy/theology and secular/religious (see Boer 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014).

Evidently, the eliminative approach does not define Marx on religion, much less all of Marxism. The same is true of secularism, for which Derrida's description of plurality is equally apt. Scholars critiquing secularism have discussed its political varieties in the plural, as secularisms (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 2010), and observed the diverse configurations of religion, government, and civil society in modern states (Stepan 2011; Buckley 2017). This pluralism is certainly important, but so is the internal distinction within secularism between worldview and political separationism. Even within worldview secularism, there is rich diversity, such as the materialism of Marx, the secularism of Holyoake, the agnosticism of Huxley, the humanism of Comte, the Monism of Haeckel, the Ethical Culture of Adler, the Secular Humanism of Paul Kurtz, and the anti-humanist atheism (Geroulanos 2010) and radical immanentism (Deleuze 2001) in continental thought. Remembering Marx's secularism means acknowledging its place in this diversity and critically reflecting on what, exactly, the critique of secularism critiques.

Lumping together everything from political separationism to Protestantism and Marxism and then attributing to this chimera the hegemonic power of a social imaginary dissolves obvious differences and props up a hoary anti-secularism. Catholic critics, for instance, have considered Marxian materialism little more than a byproduct of the nominalist heresy that led to the Protestant Reformation (Taylor 2007; Gregory 2012), despite worldview secularism's roots in philosophies that antedate Christianity. In persistent attempts to reduce secularism to a strain of

Protestantism, secularism becomes either Christianity in drag or Christianity's mere detritus. Either way, Marx is shorn of his affirmative, pragmatic outlook and its ancient origins, the presence of which he demonstrates as early as his dissertation, but as others have also seen (Lange 1925; Foster 2000). The historians Ada Palmer and Alan C. Kors show how an updated Epicureanism became Christianity's atheism—its antithesis, par excellence—through centuries of debates among Christian theologians in need of an adversary in their dialectical arguments for God's existence (Palmer 2014; Kors 2016a and 2016b). Despite being a religion-like missionary movement in the ancient world (DeWitt 1954), Epicureanism became through great Christian effort the very antithesis of religion. Given its complex genealogy, the non-Christianity of worldview secularism cannot be dismissed as another reformation within Protestantism or the mere opposition of a Christian thesis. For the same reasons, scholars reduce political secularism to the machinations of Christian colonialism at the risk of ignoring powerful tools available for the improvement of material conditions (see Laborde 2017).

Toscano observes that some have called Marxism a “political religion” in order to criticize its revolutionary hopes as either fanatical or fancifully messianic (2010, 18-19). Victoria Smolkin has found the same language used to oppose Soviet Communism (2018, 6-8). As a warning label, “religion” can signal everything from a belief-centered “intellectual theory” to a “social system” that attempts “to encompass the totality of human experience” (Smolkin 2018, 7). If Marxism is religion-like, it is not in these facile senses, but in an uncanny way that is made legible through the powerful, related critiques of secularism (Asad 2003) and religion as an analytic category (Asad 1993). Some find in these critiques good reason to stop talking about “religion,” but transgressing the possibilities of what the word can point to is far more productive than hiding its work within a different category, such as “politics” or “culture.” Calling the

construction of religion by another name—say, “religionism” or the hyphenated “religion-making”—distinguishes the process that produces religions and the secular from its identity with just one of the things it structures. This in turn enables a glimpse of a weird secularism that is religious, not religious, and sort of like religion all at once (Quack 2014). Secularism’s religion-like qualities remain concealed so long as its name merely indexes the process through which Christian hegemony has produced the category “religion” and its constellation of related terms. A religion-like secularism is refreshingly unwieldy and tough to govern. Shot through with traces of its ostensible other, it bears the full messiness of its genealogy and defies any attempt to regulate it through a simplistic binary of religion and secular (Blankholm 2018). If the critique of secularism has sought to challenge secular liberal governance, secularism seems already to contain its own undoing.

The worldview and political secularisms of Marx should be subject to critique, and the best critiques of secularism take care to avoid elision of their complex difference. On the worldview side, secularism is more than just belief: it appears remarkably religion-like in its various ideological movements, in its institutional forms, and even in its life-cycle rituals (Engelke 2015; Copeman and Quack 2015; Smolkin 2018). Remembering Marx’s secularism orients a possible future after secularism’s critique, in which a discursive tradition (Asad 2009) variously called Epicurean, immanentist, materialist, empiricist, and secular takes shape on terms partly its own and partly other—as strangely like religion, but also awkwardly not (Blankholm and Invernizzi Accetti 2017). This is a tradition that is no less internally diverse than Christianity, and it includes liberals and non-liberals alike. Moreover, if Christian culture has bequeathed the category of religion by way of its merchants and missionaries, and if Christian culture has produced the secularist divisions that undergird many modern states, then there is no

choice but to imagine what is other than Christian in Christian terms and engage with the messy hybrids that result (see Lofton 2017). After the critique of secularism, it has become important to understand the secular's non-Christianity, its internal diversity, and its odd religiosity.

Remembering Marx's secularism is a good place to begin.

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