

## Commentary

# Politics in Karl Marx's *On the Jewish Question*

Ersin Yildiz\*

[e.yildiz@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:e.yildiz@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

Marx's criticism of the revolutionary constitutions in his famous article *On the Jewish Question* (1843) has been considered to be an old fashioned criticism of human rights. Marx's criticism is mostly put into a tradition of theorists who criticize the human rights on account of a strong democracy. This perception is not wrong, but still misleading because it overlooks the theoretical depth of the Marxian argumentation. Marx's thesis on human rights contains basic statements about how the political in the modern age is to be grasped. Putting it in concrete terms, in this text we can find an analysis of the relation between state and society that can be of relevance for contemporary discussions.

At first, it is helpful to emphasize the value of *On the Jewish Question* within the context of Marx's early writings. *On the Jewish Question* differs from the *German ideology* (1845-46) in the fact that the argumentation is not based on political-economic concepts. However, this does not reduce the analytic scope of this text. This becomes especially clear if it is compared to Marx's other political texts of that time: *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* is primarily a criticism of the German bourgeoisie that it is not able to realize the political unity of Germany to establish the German state. Much more important is the comparison with the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels formulate their famous thesis: namely the fact that the real – the social – emancipation would lead to the abolition of politics at all. The acceptance of the disappearance of politics – overcoming of political conflicts – led to the fact, that Marx and Engel have been criticized for being apolitical thinkers. However, this thesis cannot be maintained. A closer consideration of Marx's position in *On the Jewish Question* shows another picture.

To recognize the specific political-theoretical meaning of *On the Jewish Question*, it is helpful to look at Carl Schmitt's interesting interpretation of Marx's political and social theory. Schmitt explains in his central texts *The Concept of the Political* (1927-2009) and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923) that Marx has recognized precisely the functional change of the political in the industrial era. With the development of the bourgeois society – understood as a sphere differentiated from the state – the state would have lost its characteristic feature to be the highest, sovereign authority (C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*). In this respect, Marx has recognized the central political constellation in the 19th century: the fact that the substance of the political has shifted itself on the economy. From the Marxian perspective, the actual political conflict takes place in the economic area. Thus, Marx postulates the class conflict as the extreme intensification of the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Therefore, the antagonism has world-historical meaning: the final victory involves the redemption within itself; the emancipation is an emancipation of the whole humanity. Schmitt is critical about this historical finality of Marxian politics that is deeply grounded in the Hegelian view of history. The trust in the historical development expresses itself in the fact that history is seen as a guarantor for human emancipation (*The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 1923). Marx's concept assumes that in the history a rising consciousness exists

---

\* Institute for Social Research – Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universitaet, Frankfurt am Main



which reaches its end in the capitalistic antagonism. In the final stage of class conflict in industrial capitalism the humanity attains, finally, emancipation. The reconciliation caused by the final emancipation should transfer the whole world into friendship relations. This is the real meaning of the famous thesis that in the course of the establishment of the post-capitalistic society the state and politics will be abolished.

Yet Schmitt admires that Marx and his successors have transposed the political into class antagonism. However, he can ascribe to this, differently than Marx, only low historical relevance. According to Schmitt, the class antagonism will be replaced by other conflict constellations in the future. Indeed, from today's perspective the vision of an abolition of all social and political conflicts as a result of a final revolutionary event has lost its credibility. The fact that political conflicts would be removed forever is difficult to accept.

Much more interesting is Schmitt's significant hint that Marx/Marxism has recognized the functional change of the state, or more precisely: the shift of the political to the economic. In *On the Jewish Question* Marx represents the view that the modern constitutional order is characterized by depoliticization. Marx assumes that the modern constitutional order is based on the opposition between the state (political sphere) and society. This means that the social life is divided into two spheres. Marx expresses this process also as a duplication of the existence of the individual in civil affairs and the affairs of the state. On the one hand the individual exists as a political subject and, on the other hand, as an egoistic member of the bourgeois society who pursues his own particular interests.

This is the key insight Marx gained in his analysis of the structure of the individual rights grounded in the American and French constitutions. The formal liberal rights (human rights) are divided into citizen's political rights and the bourgeois rights of the egoistic individual. The whole point of rights is that they protect property owners (MEW 1: 363). The crucial aspect is that political rights are subordinated to bourgeois rights. Marx can study this in the first phases of the constitutional practices. The symbolism of the rights shows that the political sphere functions as means for the purposes of the bourgeois society. The sphere of the state – which should assure for the implementation of the general equality – is the sphere where the individual is sovereign only on an ideal base. However, in the social reality the individual is subjected to the laws of the bourgeois society. In general, the individual is in reality a bourgeois, i.e. one individual escorted by practical interests and at the same time a citizen whose practices are determined by common weal (MEW 1: 355). The internal division of the individual as a member of private sphere and being part of political community can be described as political alienation:

In dem Staat dagegen, wo der Mensch als Gattungswesen gilt, ist er das imaginäre Glied einer eingebildeten Souveränität, ist er seines wirklichen individuellen Lebens beraubt und mit einer unwirklichen Allgemeinheit erfüllt. [...] Für den Menschen als bourgeois [Hier: Mitglied der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft] ist das »Leben im Staate nur Schein oder eine momentane Ausnahme gegen das Wesen und die Regel« (MEW 1: 355). / In the state, on the other hand, where man is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality. [...] For man as a bourgeois [i.e., as a member of civil society], "life in the state" is "only a semblance or a temporary exception to the essential and the rule".

The modern constitution protects the *status quo* of the bourgeois society. The political revolution did not change the social reality of the feudal order, it shrunk back to transfer the idea of the equality on the social reality. The political emancipation is in this respect an incomplete emancipation. While the bourgeois society is marked by the inner conflict and injustice, the principles of the political modern age (freedom, equality) constitute an imaginary



sphere. Therefore, to establish the political sphere means to establish a kingdom of heaven. In this imaginary sphere the individual exists as part of a rational order (355).

The political state, the constitutional state pretends being the bearer of the political. But the dominance of the bourgeois rights over the citizen's rights (MEW 1: 356) makes clear that the state is not the sovereign. Actually, political power is located in the bourgeois society. If the reason was the decisive spiritual principle in the Greek Antiquity, the interest of the individual is the decisive principle in the modern age. That is to say: the political and cultural self-image of modernity is deeply rooted in economic processes.



This interpretation of the individual rights as means of social-economic interests can help us grasp the ongoing transformations of the nature of political acting. Marx's argumentation shows that politics has only limited effect on constitutional states. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Marx shows that historical development in politics (in the political sphere) is not possible. Political commitment does not change the existing political and social structures. From the perspective of the *On the Jewish Question* the present historical situation must be defined as a post-historical political period – and not as post-political. Political practices cause no change in the political structure. This does not mean that no political conflicts would take place any more. It means rather that no historical dimension is inherent in political conflicts and practices. In this respect, from the point of view of *On the Jewish Question* Kojève's and Fukuyama's thesis that the modern constitutional state marks the end of the (political) history can be better grasped.

Indeed, looking at *On the Jewish Question* in this broad perspective makes its continuing importance and relevance clear to us. The theory of political alienation can serve as conceptual framework to analyze the currently observed lack of enthusiasm for politics and democratic procedures in leading constitutional states.

