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## Marx and Atheism

Marx is assumed to be an atheist.[[1]](#footnote-1) Marxists are assumed to link atheism and communism in ways in which they cannot be disentangled. And these assumptions do not all come from lay sources or from widespread misconceptions about Marx and Marxism. The most recent biography of Marx, by Jonathan Sperber, reproduces these preconceptions, claiming that “Marx saw the realization of atheism in the secularization of the government.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This picture needs to be refined, and David McLellan’s work provides us with a framework to understand the subtlety of Marx’s analysis of atheism.

In the first part of this chapter, I will analyse McLellan’s contribution to Marx scholarship in this respect, showing that Marx, although he certainly embraced militant atheism in 1841, may have already given it up a year later in 1842. Atheism is already shown to be a position that will be overcome by communism, because the latter’s concern with economic emancipation would include other emancipations – including from religious authorities. This subtle reclassification of atheism will then be shown to have deep consequences for Marx’s thought. The quest becomes economic emancipation, and religious movements that contribute to it, as McLellan has shown, can be argued to follow the spirit of Marx’s thought. Equally, state-imposed atheism can be seen as an enemy of emancipation, recreating a form of ideology as false consciousness against which Marx’s critique is so powerful.

In the second part of this chapter, I propose to reconceptualise Marx’s attitude to atheism in general. For this, I base the new framework on Luciano Parinetto’s thesis of the legend of Marx’s atheism. Marx is not an atheist in the conventional sense, but rather can be described as *non-più-ateo,* as both *no-longer* an atheist, and *neither* an atheist (nor a theist). These two possibilities are present in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx describes his intellectual issues with the atheist doctrine. The view that Marx was an atheist in his collaboration with Bauer in 1841, and is no longer an atheist by 1842-3, is of historical interest at best. But the argument that he views himself as *neither* an atheist, as a post-atheist thinker who has overcome the dialectic of theism-atheism, is of interest to the Marx scholar. The distinction that Marx draws in this work between *crude, political,* and *positive* communism, is then applied to atheism to show that Marx perceived a similar dialectic movement within the atheist doctrine.

In the third part of this chapter, I show that conceptualising the Enlightenment materialism and atheism of some radical thinkers, notably the baron d’Holbach, as a form of *crude* atheism to be overcome is misleading. Although Marx had praise for the work of pre-revolutionary French materialists, he also perceived them as advocates of the bourgeoisie. Yet his brushing aside of their contribution to materialistic thought obscures the radical political dimension of their works. By a short detour through d’Holbach’s works, I will show that there is indeed an emancipatory dimension to this thought. His political thought, characterised by a social contract, is more radical than it is often perceived to be. Similarly, his theory of property, though certainly still enshrined in the prejudices of his time, is pointing towards an emancipation of the ownership of the means of production. For these reasons, the identification of *radicals* in the Enlightenment is of interest to critical theorists today.

Finally, the fourth part of this chapter will look at the possibility of using Marx’s subtle stance towards atheism today. By illustrating William Connolly’s use of the concept of the nontheist, I will show that a pluralist theory of emancipation is not only possible, but surely desirable. Instead of seeking orthodoxy to particular attitudes to the divine, a post-atheist or nontheist understanding of emancipatory politics has much to contribute to the present state of critical theory. It is in opening up the possibilities for different existential faiths to collaborate with one another that they can best resist the advances of capitalism, together. I will then conclude by showing that the immanent ontology of materialism is already being rebuilt on various fronts. The so-called ‘new materialisms’ have attempted to build on the historical materialism of Marx, and take it in new directions without explicitly rejecting it. These new avenues allow for crossovers between various religious commitments, albeit within materialist ontologies. The question of technology is also essential in tackling new developments, and here the ‘new critique of political economy’ of Stiegler provides in-roads for the future of materialism.

To claim that David McLellan’s contribution to English-speaking Marx scholarship has been one of the most important in the twentieth century is certainly an understatement. McLellan’s understanding of the place that religion takes in Marx’s thought and in Marxism more widely has been illuminating for scholars on the compatibility (or lack thereof) of religious beliefs with Marx’s thought. McLellan’s subtle picture of the anti-religious moments of Marx’s writings, as well as the latter’s emphasis of the role that some religious communities played in human emancipation in history still help scholars navigate the religious world-view of Marx and his followers. By using McLellan’s work, I will show that Marx’s flirtations with the atheism of Bauer and others was short-lived, and that Marx quickly moved to a post-atheistic position. That is not to say that he rejected atheism completely, but that he perceived atheism as a position to be overcome by communism.

McLellan’s work on the relation between the Young Hegelians and Marx shows that the relationship between post-Hegelian philosophy and atheism in the early 1840s was already fraught with tensions and subtle differences. Althusser’s “epistemological break” does not sufficiently explain these tensions present in the early works, notably the 1844 manuscripts which he dismisses as ideological and used – in post-war France – by the bourgeoisie[[3]](#footnote-3). But Althusser’s interpretation does not sufficiently account for the subtle relations between Marx’s thoughts and Feuerbach’s. In contrast with the view that Feuerbach’s work was a defence of atheism against the lingering religiosity of Hegel’s work, McLellan highlights that “Feuerbach’s declared aim was to achieve the unity of God and man that he believed existed at the beginning of history.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Other Young Hegelians, such as Stirner, Ruge and Buhl, continued to defend a religion of humanity[[5]](#footnote-5). Nonetheless, they were perceived as atheist thinkers by most of their contemporaries, not least of which the French communists. Cabet, for example, was shocked that the young Germans were openly embracing the doctrine of atheism, although they refused to call themselves communists[[6]](#footnote-6). As Sperber notes, French radical socialists “understood their social and economic plans in religious terms: communism was the authentic realization of the ideals of Christianity. The radical, atheist German intellectuals, subversives in trouble with the Prussian authorities, were not at all congenial to these French socialists.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In the discussion that preceded the publication of the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher,* this tension – between French communism emanating from Babeuf and German atheism emanating from Fichte – was to prove irreconcilable. Marx, caught in the middle of this struggle, was best placed to overcome it. The tension – between atheism and communism – was to remain an integral part of his work for the years to come. Yet it precedes the supposed “epistemological break,” and McLellan’s interpretation is more convincing than Althusser’s on this issue. Indeed, Althusser’s work is much better situated as part of a debate among French communists and intellectuals than a point about Marx’s *œuvre*.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are no indications that his “epistemological break” has any pertinence for the argument made here, which emphasises the continuity of engagement with dialectics in Marx rather than a clean break between the “philosophical” and “scientific” periods of his thought.

For some time, as McLellan’s work highlights, Marx was collaborating with Bruno Bauer and as such was firmly participating in the atheist activism of the latter[[9]](#footnote-9). In 1841, the two collaborated on the *Atheistic Archives,* and had plans to elaborate on this work to continue with militant atheism. Jonathan Sperber similarly notes the influence of Bauer on Marx’s thought at the time, and concludes that Marx fully embraced atheism[[10]](#footnote-10). Yet this influence was short-lived, and by 1844 it was long gone, with Marx’s *Holy Family* subtitled the *Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and His Associates.[[11]](#footnote-11)* Marx’s flirtations with radical and militant atheism were short-lived, at best covering a period of a few years between 1841 and 1844, and possibly even less as we shall see. Yet the picture of Marx as an atheist militant is resilient in the Marx literature. McLellan himself, goes as far as to say that attempts to show that Marx was not really an atheist confuse the issue[[12]](#footnote-12). Yet in later works, McLellan takes a slightly more nuanced view of Marx’s atheism. Whilst not backing down from the claim that Marx was an atheist, the statement is juxtaposed with various qualifications. Against the *Freien* – the group of German atheistic philosophers of the early 1840s – Marx is shown to take a different direction as early as 1842. Marx saw their expressions of emancipation from religion as “mere exhibitionism,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and condemned their indiscriminate criticism, instead advocating for the support of the bourgeoisie in their struggle against the feudal Prussian state. This tension – between Marx’s aversion to religion and his refusal to indiscriminately critique it; and between his communism and his support for the bourgeois revolutionary movements of the 1840s – is central to understanding his position towards atheism in the dialectic of emancipation.

McLellan convincingly demonstrates that as early as 1842, Marx had already perceived the religious struggle as subordinate to the economic struggle. “Of course, the preaching of atheism might be important where religion was strong, but atheism was only a stage on the path to communism, and an abstract one at that; only communism proposed a doctrine of action that affected what was real.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Without negating the atheism of 1841, the position of 1842 is already subtly different. It points to the need for an economic emancipation, over and above the religious emancipation. The difference may appear small at first sight, but it is fundamental. For if there are convincing emancipatory dimensions in some religious movements, these can contribute to the economic emancipation of humanity, and thus they can easily be coopted in the struggle for communism. Atheism is no longer a necessity, and can either be substituted or overcome. McLellan, in his book *Marxism and Religion*, notes that this is why many of Marx’s followers took radically different paths when it came to the status of religion in Marxism. Some have no problem recombining religious belief with the views of Marx, whilst others advocated for militant atheism as a pre-requisite of Marxism[[15]](#footnote-15).

The view that Marxism is incompatible with religion is thinner already. McLellan notes that it had been defended on two primary grounds. First, that Marxism has a materialist metaphysics, and second that religion is an instrument of class rule and can be rejected on functionalist grounds[[16]](#footnote-16). But these at best only exclude *some* conceptions of God, and *some* religious movements, and at worst it risks reifying atheism into a new religious ideology. As McLellan notes, the “move from materialism to atheism was due to the lack of epistemological sophistication with the result that the dogmatic materialism of some of the disciples of Marx and Engels was no better than dogmatic religion.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Not only is Marx’s thought potentially compatible with some conceptions of God (that do not preclude the materialist ontology) and some religions (that play an emancipatory social role), but atheism itself risks becoming an ideology in the Marxian sense – as the false belief that emancipation from God and his priests is enough for human emancipation. Marx’s prefaceto the second German edition of *Capital,* written in 1873, confirms this interpretation. There, Marx explains why he attacked Hegel “nearly thirty years ago”, but also why he has not abandoned Hegelian dialectic, but rather proposed the opposite dialectic to Hegel’s. Moving away from the mystification of “the Idea,” Marx adopts Hegel’s dialectic even in his analysis of the theory of value, although it is no longer “standing on its head” as it was with Hegel[[18]](#footnote-18). Marx’s early philosophical works thus do not stand in opposition to his later economic writings, but rather continue the dialectic process, albeit without much direct reference to religious debates discussed in the early works.

What is one to make of his excursion through McLellan’s interpretation of Marx’s religious thought? That Marx’s atheism cannot be taken for granted, and that Marx’s attitude to religion – although often antagonistic – need not be one of complete rejection. One further needs to find better conceptual tools to understand Marx’s atheism - or lack thereof – in this context. Luciano Parinetto, in his article on “The Legend of Marx’s Atheism,”[[19]](#footnote-19) provides us with such a conceptual tool – that Marx’s thought can best be described as *non-più-atea* – as both neither-atheist and no-longer-atheist. The Italian negation *non-più*, like the French negation *non plus*, can be used in two ways. In the first instance, it can be used to say that Marx is *not* an atheist *either*; that he is *neither* an atheist nor a theist. In the second instance, it can be used to say that he is no longer an atheist, even though he might have been at some stage. The latter suggests that Marx dropped his atheism, or at least dropped the militant, radical atheism that he once embraced. If Marx was once an atheist, but is no longer one by 1842 or at the very least is no longer an activist of atheism (the second definition of *non-più*), then McLellan is correct in pointing out that this situation is not particularly illuminating. But if Marx is *neither* an atheist nor a theist in the first sense of *non-più*, in the sense that he is pointing towards a post-atheism, towards a world where atheism itself is no longer necessary, then it raises important challenges for atheologists and religious thinkers alike.

Parinetto highlights that two of Marx’s early works have explicit denials of his atheism. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx denies his atheism, whilst in *The Holy Family*, Marx defines atheism as the last stage of theism – thus essentially a negation of it.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moving past Parinetto’s analysis, one needs to identify precisely what Marx himself, in his early works, says about atheism. It is worth quoting his definitions at length here.

“*Atheism*, which is the denial of this unreality [of nature and of man], no longer has any meaning, for atheism is a *negation of God*, through which negation it asserts the *existence of man*. But socialism as such no longer needs such mediation. Its starting-point is the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of man and of nature as *essential beings*.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

And again in dialectical terms.

“Atheism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of religion; communism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of private property. Only when we have superseded this mediation – which is, however, a necessary precondition – will *positive* humanism, positively originating in itself, come into being.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The two senses in which Marx is *non-più-ateo* are present in these two passages. In the first passage, atheism *no longer* has any meaning. It needs to be abandoned because it has only a negative role towards God, and the positive goal cannot be found within itself. In this sense, Marx can be described as no longer an atheist based on this passage. But in the second passage, Marx is saying that he is neither an atheist, nor a non-atheist. Atheism is a necessary precondition that needs to be superseded. It is in this sense that Marx’s thought is closer to a post-atheism (as Parinetto calls it) which does not deny that it was atheistic, but denies that the positive meaning of humanism can be found without superseding atheism itself.

The dialectical movement of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,* as Parinetto highlights[[23]](#footnote-23), is present both in terms of communism and atheism. The three movements of communism are defined as first, a *crude* communism that denies man’s personality, and is merely a generalisation of private property, or the expression of general envy and greed. This form of crude communism still reproduces the social forces inherent in capitalist modes of production, as it is based on private property (albeit generalised) and competition. The second form is that of *political* communism, which advocates for the abolition of the state. This form is still connected to private property as the estrangement of humankind because it denies it. Marx prefers the third version, *positive* communism as the arrival of a historically developed man for himself.

These three stages of communism are paralleled by three stages of atheism in Marx. One can perceive a *crude* atheism, such as that posited by pre-revolutionary French thinkers. It is notably Bayle and d’Holbach that Marx had in mind here, as examples of the rise of the bourgeoisie’s ideology.

“Hence Holbach’s theory [of utility] is the historically justified philosophical illusion about the bourgeoisie just then developing in France, whose thirst for exploitation could still be described as a thirst for the full development of individuals in conditions of intercourse freed from the old feudal fetters.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Holbach, alongside Helvétius, fought against the feudal monarchy of their time and its alliance with the Catholic Church. The struggle was necessary, for it allowed for the historical development of man from feudalism to capitalism, but it is not to be thought of as the final stage of atheism. *Political* atheism comes next, as the type of atheism proposed by the *Freien* in Marx’s time. They had already linked atheism with economic emancipation of man, but believed that this would be achieved through the abolition of religion. This form is still connected to an alienated conception of man and nature, precisely because their definition of these concepts are mere negations of the religious conceptions they seek to supersede. What Marx is proposing here, which Parinetto calls a post-atheism, is the equivalent to a *positive* atheism. Because it no longer considers itself as an opposition to religion or to God, this atheism is closer to what we may call a naturalism or a humanism (or indeed a collection of both). I will later suggest that the label of “nontheism”, suggested by Connolly, may be an appropriate description of this concept. It is man’s emancipation from his own alienation, and his reconciliation with nature (no longer conceived as an alienated concept through God) that is posited here. Just as much as communism remains a ‘not-yet’ in Marx’s thought, always to become what it points to, atheism in this positive sense remains a ‘not-yet’. It can still be conceived as a form of atheism, albeit one that has both superseded itself whilst simultaneously, in true Hegelian fashion, maintaining its preceding two stages – crude and political atheism.

Based on this interpretation of atheism, it is essential to show that there is, in the history of the concept, a potential for radical thought that goes beyond what Marx had shown us. Eighteenth-century materialism, particularly that of d’Holbach, has much more to contribute than Marx had allowed for – particularly as it proposed a model of human emancipation that is still relevant today. Marx’s characterisation of d’Holbach’s thought as “the historically justified philosophical illusion about the bourgeoisie just then developing in France”[[25]](#footnote-25) does not sufficiently address the baron’s radical thought. D’Holbach is still famous today for his radical materialism and atheism, notably that expressed in his *Système de la Nature[[26]](#footnote-26)*, but is less well-known for his political thought. Yet the radicalism of his naturalist ontology had consequences for his political theory. A social contract theorist, d’Holbach is an original contributor to pre-revolutionary thought in France. Two features of his social contract render his thought radical, not only in his context in the eighteenth century, but still today for the questions they pose to us. The first aspect is his conception of utility as a foundation for the contract. The second aspect is his concern for the property-less classes.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the first instance, d’Holbach’s concept of utility is radical, and very different from (later) utilitarian concepts *à la* Bentham. Marx had already commented on this fact in the *German Ideology*, but had concluded that d’Holbach’s utility led him to a philosophical system devoid of positive (economic) content.[[28]](#footnote-28) This judgment is too fast, and was probably based on a reading of the *System of Nature* of 1770without taking into account d’Holbach’s later writings. From 1773 to 1776, d’Holbach develops a set of political and economic critiques based on the concept of utility that he had already developed into an abstract system as Marx noted. In these works, notably the *Politique Naturelle,* the *Système Social*, and the *Éthocratie*, d’Holbach shows that he concerned with the ways in which the social contract can have an effect on the material conditions of citizens. Yet this materialist dimension of d’Holbach’s works is scarcely noticed by commentators, although Israel’s third volume of his radical Enlightenment trilogy has done much to rehabilitate d’Holbach as a radical thinker.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The key to understanding d’Holbach’s radical contribution is to put him back in his historical context. Against a calculating model of rational individuals, d’Holbach proposes a social contract that recognises man’s sociability as a key virtue to contribute to well-being. Against the individualism he had read in Mandeville’s *Fables of the Bees*, d’Holbach proposes that every aspect of our social life is affected by our material conditions. The social contract is thus meant to secure a basic sense of justice, described as a set of conventions that guarantee to all their material needs. D’Holbach’s social contract, in other words, is not a contract of abstract individual rights, but a set of social conventions that seeks justice defined as the provision of material goods for all. Since the 1970s and the revival of social contract in liberal thought[[30]](#footnote-30), little attention has been paid to materialist theorists of the social contract tradition. Yet, d’Holbach’s position is clear, unambiguous, and provides critical tools for those interested in questions of emancipation and equality. What d’Holbach shows is that the social contract is not a legal-proceduralist or abstract idea that prevents one from considering social relations, and in particular material condition of citizens, as an essential part of the contract. A radical materialist social contract can and did emerge as a response both to feudal inequalities, but also bourgeois/liberal inequalities that were increasingly visible in the second half of the eighteenth century.

D’Holbach’s contract is not to be ignored altogether, and his attack on the right to property best illustrates this concretely. D’Holbach, himself ennobled late in life, having inherited the title of baron from his uncle (himself part of the *nouvelle noblesse*), knew very well the inequalities that emanated from the distribution of land in eighteenth century France. One of d’Holbach’s central concerns in his political thought was the rise of these wealth inequalities. Property, understood in the Physiocratic sense of the possession of land, was the source of wealth in agrarian France.[[31]](#footnote-31) Most of the land did not belong to those who worked it, but to those who had inherited it, primarily the members of the Church and the nobility. D’Holbach, the atheist thinker, made wide use of his critique of the social dimension of religion in this context. His arguments were not only that Nature explains things better than God, but that religion as a social institution has contributed to the inequalities that many of its members thought it should oppose. Against such a model, d’Holbach proposes a redistribution of land, or rather to put it in Marxist terms, a redistribution of the means of production of agrarian France. All citizens should own the land that they work on, d’Holbach claims. The claim is outdated, but its radical sentiment is not. D’Holbach’s ideal of a society that abides by the terms of his social contract is one where exploitation does not exist or is at least minimised, and where inequalities are only justified if they bring material advantages to all.

D’Holbach had built this thought precisely on his atheism. Far from being merely reactionary, or a form of *crude* atheism as described above, d’Holbach had sought to build a positive movement of atheism within his thought. It is *because* he no longer conceives of the world as having been given to men by God (as Locke had before him), that he needs to reconceptualise property as a relation between men (and not only between man and God, or man and nature). Marx had seen this in the thought of the Physiocrats, and had praised them for it[[32]](#footnote-32). More than merely blaming the Church for the ills of society, conceptualising atheism had allowed d’Holbach to make a positive contribution to human emancipation. If we no longer have social classes that are God-given, they must be defined by their relation to each other. And clearly, the main difference was for him the disproportion of wealth. D’Holbach’s radical republican politics, whereby theistic as well as divinised concepts are attacked when they are not providing material benefits for all clearly fits as a first step to a historical materialism. We can salvage materialists from the *oubliettes* of history, and show that even if their thought remained too liberal for Marxists, their efforts at emancipation are part of the history of materialism widely construed. Past atheisms have more to contribute than a mere dismissal of their contributions to materialism and to emancipation. Marx himself had clearly perceived a role for these philosophies, and they deserved to be rescued for the contribution they can make to present concerns.

What of the current state of atheism in political thought? Various contributions have been made in the past decades, most notably the writings of the “new atheists”, including Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. Apart from Christopher Hitchens, whose left-wing credentials are well known, the new atheists have little to contribute to Marxist literature, and they largely fit within a reactionary type of atheism, and one embedded within the liberal struggle against religion. Marcus Schulzke has defended this position well, showing that the new atheists are not intolerant (as their opponents often claim) or dogmatic, but that they are merely defenders of liberal values perceived as under threat by certain forms of religious belief – particularly in the United States.[[33]](#footnote-33) Even Hitchens fits this picture, as he adopted a more liberal – some say conservative – outlook on international affairs after 11 September 2001.[[34]](#footnote-34)

I have argued elsewhere that this new atheism nevertheless has positive contributions to make.[[35]](#footnote-35) Its negative struggle against some religions poses some powerful challenges to contemporary politics. In particular, the role that critique plays in public life is worth defending, against attempts to ring-fence religious belief and its consequences from public scrutiny. Put in the context of Marx’s dialectic highlighted above, they remind us that the struggle against religious encroachments is not over, but needs to be re-enacted on a continual basis. But their critique often follows old communitarian lines, and the positive dimension of the new atheism is not made explicit by its proponents. Islam is often singled out as the most dangerous religion for liberal values, and the unholy alliance between Hitchens and Wolfowitz over the war in Iraq has shown some of the policy implications for such a position. When they do make positive contributions, such as Dawkins’ creation of a charity for non-believers, they tend to be on a voluntarist model of public engagement, and do not challenge a liberal understanding of public life.

More interestingly, recent atheistic contributions to political theory such as the work of William Connolly have defended a conception of nontheism against theism and atheism alike. Connolly, a self-avowed pluralist, has long defended a subtle vision comprising both a commitment to radical democratic politics and a toleration of others’ perspectives as legitimate claims to the good life. The aim of his work, to combine a radical commitment to equality with a pluralism of religious (and non-religious) beliefs, is more akin to Marx’s post-atheistphilosophy. Equality for Connolly is still rooted in the material concerns of all, and their ability to emancipate themselves from oppressive conditions of being. Finding roots for these radical democratic commitments in Spinoza, Connolly in many ways continues the materialist commitment of the Enlightenment described above[[36]](#footnote-36). Like Marx, Connolly is also concerned with understanding this materialist tradition as one that is not in strict opposition to some religious commitments that aim at similar conceptions of emancipation.

There is no strict delimitation, in Connolly’s thought, between strong political, philosophical, or religious commitments. All, without excepting his own commitments, are ultimately a form of faith – an existential faith – that is grounded in a deep commitment to particular stance or particular beliefs. Marxism, in Connolly’s work, is put alongside other existential faiths conceptualised as deep beliefs that drive human beings’ actions.[[37]](#footnote-37) The conviction that human emancipation is to be driven through the abolition of private property, for example, is put alongside other convictions. For Connolly, this does not mean that one abandons one’s beliefs when one discusses them with others. On the contrary, the definition of these commitments as forms of existential faiths makes them all-the-more essential for the person who defends them. Yet since we recognise them as forms of faith, rather than as fact or universal truths, discussions between various faiths require a sense of agonistic respect. This respectful struggle between various existential faiths is put within the agonistic tradition, where one recognises the other as an adversary to be defeated in an argument, rather than as an enemy to be eliminated altogether. This agonism, whereby different beliefs challenge each other, is coupled with a respect for the need of human beings to find fulfillment in their deep beliefs. This is why Connolly has described his religious beliefs not as atheistic, but as nontheistic. In his book *Why I am not a Secularist*, he describes his “nontheistic faith in the plurovocity of being”[[38]](#footnote-38) as a valid move of enchantment with the world.

Connolly’s pluralism and nontheism both point in similar directions than the subtle understanding of Marx’s position towards atheism highlighted above. His pluralism is similar to Marx’s analysis that human emancipation can come from various sources. One can find solace in atheism, pantheism, deism, agnosticism, Christianity, Islam or Judaism as a source of emancipation. Surely, some versions of all of these are more compatible with the kind of material emancipation wished for by Marx. But there are numerous examples of combinations between various religious perspectives and Marxist political principles. Connolly’s pluralism points to the various traditions that is at human emancipation. Without sinking into cultural relativism, Connolly’s pluralistic politics seeks to find affective dimensions between different positions that share certain crossover values. Connolly, the nontheist who believes in an immanent materialism in a plural world where existential faiths compete with each other, nonetheless sees space for collaboration on essential themes such as human emancipation.

In his article “The Evengelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” Connolly highlights the possibility of cross-faith collaborations[[39]](#footnote-39). The first of these collaborations, highlighted by Connolly, is between “evangelical Christianity, cowboy capitalism, the electronic news media, and the Republican Party.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Of course, this alliance between unlikely bedfellows is not praised for its political stance. But it highlights that movements that have very few affective dimensions with one another can nonetheless find areas of agreement for particular purposes. More than a mere assemblage of disparate forces, Connolly notes that these movements, through their interaction with one another, have grown into this powerful resonance machine that each movement on its own would have been unable to deliver. Connolly’s call is for a resonance machine that can match the power of the evangelical-capitalist machine present in Unites States politics. Connolly’s nontheism thus brings us to a new dimension of emancipatory politics. If the latter is to survive in a world where its adversaries are so well-equipped, it needs to put aside differences and find common lines of flight, common affective affinities, and amplify those through a pluralistic framework. Connolly mixes his nontheism with a call for higher spirituality, described as an infiltration of various creeds and existential faiths – political, religious, or social. “Above all, the spirituality encourages its participants to forge alliances with those in other walks of life who share its dispositional intensities”.[[41]](#footnote-41) Marx’s critique of critical criticism, of a dogmatic attitude to atheism that leads to the closure of these potential crossover lines is still to be resisted. In other words, both Marx and Connolly point to the need for all those who believe in human emancipation, notably atheists, Christian, Jews, Muslims, but also communists, socialists, and liberals who share those aspirations to find ways of amplifying their forces.

Marx’s stance towards the liberal revolution of 1848 is a further inspiration here. Marx was well aware that the demands of emancipation from Prussian hegemony at the time could only succeed if liberals, socialists, and communists alike put aside their differences and worked towards their common goals. This support for liberal revolutionaries, as Sperber notes[[42]](#footnote-42), is not surprising when one has understood the wider commitment to equality in Marx’s thought. Any movement in that direction was worth supporting, and Marx did not hesitate to take part in joint ventures with odd bedfellows. This did not entail the abandonment of his existential faith, to put it in Connolly’s terms, or tarnish his communist credentials. On the contrary, it shows a complex understanding of the necessity to build a resonance machine to achieve one’s goals. McLellan’s insistence on religious faith as a potential avenue for emancipation makes a similar contribution. In many ways, it is necessary to combine the emancipatory potential of religious believers with the non-religious. This alliance does not require any of the participants to forego their existential faith, on the contrary it demands that they open their affective commitments so they can include those of others. The political right has been much more successful at forming such alliances in the recent past, and the call for similar lines of flights on the other side of the political spectrum seem more relevant than ever.

Recent movements in political theory and philosophy have highlighted new strands of thought that emanate from Marx’s thought and seek to go beyond it. The ‘new materialisms’, as an assemblage of various new ways to think about matter and human relations to it have helped broaden the scope of our inquiry. One of the new materialist authors, Jane Bennett, has pointed to the need for broadening our understanding of the material world to include agency of things, not merely human agency[[43]](#footnote-43). Breaking down the barriers of matter and life enable us to understand “the capacity of things - edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Moving past humanism without abandoning it, the new materialism seeks to problematise the role that various materialities play in human emancipation. Challenging humanism along the same lines that Marx challenged atheism – moving past it without abandoning it – these movements have a radical potential to contribute to a critique of political ecology, to a rethinking of humanity’s place in nature, and to a widening of our relations to objects more widely construed. Bernard Stiegler has articulated one such questioning. His *New Critique of Political Economy* remains a Marxist project, where the role of consumption and the relation of technics to processes of individuation are taken seriously[[45]](#footnote-45). Stiegler’s work also emanates from an atheological perspective. As he had already explained in *Technics and Time*, “there is a metaphysical blockage inscribed in Western psychic and collective individuation from its earliest beginnings: the repression by the religious and lay clergy of the constitutivity of technics, a repression that continues today.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Moving past atheism towards a materialism of technics, and in particular conceiving of material objects as forms of external memory, is Stiegler’s conclusion to the post-atheist project. In other words, what the new materialists and Stiegler propose is to build on Marx’s post-atheistic philosophy to de-divinise our senses of subjectivity and our relation to technics. The possibilities for a Marxist post-atheist philosophy are set.

One does not need to attack humanism, as Althusser did, to incorporate concerns about non-human entities in the quest for human emancipation. Marx had already discussed the question of technological development in *Capital*, and the new materialists contribute to this discussion. Human beings live in social, technical, and natural worlds, and considering them as such does not mean the abandonment of human emancipation and values. McLellan had pointed to the fulfillment of humanism through real material conditions of man[[47]](#footnote-47). It is because humanism seeks material emancipation that it must consider all of the material world, including its technical and natural dimensions. In other words, humanism requires going beyond itself, perhaps in a similar manner than atheism required going beyond itself to include a post-atheism. One can be a committed humanist, while simultaneously going past the human and understand technical systems and environmental concerns. It is a tribute to the humanist project not to leave it stagnant, but rather to continue the dialectic of emancipation to include post-humanist concerns.

1. Stephen LeDrew, ‘The evolution of atheism: Scientific and humanistic approaches,’ *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 25, 2012. I would particularly like to thank Philip Cunliffe for bringing this issue of Marx’s atheism to my attention, and for the stimulating discussions we have had on the topic since. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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3. Louis Althusser, *For Marx.* London: The Penguin Press, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*. London: MacMillan, 1969, p.91. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p.38. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p.120. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James Heartfield, *The ‘Death of the Subject’ Explained.* Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press, 2002, p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. David McLellan, *Marx before Marxism*. London: MacMillan, 1970, p.69. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p.130. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p.162. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. McLellan, *Marx before Marxism,* pp.144-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography*. London : Papermac, 1995, p.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. David McLellan, *Marxism and Religion*. MacMillan Press, Basingstoke, 1987, p.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Luciano Parinetto, ‘The Legend of Marx’s Atheism,’ *Telos*, Vol. 58, pp.7-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Parinetto, The Legend of Marx’s Atheism, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Karl Marx, *Econonomic and Philosophical Manuscripts,* in *Early Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975, p.357. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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23. Parinetto, The Legend of Marx’s Atheism, p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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    *Tome II*, ed. Jean-Pierre Jackson. Paris: Alive, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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32. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, p.44. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Marcus Schulke, ‘The Politics of New Atheism,’ *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 6 (2013), pp.778-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ian Parker, ‘He knew he was right,’ *The New Yorker,* October 16 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Charles Devellennes, ‘A Theory of Atheology. Reason, Critique, and Beyond,’ *Telos,* Vol. 166, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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38. William Connolly, *Why I am not a secularist*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1999, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. William Connolly, ‘The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,’ *Political Theory*, 33 (6), pp.869-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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41. *Ibid*, p.872. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
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