

# OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT  
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— XVIII —

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## MICHAEL FRANZ

### VOEGELIN'S ANALYSIS OF MARX

Eric Voegelin's written references to modern political theorists are predominately critical and, in many cases, notable for the sharpness of their language. In articles written between 1940 and 1980, and in books such as *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Voegelin develops critiques of figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx that are perhaps the most biting leveled against these writers by any major 20<sup>th</sup> century analyst. Voegelin goes well beyond the relatively common accusations that these thinkers failed to transcend the circumstances or intellectual fashions of their day, or that they fell prey to intellectual weakness or a lack of political prudence, or that they are responsible for unwittingly causing destruction by means of their influence. Voegelin goes beyond suggesting that these men were flawed as thinkers to argue that their very souls were diseased. He contends that their errors—and the damage and deaths that flowed therefrom—were not unwitting but rather intentional. He maintains that their works do not merit careful refutation and that they are not worthy partners in intellectual debate, being fit only for diagnosis as exemplars of dangerous types of spiritual disorder.<sup>1</sup> He does not address them as philosophers, but lambastes them as intellectual sorcerers and swindlers.

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<sup>1</sup> "A true scholar has better things to do than to engage in futile debate with men who are guilty of the *aspernatio rationis*." Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (English edition)(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 8-9. For a more nuanced treatment of the point see "On Debate and Existence," *Intercollegiate Review*, III (1967, pp. 143-52.

These are strong words by any standard, and Voegelin reserves many of his strongest words for Marx. He treats Marx as a “model case” of spiritual disorder, and deigns to write about him only because his influence was especially destructive and because his thought is widely—but mistakenly—thought to be important.<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge Voegelin never writes of Marx as an “equal” or as a thinker whose truth claims deserve serious exploration. In his *Autobiographical Reflections*, Voegelin acknowledges a teenage flirtation with Marxist ideas, but notes that the affair was over—for good—in a matter of months:

...[I]n the vacation between the *Abiturium* and the beginning of my university studies in the fall, I studied the *Kapital* of Marx, induced of course by the current interest in the Russian Revolution. Being a complete innocent in such matters, I was of course convinced by what I read, and I must say that from August, 1919, to about December of that year I was a Marxist. By Christmas the matter had worn off, because in the meanwhile I had attended courses in both economic theory and the history of economic theory and knew what was wrong with Marx. Marxism was never a problem for me after that.<sup>3</sup>

In light of such dismissive comments, one might easily assume that an analysis of Voegelin’s references to Marx would not yield anything of consequence about either thinker. If Voegelin regarded Marx as an unworthy opponent fit only for

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<sup>2</sup> Voegelin identifies Marx as a model case in “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation,” *Southern Review* (n.s., XVII, 1981), p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (Ellis Sandoz, ed.)(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 9-10.

diagnosis and not a true intellectual engagement, one might reasonably assume that his references could not illuminate anything very substantial about Marx. By the same token, if “Marxism was never a problem” for Voegelin from his late teens onward, one might assume that the references cannot lead us to see anything genuinely central to Voegelin’s thought.

However, all of these assumptions would be wrong. Beyond my main task in this study, which is to offer an account of Voegelin’s analysis of Marx, I also hope to demonstrate that Voegelin’s references to Marx add up to more than the stream of invective they may—at first blush—appear to be. Moreover, I believe I can show that they offer highly valuable insights into the thought of Voegelin as well as that of Marx. More particularly, I will argue that Voegelin’s approach to Marx is not as dismissive as one might surmise of the basis of a first reading. It turns out that Voegelin is not universally condemnatory in his comments, but finds merit in certain aspects of Marx’s work and regards him as a thinker of considerable caliber despite his grave spiritual shortcomings. Additionally, an examination of the legitimacy of Voegelin’s unwillingness to analyze the particulars of Marx’s work will show that this unwillingness stems not from a simple evaluation of Marx as a thinker of low rank but, rather, from a complex analysis of Marx’s character and motivations. Viewed in this way, one can see that Voegelin’s comments supplement the critical literature on Marx in several important ways and greatly clarify the suspicion of some scholars that Marx must be understood as a quasi-religious figure—despite his explicit anti-religiousness.

I also hope to show that the references to Marx can bear important fruit for scholars intent upon understanding Voegelin's own thought. The shifts in tone evident in Voegelin's references to Marx over the span of his career will raise some interesting suggestions about his development as a thinker. Yet, these shifts notwithstanding, we shall also see that there are important continuities that mark Voegelin's treatments of Marx, and that their collective inference is to cast serious doubt upon any characterization of Voegelin as a right-wing, anti-communist cold warrior. In fact, we will see that Voegelin was favorably impressed with Marx in several ways that set him at odds with most conservatives and the great majority of his anti-communist contemporaries. Moreover, I hope to show that Voegelin's mature analysis of the spiritual disorder he identifies in Marx carries a surprising implication: Voegelin is no slash-and-burn critic—however striking the forcefulness of his condemnations may seem—but rather a remarkably subtle analyst capable of empathizing with his enemies and acknowledging commonalities that link them to thinkers he holds in the highest regard.

### **I. Voegelin's Early Critique**

To account for shifts in Voegelin's treatments of Marx, I will assess them not as a single block but rather as falling into two "periods": 1) an "early" period marked by an approach associated with the history of ideas, running from Voegelin's earliest writings to about 1950; and 2) a "late" period marked by Voegelin's adoption of the concept of gnosticism and his development of a theory of experience and symbolization out

of his work in the philosophy of consciousness. These “periods” pose a risk of serious misunderstanding, and I must stress that they are used here solely for illustrative or heuristic purposes. Voegelin’s thought—like his writing—is every bit as continuous as it is periodic, and thus we shall see that there are important continuities in the analytical thrust of Voegelin’s references to Marx that bridge the writings in these two “periods.” I have no intention of forwarding anything like a notion of “two Voegelins” to match the “two Marxs” often discussed in Marxist literature, and I make reference to “periods” solely for the purpose of doing justice to some significant differences in approach that mark Voegelin’s writings.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I should like to stress that the identification of *two* periods is likewise dictated solely by illustrative considerations. If I were interested in “periodizing” for its own sake (which I am not), it would be just as easy to distinguish three or four as two. For example, an argument could be made for discussing four “periods” on the grounds that Voegelin’s “early” period contains elements of a conventional history of political ideas but also the stirrings of experiential analysis, just as the “late” period shows fissures that distinguish the treatment of Marx in *The Ecumenic Age* from earlier ones in *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. However, an account structured around four periods would necessarily get bogged down in the details needed to distinguish each period

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<sup>4</sup> The secondary literature on Voegelin holds many discussions of two “breaks” in his research program that took place in the early 1950s and the early 1970s, and I fear that many of these discussions over-estimate the depth of the breaks. For a detailed discussion of this point in connection with the second “break,” see my “Editor’s Introduction” to *The Ecumenic Age*, Volume 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

from the others, which would be contrary to my objective of focusing on the substance of Voegelin's treatments of Marx and their continuity over time. Yet, it would be equally unwise to veer to the other extreme and address Voegelin's work on Marx as a single block, since there are important differences between early and late writings that must be acknowledged and which help to highlight developments in Voegelin's own thought. Thus, having laid down a clear caveat regarding the notion of "periods" in Voegelin's work, I shall proceed in the hope that I can employ it usefully without promoting misunderstandings.

Turning to Voegelin's early writings, we find that references to Marx appear in each of the five books published prior to his emigration to the United States. However, none of these works contain anything resembling a sustained analysis. Most of the remarks on Marx consist of brief asides, and the only discussion of any length (contained in *On the Form of the American Mind*) is actually a summary of an article on Marx written by John R. Commons.<sup>5</sup> By all available indications, Voegelin did not undertake an extended analysis of Marx or his writings until some point in the 1940s, within the broader project of his *History of Political Ideas*. Voegelin ultimately elected not to publish the *History*, choosing instead to mine several of its sections for inclusion in *Order and History* under a revised theoretical approach.<sup>6</sup> Many chapters of the *History*

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<sup>5</sup> Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1928). Re-published in English translation as Volume 1 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Ruth Hein, tr.; Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, eds.) (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 257-62.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of the *History* including its development and ultimate fate, see Thomas A. Hollweck and Ellis Sandoz, "General Introduction to the Series," in Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume I: Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, Volume 19 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*

remained unpublished at the time of Voegelin's death in 1985, though nine sections were published by Voegelin as journal articles during the 1940s and early 1950s. Among these was "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," which appeared in *Review of Politics* in 1950.<sup>7</sup> This important article (which remains superior to the great bulk of secondary literature on Marx) comprised roughly 40% of a chapter from the *History* entitled, "Gnostic Socialism: Marx."<sup>8</sup> The remaining portions of this chapter (namely, an opening section that analyzes the relation between theory and revolutionary practice in Marx and in the subsequent Marxist movement, as well as a very important concluding section) did not appear in print until 1975. The entire chapter appeared in that year (albeit split into two parts) as the final chapters of *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, edited by John H. Hallowell and published with Voegelin's permission.<sup>9</sup>

At the risk of belaboring formalities, it is worth emphasizing that Voegelin's "early" literary output concerning Marx

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(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 1-47. Those portions not transformed for *Order and History* are now available as Volumes 19-26 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*.

<sup>7</sup> *Review of Politics* (XII, 1950), pp. 275-302. The other sections published as articles were, "Siger de Brabant" (1944), "Bakunin's Confession" (1946), "Plato's Egyptian Myth" (1947), "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*" (1949), "Machiavelli's Prince: Background and Formation" (1951), "More's Utopia" (1951), and "The World of Homer" (1953). All are slated for re-publication in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*.

<sup>8</sup> Now available in Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, Volume VIII: *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man* (David Walsh, ed.), Volume 26 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), pp. 303-372.

<sup>9</sup> Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (John H. Hallowell, ed.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975).

consisted of a single article that did not appear until he was nearly 50 years old, and that the full chapter from which the article was culled did not appear until he was nearly 75. This suggests that Marx did not quite head Voegelin's list of theoretical priorities, and this suggestion is lent credence by an aspect of Voegelin's treatment of Marx that immediately strikes the reader of the "Gnostic Socialism: Marx" chapter from the *History*. Specifically, Voegelin comes close to apologizing for even addressing Marx, as in the following passage:

The case of Marx is very similar in its structure to that of Bakunin; in itself it would hardly merit an analysis. If we give extensive attention to it, nevertheless, this is admittedly a concession to the political importance of the Marxist movement. It is also a concession to the present deplorable state of political science and political discussion in general. Dialectical materialism has found wide social acceptance under the more conventional name of "historical materialism," and even more so under the distinctly respectable label of "economic interpretation" of politics and history; and it has found such acceptance not with Marxist only but generally in the environment of up-to-date intellectuals that has also absorbed psychoanalysis. We have reached the situation where any day we can read fiery assurances that nobody has a right to talk about politics who has not understood, and is able to apply, the profound insights stemming from Marx. The philosophical dilettantism, and sometimes the plain silliness, of the theories involved has proved no obstacle to their mass influence. In view of this situation, the present analysis may be excused.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Voegelin, "Gnostic Socialism: Marx," p. 320. Note also a passage from p. 311-312: "In the realm of ideas, Marxist problems are of a rather subordinate, petty nature. Since, however, in pragmatic history Marxism is of immense importance (at least for the time being), it may be excusable if we add a note on the context from which the dictum of Karl Kautsky is taken."

Those familiar with Voegelin's writings will immediately recognize both the dismissive nature and the derisive tone of this passage, which are more or less of a piece with the "late period" references to Marx contained in the more widely-known *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*.<sup>11</sup> However, there are significant differences between these later works and the "Gnostic Socialism" chapter from the *History*.

First, Voegelin is notably more attentive to the particulars of Marx's thought in "Gnostic Socialism," whereas in later works he engages not in conventional textual analysis so much as in diagnostic theorizing on spiritual disease with only the briefest references to Marx's texts. To be sure, this distinction is not a hard-and-fast one, since Voegelin also diagnoses spiritual disease in Marx in "Gnostic Socialism," and since some of Marx's texts are given brief interpretive readings in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is clear that closer attention to Marx's texts is simply demanded by the nature of Voegelin's task in the *History*, since one cannot, after all, write a history of ideas without directly addressing ideas. Nonetheless, there is a real distinction observable here. It can be comprehended most readily through the lens of a passage from a late essay in which Voegelin contrasts two pertinent approaches to criticism of thinkers like Marx:

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<sup>11</sup> Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); *Wissenschaft, Politik, und Gnosis* (Munich: Kösel, 1950), English translation, with a Foreword to the American edition, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968). Now available in Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint* (Manfred Henningsen, ed.), Volume 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> See "Gnostic Socialism," pp. 319, 325-327, and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 262-265; 268-271; 284-286.

If we were to accept the activist's counter-image as the "theory" it claims to be, as a theory to be verified or falsified on the positivistic level, we would play the activist's game, even if our evaluation of the details should turn out to be devastatingly negative....[P]henomena of this class must certainly not be neglected in specialized studies of such counter-images....Nevertheless, they are of symptomatic importance only and must not analytically obscure the intended analytical obscurity of the activist dreamer. Only if we disengage the dream story from the complicated counter-image can we bring the truly theoretical issue of reality and imaginative dreaming into focus.<sup>13</sup>

To state the point simply, in the "late" writings that address Marx, Voegelin does in fact "disengage" his diagnosis from Marx's "complicated counter image," whereas in "Gnostic Socialism" he directly engages it while offering a diagnosis as well. In "Gnostic Socialism," Voegelin offers a direct analysis that is indeed "devastating" in its way, and which seems inevitably to take Marx's work more seriously than the "late" writings.

Second, in "Gnostic Socialism," much more than in later writings, Voegelin seems willing to acknowledge the power of Marx's intellect, his actual accomplishments as a political economist, and the differences in "caliber" that distinguish him from the Marxists who follow in his wake. I will offer specific examples to support these observations below, but for the moment we should consider *why* this difference exists. One possibility is that Voegelin's early approach may have been better suited to such acknowledgements by virtue of its

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<sup>13</sup> Voegelin, *Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme*, p. 239.

structure. When engaging Marx's theses directly rather than treating him in categorical terms as an exemplar of a broader class of gnostic ideologists (as he generally does in "late period" references), it was certainly more natural and appropriate for Voegelin to "give Marx his due" while also taking him to task for the grave shortcomings in his works as well as the spiritual revolt that underlies them. It is also conceivable that matters of timing were involved. "Gnostic Socialism" was written in the 1940s, in the midst and the aftermath of successful collaboration between the Allies and the Soviet Union in World War II, whereas all later references to Marx were written after the onset of the Cold War. On one hand, anyone who knows the facts of Voegelin's career knows that he was not a writer inclined to trim his views to suit contemporary events or public opinion. On the other hand, Marx's "heirs" became a much more frightening menace after the Soviet detonation of an atomic device and the outbreak of the Korean War. Even if Voegelin were not concerned about his (still-to-be-established) reputation, circumstances in the 1950s were such that almost any American political scientist would have hesitated before praising Marx—even in the midst of a blistering critique. It is worth noting in this connection that, when selecting a segment of "Gnostic Socialism" for publication as, "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea" in 1950, Voegelin elected to omit the opening section, which elevates Marx above his successors, as well as the conclusion, which acknowledges Marx's superiority to the other great political economists on the ground that he alone recognized the dangers of capitalism. His editorial decision may have had exactly nothing to do with public opinion, the world situation, or the politics of the academy—but the possibility that these factors played a role must at least be considered.

Third, in the chapter on “Gnostic Socialism,” Voegelin has not yet made the concept of gnosticism the guiding force in his analysis, though forms of the word itself are present at various places in the text. At many points (as in the chapter title), “gnostic” is simply employed as an adjective without explanation or attribution. At several points “gnosis” appears, but the proper noun “Gnosticism” is never used, nor does Voegelin ever explain how he intends to link an explicitly atheistic modern thinker like Marx to ancient religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Although Voegelin speaks of a Marxian and a Hegelian “gnosis,” he never calls either thinker a gnostic (or a Gnostic). Marx is categorized as an “activist mystic”<sup>15</sup> rather than a gnostic, and it is by means of this designation that he is linked to other moderns like Comte and Bakunin as well as to medieval paracletes.<sup>16</sup> The terms gnosis and gnosticism are so

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<sup>14</sup> Thorny problems arise from that fact that Voegelin uses the word Gnosticism both as a proper noun to designate historical persons and sects and also as a general designation for a pattern of consciousness. His oscillation between these usages can be confusing, and thus I will adopt Eugene Webb’s practice of capitalizing the word when used in the former connection but not the latter. This practice is not without problems of its own, as I have written and Webb has acknowledged. However, short of simply breaking with use of the word, I know of no preferable alternative. See Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), pp. 201-202, and my *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), pp. 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 304ff.

<sup>16</sup> “We are well acquainted with this case of spiritual disease. We have discussed it amply on occasion of the late-medieval and Renaissance Paracletes, and we have studied its full modern development in the Comtian Apocalypse of Man. Neither the fact that the logos in the Christian sense had been thinned out even in Hegel to the Idea nor the verbose antireligiousness of Marx should obscure the fact that he was a paraclete in the best medieval, sectarian style, a man in whom the logos had become incarnate and through whose action in the world mankind at large would become the vessel of the logos.” “Gnostic Socialism,” p. 343.

little developed here (by comparison to the treatments of the late 1950s) that they do not truly stand as critical “concepts,” and it seems likely that Voegelin was only beginning to think of gnosticism as a trans-historical type of consciousness when this portion of the *History* was written.<sup>17</sup>

At only one point does Voegelin even pause to explain what he means by gnosis: “The fallacy of gnosis consists in the immanentization of transcendental truth.”<sup>18</sup> Although this formulation is highly compressed, it is perfectly consistent—as far as it goes—with the basic descriptions of gnosticism found in Voegelin’s later writings. Nevertheless, important elements of the typical “late period” analysis are missing from the formulation (and from the approach in “Gnostic Socialism” more generally), namely, the experiential and symbolic analyses that form the foundation of treatments like *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. That is to say, Voegelin is still largely engaged in criticism of the *ideas* of Marx and Engels in “Gnostic Socialism,” rather than analyzing the *symbols* they develop as indicators of the *engendering experiences* “beneath” them. Consequently, we can see that Voegelin regards gnosis as a “fallacy.” Equally tellingly, his critique is filled with judgments that suggest he remains

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<sup>17</sup> As David Walsh expresses the point, “It is noteworthy that, while Voegelin uses the term [gnosticism] with reference to Marx in particular, he nowhere provides any extended account of its meaning or significance. “Gnostic” is here used in an almost casual way and especially with reference to any claim to possess gnosis of the means by which a transfiguration will be effected. It is likely that Voegelin had still not absorbed the full measure of this conception as a theoretical tool. He may have just been in the midst of reading the work of the great early scholars of gnosticism.” Walsh, “Editor’s Introduction” to Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, Volume VIII: *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> “Gnostic Socialism,” p. 332.

focused more on rational than spiritual diagnosis, and thus we see Marx and Engels criticized on grounds such as, “*contradictio in adjecto*” (321), “grandiose ranting with uncritical symbols” (329), “futile nonsense” (327), “intellectual confusion” (331), “pseudological speculation” (335), and “antiphilosophism” (343).

Nevertheless, having noted these significant elements of distinction from Voegelin’s later treatments of Marx, it should be emphasized that “Gnostic Socialism” is every bit as important and impressive in its way as any of the later treatments of Marx. Voegelin’s accomplishments in the 70-page “Gnostic Socialism” are so numerous that, within the confines of the present study, they can only be summarized rather than recounted in detail:

- 1) Voegelin shows the elements of continuity between Marx’s revolutionary expectations and those of other modern radicals (like Bakunin) as well as pre-modern millenarians (like medieval and Puritan sectarians) by reference to the notion of a *metanoia* (or change of heart). He succeeds in showing how Marx could expect such a *metanoia* while nevertheless maintaining his “materialism,” and also offers a brilliant, concise explanation of why Marx’s expectation has proved so much more destructively than those of earlier millenarians.
- 2) Voegelin shows that Marx’s ultimate desideratum is neither a leveling of income nor communal control of the instruments of production, but rather a realm of freedom from natural necessity based upon maintenance of modern industry. He indicates that this is true not only for the young, “philosophical” Marx but also for the Marx of Volume III of *Capital*, and shows how Marx’s shrewd

truce with industrialism elevates him above the “utopian” socialists.

3) Voegelin provides an understanding—still unsurpassed in the secondary literature—of how Marx the revolutionary (prior to 1848) should be regarded in relation to Marx the intellectual (of later decades). This is explained through the concept of a “derailment” from ardent anticipation of the *metanoia* to mere midwifery of the revolution, and the concept is then successfully extended to show a comparable derailment from revolution to reformist quietism (in German revisionists like Kautsky) and endlessly preparatory socialism or Russian imperialism (in Lenin and Stalin).

4) Voegelin furnishes an exemplary account of how the efforts of Marx and Engels to “turn Hegel upside down” (and thereby place dialectical thought back on its feet) actually constitute a disingenuous evasion not only of Hegel but of authentic philosophizing as well. His treatment of the issue of Marx’s intellectual honesty is arguably more nuanced than the more polemical ones he published in later analyses, and his tracing of the disingenuousness to the inner logic of spiritual disease is actually more akin to the treatments of his most mature works.

5) Voegelin illuminates the impulses and convictions that formed Marx’s revolutionary ideas, primary among which are an explicit revolt against God and a correlative insistence on the sovereignty of human consciousness. He shows that both the revolutionary activism of Marx and the materialist premises that render it plausible are born of a prior revolt against God. This stands in direct contradiction to the widespread Marxist view that the sequence is initiated by Marx’s outrage at the living conditions of the

working class, followed by the discovery of the causes of human dependency and alienation, followed in turn by the advocacy of revolution.

6) Voegelin analyzes the fundamental Marxian concepts in “Gnostic Socialism” in a manner that shows him near the breaking point of the “history of ideas” approach. It remains true, as stated above, that Voegelin is still largely engaged in criticism of the *ideas* of Marx and Engels in rather than analyzing the *symbols* they develop as indicators of the *engendering experiences* “beneath” them. However, “Gnostic Socialism” clearly shows Voegelin experiencing dissatisfaction with an analysis conducted on the level of ideas. When he encounters ideas that are—as propositions about the world and its history—senseless, we see him recognizing the need to penetrate to deeper levels of consciousness in order to make sense of them. For example, he writes that “we can find no sense in the sentences of Engels unless we consider them symptoms of a spiritual disease. As a disease, however, they make excellent sense...”<sup>19</sup> Such passages strongly prefigure the “late” Voegelin’s practice of analyzing ideological notions not on the level of ideas or propositions (as in much of the *History*) but as the outcome of a psycho/spiritual process driven by the inner logic of disordered consciousness. Although Voegelin did not attain the highest expressions of this approach until the 1970s, “Gnostic Socialism” is already tending in this direction, and to regard the document as dispensable on the ground that its methodology is outmoded would be a lamentable error.

7) Finally, and very importantly, Voegelin provides a balanced and largely sympathetic reading of Marx’s

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

observations of the degrading and enslaving effects of the institutions and practices of industrial capitalism. To be sure, there are very strict limits to Voegelin's sympathy for Marx's observations. Voegelin is clearly *not* in sympathy with Marx's philosophy of history, in which emancipation from alienated existence is achieved historically by human empowerment over nature and the necessities it imposes upon human activity. Moreover, Voegelin expresses derisive amazement regarding Marx's notion that the material benefits of industrial society can be retained after it has been stripped of division of labor and its other destructive features.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Voegelin recognizes rightly that Marx's deepest objections to industrial capitalism are not about poverty or squalid living conditions, but rather about "the growth of the economic structure of modern society into an 'objective power' to which man must submit by threat of starvation."<sup>21</sup>

Voegelin assembled his own summary of "the principal and characteristic features" of this structure as identified by Marx, and included it in "Gnostic Socialism" without adjacent critical commentary. I shall quote it at length momentarily, but it should be emphasized that this section, which also appears in the excerpt published as "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," has a much different impact in the full chapter from the *History*. The text of "The Formation..." does not include the concluding section of the full chapter, in which Voegelin writes: "Marx has laid his finger on the sore spot of modern industrial society, on the cause of serious trouble (even if the trouble should not take the

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<sup>20</sup> He characterizes the notion as sounding "wild" and "incredible" on p. 357.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

form of a general communist revolution), that is, the growth of economic institutions into a power of such overwhelming influence on the life of every single man that in the face of such power all talk about human freedom becomes futile.”<sup>22</sup> Voegelin continues by noting that: “Although Marx has erred with regard to the extent of the evil, he has not erred with regard to its nature.”<sup>23</sup> By this Voegelin means not that Marx overestimated the extent of the evil, but rather that he *underestimated* it. That is, Marx saw only the workers as the victim of industrial institutions, “but it is a fate,” according to Voegelin, “that is engulfing practically our whole society.” And while Voegelin scoffs at Marx’s revolutionary therapy for the evil, he reiterates the point that, “nevertheless, the diagnosis of the evil is on the whole sound.”

Voegelin’s summary of Marx’s diagnosis runs as follows:

The principal characteristic features that appear on and off in the descriptions of Marx can be brought under the following headings:

- (1) The separation of the worker from his tools. This characteristic is determined by industrial technology. No man can individually own and operate the tools of modern industrial production. The “factory” or, generally, the “place of work” cannot be the “home.”
- (2) Job dependence. This characteristic has the same determining cause. No man can earn a living in an industrial system unless he finds a job in some “enterprise” that assembles the tools for production and markets the product.
- (3) Division of labor. No man can produce any whole product. The process of production must be

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

centrally planned, and the single worker is confined to the phase in the process assigned to him. Marx was very much aware of the supreme insult to human dignity that lies in the fact that at the end of his life, when a man summarizes what he has accomplished, he may have to say: all my life I have spent in cooperating in the production of a certain type of Grand Rapids furniture and thereby degraded humanity in myself and others.

(4) Specialization. This characteristic is intimately connected with the preceding one. Even if the total product is not an insult to human dignity, the productivity of man has no appreciable range for unfolding if his work is confined to a small sector of production on which as a whole he has no influence.

(5) Economic interdependence. No man can live a whole life if his existence is permanently threatened, not by natural catastrophes as in the case of the peasant, but by social actions beyond his control—be they new inventions, or the closing of a market through tariff, or miscalculation of management, or change in customers' taste, or a general economic crisis.<sup>24</sup>

This section, when read in the light of the “Conclusion” that did not appear with the 1950 article on “The Formation...,” is sharply at odds with any characterization of Voegelin as a typical right-wing conservative. We shall revisit this point below, but for the moment it will suffice to conclude that Voegelin's early treatment of Marx is characterized by criticism that is biting but also careful, balanced, fair-minded and non-doctrinaire.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

## II. Voegelin's Late Critique: Marx as Gnostic Ideologue

Voegelin's references to Marx in from the early 1950s onward are distinguished from those that precede them by the development of gnosticism and ideology as general categories of analysis. It will not be possible here to offer more than adumbrations of Voegelin's concepts of gnosticism and ideology, but such adumbrations are crucial for understanding Voegelin's unconventional approach to Marx's writings in works such as *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. In the most general sense, Voegelin used the concept of gnosticism to signify the belief that it is possible for human beings to escape or eliminate the evils and hardships that afflict our existence by means of the power conferred by a special knowledge (*gnosis* in ancient Greek). Although Gnosticism was a "heretical" faith of ancient sects, Voegelin found a variety of beliefs in modernity that he regarded as comparable in structure. The main difference between the ancient and modern forms of gnosticism was that the ancient Gnostics sought to utilize their special knowledge to escape from the world (indeed, from an irredeemably evil cosmos), whereas modern gnostics seek to perfect a radically flawed world by means of special knowledge. Both forms express a radical dissatisfaction with the human condition and an intense desire for enhanced certainty and power.

The most dramatic manifestations of gnosticism in modern times have been ideologies, systems of thought that spawned either intellectual movements such as progressivism, Hegelianism, psychologism, behavioralism and positivism or—even more destructive—political movements such as

fascism and Marxism. Although Voegelin readily acknowledged the vast differences that set the various ideologies off from one another at the doctrinal surface, he maintained that they share a deeper commonality: each identifies some aspect of the worldly realm as the key to existence (e.g., historical progress, productive relations, racial composition, scientific rationality). By contrast to the great philosophies and theologies of order, which located the ground of being outside the worldly realm, ideologies (mis)place the ground within the mundane realm so that human beings can decipher and manipulate it, thereby achieving the hubristic objectives of absolute power and perfect certainty.

Voegelin asserted that ideological systems cannot, when they become active in the world as intellectual or political movements, actually achieve their ends. It will always remain a fact that human beings have created neither themselves nor their world, and are therefore incapable of re-creating the conditions of existence at will, regardless of the transfigurative fantasies harbored by ideologists. However, while ideologists cannot succeed in reworking the fundamental structures of worldly existence, they may very well succeed in destroying the political and spiritual order of a society. Once they find that their particular form of *gnosis* is powerless against the intransigent structure of worldly reality, they are likely to resort to some form of force to effect their desired transformation, whether that force is outright violence or more subtle forms of propaganda, ostracism or intellectual dogmatism. Voegelin argued that ideological gnostics who resorted to violence are responsible for millions of deaths in ideological wars and revolutions during the past 200 years, as well as for profound damage to intellectual and spiritual traditions across the globe.

Voegelin consistently addressed Marx's thought, activity and influence within this framework of understanding in the 1950s and early 1960s, always regarding him as a gnostic and an ideologue rather than an authentic philosopher. As we saw in the foregoing analysis of "Gnostic Socialism," even the "early" treatments show Voegelin's regarding Marx as an "activist mystic" whose thought and activity bear marks common to gnostics of every era and variety:

In the fundamental structure of his activist mysticism, Marx conforms to the well-known pattern. He was aware of the crisis of his age and his awareness was intense to the degree of an acute consciousness of epoch. He experienced the age as "a parting asunder of the times," the old world of corruption and iniquity to be followed by a new world of freedom....Marx assumes a *metanoia*, a change of heart, as the decisive event that will inaugurate the new epoch.<sup>25</sup>

In this expectation of a *metanoia* and a resulting transformation of the conditions of worldly existence, Marx exhibits a strong resemblance to other modern, worldly eschatologists like Helvetius, Comte, and Bakunin. The notion that a change of heart will pave the way to redemption from the evils and travails of worldly existence is also strongly reminiscent of the millenarianism and apocalypticism that, while far from unknown in the modern era, were relatively common in earlier periods.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Gnostic Socialism," pp. 304-305.

<sup>26</sup> See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (revised and expanded edition)(New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

There are, to be sure, important differences that make Marx unique in terms of *how* he expects the *metanoia* to come about and what particular transformations he expects it to produce. As a materialist, Marx does not rely principally upon intellectual persuasion (like the *philosophers*) or preaching (like medieval paracletes) to produce the *metanoia*. Rather, he expects that the structural dynamics of capitalism will produce an urban working class that then, through direct, material encounters with the harsh realities of bourgeois society, will be stamped with a revolutionary consciousness. Ultimately, however, Marx holds that the *metanoia* will come about only by means of active engagement in revolution itself. In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes that:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>27</sup> [italics in original]

Although Voegelin acknowledges the doctrinal peculiarities that distinguish Marx's expectations from those of others who anticipate a *metanoia*, he stresses the continuity of Marx's eschatological longings with those of earlier figures. This applies both to the form of his longings and to their fate in

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<sup>27</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 60.

historical actuality. “The fundamental structure is conventional and the tragedy of the idea is foreknown: if the predicted revolution should ever take place, the heart of man will not change and the new world will be exactly as pre-historical and iniquitous as the old world.”<sup>28</sup> For Voegelin, the truly important difference between Marx and his millennialist predecessors has less to do with Marx’s materialism than with his tragically novel understanding of the sequence of *metanoia* and revolution:

Marx did not, like earlier sectarians, first create a People of God with changed hearts and then lead the People into a revolution; he wanted the revolution to happen first and then let the People of God spring from the experience of the revolution. While for Marx personally the overthrow of the bourgeoisie was senseless unless the revolution produced the change of heart, the historical proof that the overthrow was not the proper method for producing such a change would only come after the revolution had occurred. The pneumopathological nonsense of the idea could not break on the rock of reality before the damage had been done. In the meanwhile, a tremendous amount of disturbance and destruction could be engineered, animated by the pathos of eschatological heroism and inspired by the vision of a terrestrial paradise.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Gnostic Socialism,” p. 305. This quotation is from an “early” writing by Voegelin (utilized here for its clarity and connection to the brilliant “People of God” quotation below), but it is perfectly continuous with later writings. For example, in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Voegelin argues: “The structure of the order of being will not change because one finds it defective and runs away from it. The attempt at world destruction will not destroy the world, but will only increase the disorder in society.” In *Modernity Without Restraint*, p. 256.

<sup>29</sup> “Gnostic Socialism,” pp. 305-306.

For Voegelin, Marx's thought and activity are modern only in form. In content, they fit a perennial pattern of radical dissatisfaction with the conditions of human life. And in practice, they are ruinous because they demand a violent pursuit of an unattainable objective.

There is, of course, more to Marx's work than the prophesy of communism and the call to arms. As we saw in the preceding section on Voegelin's early critique, he clearly recognized Marx's important—indeed, historic—contributions as a political economist in diagnosing the destructive features of industrial capitalism. Yet Voegelin evidenced little interest, at least in published form, in this aspect of Marx's work. Most of the material in "Gnostic Socialism" casting Marx in a favorable light was not included in "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," appearing in print only in 1975 (and even then only because of the prodding of John Hallowell, who edited "Gnostic Socialism" for inclusion in *From Enlightenment to Revolution*<sup>30</sup>). From 1950 onward, Voegelin never deigned to address Marx's writings for more than a page or two at a time, much less engage in point-by-point refutations of Marx's doctrines. He directly and repeatedly characterized most of these doctrines as non-theoretical nonsense, and was content to leave the work of refutation to others (and to the course of worldly events). What *did* interest Voegelin about Marx was the question of why a man of formidable theoretical gifts should have devoted his life to the tireless creation and promotion of such nonsense. Not surprisingly, Marx's sympathizers object strenuously to this sort of critique (indeed, they might well deny that it

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<sup>30</sup> See Hallowell's "Editor's Preface" in *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, p. ix.

constitutes a critique at all), since it assumes rather than demonstrates the existence of vitiating errors in Marx's work, and also since it smacks of the sort of "back-stair" psychologizing that Voegelin himself bemoans in other contexts. It is necessary to probe more deeply into Voegelin's analysis of Marx's spiritual motivations if we are to address the issue of whether this type of criticism should be deemed theoretically unfair.

For Voegelin, Marx's thought and activity are ultimately rooted in a revolt against the basic conditions of human existence, and an adequate understanding of Voegelin's critique depends upon an understanding of his characterization of the human situation. In describing the human condition, Voegelin utilizes Plato's symbol of the *metaxy* to suggest that humans exist in an "in-between" state of suspension between the merely human and the divine. Humans are tied to the immanent, mundane realm by virtue of their physical existence and the pragmatic necessities that flow therefrom, yet they also participate in the divine by virtue of more-or-less sustained and self-conscious spiritual activity of two fundamental types: searching for understanding of the divine in its dimension as the creative source of the cosmos, and/or responsiveness to the active and sustaining presence of the divine as it is experienced within reality but beyond the cosmos. To say that humans exist in the *metaxy* is to say that they are more than animals but less than gods. By dint of participation in the divine, in the forms of meditative contemplation, or prayerful beseeching, or responsive obedience, or worshipful love, they are more than animals; yet they are not themselves divine, as they experience the divine as a reality other than themselves, either in its dimension as

the Beginning of the cosmos or in its dimension as a Beyond of the cosmos toward which they are drawn.

Thus Voegelin speaks of humans as existing in a tension toward the divine. His usage of “tension” in this formulation suggests two distinct features of the human condition that are important for understanding his critique of Marx. First, his usage of “tension” suggests that humans are naturally drawn or “pulled” toward the divine, whether in simple curiosity about their own origins, or a more intense longing for understanding of the ground of being, or a more specific love of the source of goodness in reality, or in some still more dramatic fashion as in a revelatory event. Second, his use of tension conveys the notion that the human condition is an uneasy one. If humans are more than animals but less than gods, they can understand themselves only by reference to beings which they are not, which is an important source of unease. Moreover, since they are drawn in these various modes of participation toward a divine reality that they can experience but not know in any certain way,<sup>31</sup> the experienced reality to which humans owe their existence and toward which humans are drawn in the present will remain—forever—a Mystery. For Voegelin, the ineluctable mysteriousness of the divine further aggravates the fundamental human unease of which we are speaking because it spreads mysteriousness over humanity as well. He held that the human condition can only

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<sup>31</sup> In Voegelin’s view, philosophical activity does not yield a set of facts but set of illuminating experiences of participation in a process of being which reveals itself as mysterious, as a great Question. Thus Voegelin writes, “The Questions as a structure in experience is part of, and pertains to the In-Between stratum of reality, the Metaxy. There is no answer to the Question other than the Mystery as it becomes luminous in the acts of questioning.” Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (vol. IV of *Order and History*)(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 330.

be understood within the comprehensive matrix of “God and man, world and society,”<sup>32</sup> and that no single element in this matrix can be fully understood unless all of its elements are fully understood. The nature of the divine and the human must always remain mysterious at their core, and if Aristotle was correct when stating in the first line of the *Metaphysics* that all human beings by nature desire to know, then all human beings are bound to experience frustration of a fundamental desire.<sup>33</sup>

A defender of Marx might well step in at this point and object that this account of the human condition can have no critical significance, since Marx felt no such tension and would have no truck with meditative contemplation, prayerful beseeching, responsive obedience, or worshipful love—all of which he regarded as impoverished and impoverishing varieties of superstition. This is a serious and potentially legitimate objection. Voegelin’s argument is not that Marx was obtuse to the divine, but rather that he sensed the necessity of a divine realm as a basis for existent reality and rebelled against it. Similarly, Voegelin’s argument is not that Marx was somehow immune to the tension of existence, but rather that he experienced it strongly and sought means to escape from its demands. Consequently, if Voegelin’s method of criticism is to be vindicated, it must be shown that there are specific experiences of the tension of existence of which Marx has partaken. Moreover, it must be possible to show that Marx’s

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<sup>32</sup> Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (vol. I of *Order and History*)(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Voegelin did, in fact, believe that Aristotle was correct in this famous statement. See “Reason: The Classic Experience,” *Southern Review* X (Spring, 1974), reprinted in the English version of *Anamnesis*, pp. 91-94.

thought and activity are intelligible as reactions or revolts against the implications of these experiences.

What are the key experiences in question? In my reading of Voegelin, four experiences of the human condition have a truly fundamental status. The first three can be stated straightforwardly: these are experiences of the human condition as one of uncertainty, contingency and incompleteness. The fourth requires only a slightly more extensive description: it is the experience of mortality in a world in which all things pass away, but beyond which there is a perceived lastingness, a mysterious eternity beyond the world of things.

The characterization of these experiences as “fundamental” is intended to suggest several aspects of Voegelin's account. First, they are fundamental in the sense that they are experiences of the foundations of our existence, and therewith of our relation to the ground of being. Second, they are fundamental in the sense that they are not restricted to particular times or places, but are fundamental for humanity at all times and places. In connection with humanity's contingency, Voegelin writes:

Man is not a self-created, autonomous being carrying the origin and meaning of his existence within himself. He is not a divine *causa sui*; from the experience of his life in precarious existence within the limits of birth and death there rather arises the wondering question about the ultimate ground, the *aitia* or *proto arche*, of all reality and specifically his own... [T]his questioning is inherent in man's experience of himself at all times.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *Anamnesis*, pp. 92-93.

Third, these experiences are fundamental in the sense that all persons—including those well below Marx’s level of intelligence and spiritual sensitivity—partake of them. I hasten to add the caveat that the experiences of different individuals will, nevertheless, be marked by differing degrees of frequency, intensity, clarity, and transformative impact. But with that said, it is important to emphasize that one need be only a normally self-conscious person and not a philosophical genius to partake of the experiences:

We find ourselves referred back to nothing more formidable than the experiences of finiteness and creatureliness in our existence, of being creatures of a day as the poets call man, of being born and bound to die, of dissatisfaction with a state experienced as imperfect, of apprehension of a perfection that is not of this world but is the privilege of the gods, of possible fulfillment in a state beyond this world, the Platonic *epekeina* [Beyond], and so forth.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the fundamental experiences which are common to the well-ordered and the disordered soul are also common to all of humanity, though it remains true that the great majority of individuals will not be motivated to absorb themselves in contemplating or symbolizing the experiences. Rather, for the majority of humans who lack the spiritual sensitivity and reflectiveness that characterizes one such as Plato, the experiences will be relatively fleeting, usually occasioned by personal turbulence or tragedy (perhaps the death of a beloved or the apprehension of one's own death) and followed by an absorption not in the experience but in the more comfortable routines of everyday life that are disturbed by the experience.

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<sup>35</sup> “On Debate and Existence,” p. 146.

Importantly, what sets figures like Plato, Aquinas, Hegel or Marx off from the majority of humanity is precisely that which unites them with one another as a human type. In cases such as theirs, the fundamental experiences are not banished to the periphery of life and consciousness but, rather, become the motivating center of life and consciousness. We shall return to this point momentarily.

To be sure, one such as Marx is motivated toward a very different sort of project than is Plato. Yet there are important continuities that run through the experiences that result in such different reactions, and it will be helpful to give them specific consideration by way of example. Plato seeks to attune himself to the divine measure and to symbolize his experiences of participation in the divine in writings that will assist those driven by a parallel desire. Marx, by contrast, seeks to make humanity the measure, and to symbolize his revolutionary consciousness in writings that will help humanity achieve independence by means of communist productive relations, which will banish scarcity and the attendant need for religious opiates. Yet Marx's quest for human emancipation is motivated just as surely as Plato's search for attunement by the basic experiences of uncertainty, contingency and incompleteness. As the young Marx writes (in a passage to which Voegelin accorded great significance):

A being counts itself as independent when it stands on its feet and it stands on its own feet as long as it owes its existence to itself. A man who lives by the grace of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by the grace of another when I owe him not only the maintenance of my life but when he has also created my life, when he is the source of my life. And my life necessarily has such a ground

outside itself if it is not my own creation. The idea of creation is thus one that it is very difficult to drive out of the minds of people. They find it impossible to conceive of nature and man existing through themselves since it contradicts all the evidences of practical life.<sup>36</sup>

This passage suggests that, whatever else one may think of Marx, he was not a spiritually obtuse man. He had partaken of the experiences underlying Aristotle's meditations on the *proto arche*. What sets him off from an Aristotle is not a different foundation in experience, but a different pattern of *response* to an essentially equivalent experience.

Pausing to draw together the strands of what has been argued to this point, we may ask the following question: what really differentiates persons such as Plato and Marx, whom Voegelin characterizes as having, respectively, open and closed souls? As we have seen, the closed soul is not closed off from the fundamental experiences but, rather, closed in *reaction* to the experiences. What Voegelin calls existential or ideological closure is not a condition with which one is born, or an insidious process that befalls a passive or unwitting victim. It is an active “existence-in-revolt” against a condition experienced as intolerably flawed and incomplete. Voegelin refers to the ideological impulse with terms such as “revolt,”

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<sup>36</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977, p. 94. For Voegelin's analysis of this passage and Marx's ensuing remarks, see Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 262-265; 268-271, and “Gnostic Socialism,” pp. 358-359. For a critical view of Voegelin's treatment of this passage, see Fred Dallmayr, “Voegelin's Search for Order,” in *Margins of Political Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 73-94), pp. 92-94.

“rebellion,” and “closure” in order to stress this reactive nature.

Voegelin illustrates this point brilliantly in his handling of Marx’s case. Thinking back to the passage in which Marx tacitly acknowledges that his own existence must have a ground beyond itself and the world, one might ask why this observation did not prompt Marx to inquire into the nature of that ground, or to explore the extent to which he could know or participate in its order. But the answer is already before us. Marx’s philosophical training (which was very extensive regardless of the fact that it did not take root in his soul) informs him in advance that the very presence of such a ground will place him—and the rest of humanity—in a condition of contingency. Moreover, since the ground of being is not of the physical world but beyond it, such a ground cannot be fully known, and thus its very presence will leave Marx and the rest of humanity in a condition of permanent uncertainty. Additionally, if humanity and the world did not originate from out of themselves, but require a ground outside of their existence if they are to come into being, then the apprehension of a ground of being entails awareness that the human condition is one of permanent incompleteness. Finally, if humanity and the world came into being rather than existing eternally out of themselves, they must have been preceded by being and its ground; therefore, since it is readily apparent that everything in physical existence passes out of existence, the comparison of transitory physical things to eternal being shows that the condition of humanity is one of mortality.

Since these conclusions are the upshot of Marx’s fundamental experiences of the human condition within reality, and since Marx finds this condition intolerably flawed and incomplete,

he must revolt against the experiences and, to the greatest degree possible, close himself off from them and their implications. This is exactly what he tries to do. Although he is privy to the experience of contingency, he rebelliously asserts that “for socialist man what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour...”<sup>37</sup> However implausible the notion of humanity having created itself may be, this is Marx’s only option if he insists on declaring human independence from metaphysical contingency. Of course, the notion will seem less implausible (or the implausibility may be less bothersome) if Marx can surround himself with followers who share his militant immanentism. But in 1844 there are as yet no followers, no “socialist men,” since Marx is just beginning his advocacy of scientific socialism. This helps to explain the anxious tone of this section of the “Paris Manuscripts,” particularly the ominous sentence in which Marx reflects that “the idea of creation is one that it is very difficult to drive out of the minds of people.” Why should Marx care whether the idea of creation occurs to people? Is it because he knows that his theory, in which humanity creates itself through productive activity, begs rather than answers Aristotle’s question of the *arche*? If he believed that his theory could pass scrutiny when measured against “all the evidences of practical life,” would he have any reason to wish that the idea of creation might be driven from people’s minds? And by what means might the driving out be accomplished? Not by education in the principles of scientific socialism, it would seem, since Marx’s radically immanentist theory is structurally such that it can only sidestep and not answer the question. And thus Marx’s

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in McLellan, p. 95.

final response to an imaginary critic (who pursues Aristotle’s argument for a *proto arche*) is, “Give up your abstraction and you will give up your question....[D]o not think, do not ask me questions.”<sup>38</sup>

Marx’s (almost confessional) description of his encounter with the experience of contingency terminates at this point in what Voegelin terms the “prohibition of questions.”<sup>39</sup> From this point, in 1844, Marx begins to build his system in earnest. Key features of the system may be understood against the psychological backdrop of a fear of questions regarding the fundamental experiences of the human condition. The basic architecture of the ideology as an interconnected and exhaustively comprehensive system may be seen as an attempt to obliterate uncertainty. By enclosing reality within a system, the mysteries of the Beginning and the Beyond of our existence are occluded, and the need for a ground of being outside the realm of the sensible is obviated. The fiction that the system consists of scientific, empirically grounded, demonstrable propositions adds an additional layer of insulation against the uncertainty of our position within reality. Casting the advent of communism as an inevitable outcome of a predictable series of historical events has the effect of assuaging fears regarding our destiny, while also spreading a halo of ultimate significance over actions—however humble—directed toward the actualization of this *telos*. By declaring certain knowledge of the meaning *of* history, one may turn one’s back on the discomfiting experiences of either finding

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> The more general disorder of which this prohibition is a symptom was called “logophobia” or “idophobia,” meaning the fear of critical concepts, in Voegelin’s early critique. See “Gnostic Socialism,” pp. 324-327.

no distinct line of meaning *in* history or, alternatively, of finding all-too-many lines that do not run in parallel or converge upon a single, intelligible outcome. Asserting that the meaning of history consists in the achievement of a certain arrangement of productive relations has the effect of making man the measure of reality—rather than a mere creature among other dependent, finite entities. Finally, though Marx cannot promise immortality to his followers, he can buffer the experience of perceived mortality in several ways. By abolishing speculation on eternity or the existence of immortal being, he can prevent his flock from longing for an attribute possessed by any other species or type of being. By declaring communism the final stage of human history, he can offer humans a goal that will be immortal even if they, as individuals, will not. And finally, by declaring communism a never-ending condition, he can offer the promise that history will not develop higher stages or types of life that could make one's efforts in building communist society seem primitive or merely preliminary.

#### **IV. Assessing Voegelin's Assessment**

In my view, an analysis of this type, based upon Voegelin's method of experiential diagnosis, can indeed offer persuasive indications that Marx was engaged in an active revolt against the conditions of human existence. We do well to acknowledge, however, that persuasive indications do not constitute a demonstration. One can hardly expect that a defender of Marx will fold up his or her tent at this point, since the experiential analysis put forth by Voegelin in works such

as *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* and even the more extensive treatment in “Gnostic Socialism” do not address Marx’s main doctrines in detail. Although it seems necessary to recognize this as a *limitation* of Voegelin’s critique, it is not clear that it is also a *weakness*. Voegelin is hardly apologetic about dispensing with the business of point-by-point refutation:

If we were to accept the activist’s counter-image as the “theory” it claims to be, as a theory to be verified or falsified on the positivistic level, we would play the activist’s game, even if our evaluation of the details should turn out to be devastatingly negative....[P]henomena of this class must certainly not be neglected in specialized studies of such counter-images....Nevertheless, they are of symptomatic importance only and must not analytically obscure the intended analytical obscurity of the activist dreamer. Only if we disengage the dream story from the complicated counter-image can we bring the truly theoretical issue of reality and imaginative dreaming into focus.<sup>40</sup>

The key point here for our purposes is that one need not—and indeed should not—conduct theoretical criticism at the level of detailed refutation in instances where the errors to be unmasked are *deliberate*. And that, in Voegelin’s view, was precisely the case with well-trained, highly intelligent gnostic

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<sup>40</sup> Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” p. 239. Although “doctrinally dismissive” passages such as this are much more common in Voegelin’s “late” works, they are not absent from early ones. For example, in a footnote in “Gnostic Socialism” (p. 343), Voegelin observes that, “Incidentally, this should make it clear why “discussion” with a Marxist or Positivist is senseless. One cannot enter into rational discussion with a “case” whose disease consists in the denial of the order of the logos.”

ideologues such as Marx,<sup>41</sup> who quite simply must have known better. For example, Marx must have known that he had not, in fact, refuted Hegel or “stood him on his feet” but, rather, simply posited contrary assertions placing matter prior to spirit. Similarly, with Marx’s background in world history he must have known that a great many wars and upheavals cannot be understood in terms of class conflict. However, as an ideologue who asserts baldly that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it,<sup>42</sup> Marx has no compunction about falsifying the details of his arguments to give them greater clarity and punch and make them easier for the rank-and-file of his movement to digest. Although there is no way for Voegelin to *demonstrate* that this is what Marx was doing (at least not to the satisfaction of one who sympathizes with Marx), it nevertheless seems apparent that *if* Voegelin is correct in identifying Marx as a swindler, then he is also correct in asserting that detailed refutations are beside the point in an important sense. They are beside the point theoretically, since in a case like this it would be much more superficial to show *that* Marx was wrong than *why he chose* to be wrong.

Detailed refutations are also somewhat beside the point in practical terms. Scholars in various fields had published scores of critiques of Marx’s doctrines by the mid-twentieth century, but these had little effect in impairing the popular attractiveness of the doctrines. We may assume that much of

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<sup>41</sup> See *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 262-265; “The Eclipse of Reality,” pp. 188-89; “Remembrance of Things Past,” in *Anamnesis*, pp. 3-9; “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” pp. 235-39.

<sup>42</sup> See Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings, pp. 156-58.

the appeal of Marx's works for intellectuals and the rank-and-file of various movements stemmed less from the precision and robustness of the theory than from the simplicity and clarity with which Marx offers independence, certainly, perfection, and a sort of ersatz immortality. He offers a clear understanding of where we have come from, how we have developed, where we are headed, how we will get there, who stands in our way, and how we can dispose of them. This is an attractive package, and its attractiveness does not depend on irrefutability. The theory need only be plausible. And this, Voegelin grants quite readily, Marx achieved.<sup>43</sup>

When Voegelin's decision not to engage Marx's doctrines directly is considered in light of these points, we can see that it is based on a thoroughly-articulated theoretical stance rather than mere dismissiveness.<sup>44</sup> Although his approach will not be to everyone's taste, the notion that Voegelin simply left no critique of Marx—because he did not address the nuts and bolts of Marx's doctrines—is untenable. We should grant, of course, that Voegelin's critique does not supplant the need for other critical approaches.<sup>45</sup> Works such as Leszek Kolakowski's masterful, three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism* can be invaluable for their careful, detailed assessments. But just as Kolakowski's books do much to supplement Voegelin's approach, Voegelin's writings lend

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<sup>43</sup> See "Gnostic Socialism," 369-370.

<sup>44</sup> By "thoroughly-articulated" I do not mean to suggest that Voegelin's references to Marx are voluminous. They are not. However, his analyses on the psycho-spiritual dynamics of gnosticism and pneumapathology are indeed voluminous—if somewhat scattered across his writings. For a critical account of these analyses, see my *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Ideology*.

<sup>45</sup> See "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," p. 239.

substance and detail at a crucial point where Kolakowski must settle for being merely suggestive. In the Epilogue to his 1,524-page study, Kolakowski argues that:

The influence that Marxism has achieved, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements. Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just around the corner. Almost all the prophecies of Marx and his followers have already proved to be false, but this does not disturb the spiritual certainty of the faithful, any more than it did in the case of chiliastic sects; for it is a certainty not based on any empirical premises or supposed “historical laws”, but simply on the psychological need for certainty. In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a religious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution* (3 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), vol. 3, pp. 525-26. It should be noted as an aside that Voegelin’s writings on ideology and spiritual disorder are an important supplement not only to Kolakowski’s work but also to the entire line of interpretation of ideology as quasi-religious phenomenon. For examples of this interpretation see, e.g., Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implication of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York, Norton, 1962); Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Time, Inc., 1963), and Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963). Voegelin’s approach is uniquely able to permit a precise and sophisticated explanation of the similarities and differences existing between ideologies and religions. He shows that a differentiated religious tradition does not provide a “solution” for the tensions imposed by the human condition but, rather, a heightened sensitivity to tension that may lead either to a balanced consciousness or to a millenarian escapism, closure within doctrine, and violent intolerance of

Although I share Kolakowski's view, I would also assert that none of the foregoing sections in *Main Currents* provide a theoretical grounding for the psycho-spiritual core of this argument, which is, as it stands, little more than an assertion. It seems that, for all the differences in approach that divide the two writers, their critiques are related to one another symbiotically.

If we have succeeded in overcoming the two objections that Voegelin's spiritual critique of Marx skirts the doctrinal details or is ungrounded in Marx's own experiences, there is yet another objection to be considered: is the critique impermissibly personal or intolerant? The suggestion that figures such as Marx were not only wrong but also diseased and evil has drawn fire from various quarters,<sup>47</sup> including some of Voegelin's most capable admirers. Dante Germino has written:

One problem is to distinguish between "error and the person who errs," as John XXIII expressed it. Voegelin frequently seems to suggest that not only the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and the rest of the "Gnostics" are erroneous, but that the thinkers are spiritually diseased as persons. I must confess that I still find it difficult to accept this latter judgment and wonder if it is necessary to condemn these thinkers as whole persons in

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competing doctrines. Thus, he was able to provide a wealth of original insights into the similarity of ideological and religious fanaticism while simultaneously maintaining a clear distinction between an authentically religious consciousness and a fanaticism of either variety.

<sup>47</sup> Cf., e.g., Robert A. Dahl, "The Science of Politics: New and Old," *World Politics*, VII (1955), pp. 479-89; Arthur W. H. Adkins, review of Voegelin's *Plato and Aristotle* and *The World of the Polis*, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXXI (1961), pp. 192-93.

the way, again, that Voegelin *appears* to argue.<sup>48</sup> [Emphasis in original]

Charitable as these remarks are, it may be that Germino's tolerance is misplaced.<sup>49</sup> I would suggest that Marx deserves precisely the diagnosis that he received. To the degree that an ideological systematizer such as Marx has knowingly falsified reality for purposes of enlisting others in a ruinous project of world transformation, I believe it *was* necessary for Voegelin to invoke the concept of spiritual disease, and that no gentler judgment would fit the case. Additionally, the epistemological structure of Voegelin's critique dictates this judgment and no lesser one. A major premise of Voegelin's late work (which is characterized by the shift after 1950 from intellectual history to the theory of consciousness) is that ideas are epiphenomenal manifestations of the experiences that set the pattern of an

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<sup>48</sup> Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework for Political Evaluation in His Recently Published Work," *American Political Science Review*, LXXII (1978), 118, n. 29.

<sup>49</sup> I must confess that I too shrink from some of Voegelin's judgments, especially those that seem to consist of blanket condemnations of all partisans of this or that ideology. For example, see *Israel and Revelation*, xii; *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 4-5; *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, p. 69; *Anamnesis*, pp. 3-7, 145-46; "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," p. 240. Many of the ideological rank-and-file do not undergo the process of experience-and-revolt from which an ideology itself originates, and though they may become believers or functionaries for a whole welter of reasons ranging from simple stupidity to boredom to personal ambition, they have not fallen prey to the particular disorder one finds in the creators of ideological systems. When there is evidence to indicate that a particular individual has *knowingly* falsified reality and engaged in a *self-conscious* revolt against the conditions of existence, I believe a diagnosis of spiritual disease is warranted. But when this standard cannot be met, Germino is correct and we should restrict our criticism to a finding of, say, excessive credulousness, opportunism, or some other charge that fits tightly with the problem in question.

individual soul and its activity. With regard to Hegel and Marx, the two thinkers mentioned by Germino, the salient experiences are alienation from the conditions of human existence, will to power (to the extent of attempted murders of God), and a hubristic desire to make history culminate in their own efforts. Their ideas are not simply erroneous. On the contrary: they are ingeniously orchestrated according to the inner logic of a spiritual rebellion that seeks popular acceptance. If Voegelin was correct in arguing that both were well aware of what they were doing, then it is difficult to see why criticism should be restricted to the level of ideas.<sup>50</sup>

Germino's reference to Voegelin's condemnations of thinkers as "whole persons" can serve as a point of departure for a final issue: Does Voegelin's critique leave us no room to recognize merit in Marx? Does a finding of spiritual disease constitute a condemnation of Marx as a "whole person?" I believe both questions should be answered negatively. Although I cannot speak definitively on what Germino means when speaking of condemnations of "whole persons," I suspect that he is implying that, once one has declared the soul of a person to be diseased, one has condemned the person utterly and left uncondemned nothing of significance. To provide an example that risks seeming flippant, it would hardly take the edge off a diagnosis of spiritual disease in Marx to observe that he nevertheless had an impressive beard. If the soul is judged to

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<sup>50</sup> For Voegelin's argument that the Hegelian and Marxian deformations of reality were intentional, see *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 23-28, 34-46; "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," *passim*; *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 262-66; *Anamnesis*, pp. 3-4. On the general issue of intentionality among the spiritually diseased, see esp. "The Eclipse of Reality," in *Phenomenology and Social Reality* (ed. Maurice Natanson)(The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), *passim*.

be diseased, the argument would go, the whole person has been condemned. But has it really?

I wish to respond that, at least in the case of Marx, Voegelin has left uncondemned something of considerable significance, namely, Marx's intellect. I will also argue momentarily that even the finding of spiritual disease is softened considerably by a tendency (which became ever stronger in the final periods of Voegelin's writing) to recognize the great difficulty which sensitive souls have in maintaining balanced consciousness in the face of their especially intense experiences of the tension of existence. For starters, though, it is important to recognize that Voegelin consistently acknowledged the power of Marx's intellect and credited him with scholarly accomplishments of a very high order.

In the "Conclusion" to "Gnostic Socialism" Voegelin speaks of "spiritual impotence" in Marx, whose soul he characterizes as "demonically closed against transcendental reality."<sup>51</sup> However, elsewhere in that chapter, he also speaks of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* as "an unsurpassed masterpiece of mystical speculation," (albeit one that is conducted in a mode of spiritual closure), and notes that "Marx is distinguished among the revolutionaries of his generation by his superior intellectual powers."<sup>52</sup> This sort of complex judgment is relatively common in Voegelin, whom I find balanced and fair-minded much more often than simply vituperative. This is no less the case late in his life than it was in the 1940s. For example, in a series of taped interviews from 1973, Voegelin acknowledges that Marx "conducted his arguments on a very

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<sup>51</sup> Voegelin, "Gnostic Socialism," pp. 368-369.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 369; 306.

high level,” and that “as distinguished from our contemporaries who pontificate on Marx, Marx himself had a very good philosophical education.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in case it might be thought that Voegelin acknowledges Marx’s capabilities only grudgingly, or that he merely damns him with faint praise, we should return to the remarkable “Conclusion” to “Gnostic Socialism.” The following passage (which I quote at considerable length because of its great importance) shows that Voegelin was prepared to credit Marx for accomplishments of great importance:

The effectiveness of the Marxian idea, however, does not rest in the strength and intellectual consistency of his antitheistic revolt alone. Marx has laid his finger on the sore spot of modern industrial society, on the cause of serious trouble (even if the trouble should not take the form of a general communist revolution), that is the growth of economic institutions into a power of such overwhelming influence on the life of every single man, that in the face of such power all talk about human freedom becomes futile. With socially irrelevant exceptions, in an industrialized society man is not the master of his economic existence....Although Marx has erred with regard to the extent of the evil, he has not erred with regard to its nature. Marx is the only thinker of stature in the nineteenth century (and none has followed him) who attempted a philosophy of human labor as well as a critical analysis of the institutions of industrial society from his philosophical position. His main work, the *Kapital*, is not an economic theory like that of Adam Smith, or Ricardo, or John Stuart Mill; and one cannot dispose of it by showing the defects of the Marxian theories of value, interest, of the

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<sup>53</sup> Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, pp. 48-49; see also p. 121.

accumulation of capital, and so on, all of which are certainly defective. It is, as the subtitle states, a critique of political economy; it is an attempt to reveal the social myth that is contained in the concepts of economic theory and to penetrate to the core of the matter, that is, to the relation of man to nature and to a philosophy of this relation, that is, of labor. That no economic theorist after Marx was sufficiently interested in the philosophical foundations of his science to explore this problem further, that no modern school of economic theory exists that would understand and develop the very important beginnings of Marx, casts a significant light on this whole branch of science.<sup>54</sup>

The passage is remarkable not only for its praise of Marx, but also for its willingness to cross swords with the orthodox conservatives with whom Voegelin is often lumped. Although there are, of course, many species of conservatives, the vast majority of avowed American conservatives understand the optimal arrangement of polity and economy as one combining political liberalism with minimally regulated economic capitalism. More pointedly, they tend to regard minimally regulated capitalism as an absolute prerequisite for freedom, whereas Voegelin decries, “the growth of economic institutions into a power of such overwhelming influence on the life of every single man, that in the face of such power all talk about human freedom becomes futile.” To the best of my knowledge, Voegelin never backed away from the criticisms leveled in the quoted passage, and he permitted their publication in 1975. To state the issue simply, on very important questions of political economy, Voegelin takes sides with Marx and against those with whom he is usually

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<sup>54</sup> Voegelin, “Gnostic Socialism,” pp. 369-370.

grouped.<sup>55</sup> Parenthetically, I must note my disappointment that Voegelin did not air—earlier and more publicly—his reservations regarding industrial capitalism. This would have done much to prevent the pigeonholing of Voegelin as a right-wing Cold Warrior that has—to this day—diminished his impact on scholarly and public discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. I also find it disappointing that Voegelin wrote nothing in his later years about the globalization of industrial capitalism and the creation of an international division of labor in which the situation he decries has been virtually universalized.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the diagnosis of spiritual disease in Marx does not entail a condemnation of him as a “whole person,” and I wish to close by noting that Voegelin’s late writings show an increasingly empathetic understanding even with regard to spiritual acts of closure and revolt. Although I cannot make the point concisely without oversimplifying, a gradual shift can be detected between *The New Science of Politics* and *The Ecumenic Age* in which Voegelin seems ever less willing to rigorously segregate the spiritually disordered from the well ordered. On one hand, Voegelin seems increasingly appreciative of the difficulties that even great exemplars of spiritual order such as Plato, Aristotle, and Paul experienced in maintaining “the balance of consciousness,” and increasingly willing to acknowledge the proximity of some their symbolizations to disordered or gnostic ones. On the other hand, Voegelin seems ever more prepared to grant that the symbolisms of gnostics and

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<sup>55</sup> I should note that I make these observations not to tweak the noses of conservatives (whom I find myself allied on many important issues) but rather to add my voice to those counseling caution before any particular label—such as “conservative”—is attached to Voegelin and his work.

ideologues show patterns of experience and reaction which bear strong resemblances to those of the great exemplars of order. To cite but three examples from *The Ecumenic Age*:

The search for the ground, thus, remains recognizable as the reality experienced even in the modes of deformation. However much the symbolisms of deformation may express existence in untruth, they are equivalent to the symbolisms of myth, philosophy and revelation.<sup>56</sup>

Egophanic deformation notwithstanding, the Hegelian speculative revelation is an equivalent to the Pauline vision. Both symbolisms express experiences of the movement in reality beyond its structure. The experience of transfiguration, thus, emerges from the confrontation between Hegel and Paul as one of the great constants in history, spanning the period from the Ecumenic Age to Western modernity.<sup>57</sup>

...[T]he modern revolt is so intimately a development of the “Christianity” against which it is a revolt that it would be unintelligible if it could not be understood as the deformation of the theophanic events in which the dynamics of transfiguration was revealed to Jesus and the Apostles. Moreover, there is no doubt about the origin of the constant in the Pauline myth of the struggle among the cosmic forces from which the Son of God emerges victorious. The variations on the theme of transfiguration still move in the differentiated form of the eschatological myth that Paul has created. This is an insight of considerable importance,

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<sup>56</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 192.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

because it permits one to classify the ideological “philosophies of history” as variations of the Pauline myth in the mode of deformation.<sup>58</sup>

These quotations reinforce an important point made in section II above: figures such as Plato, Aquinas, Hegel and Marx are, in a real sense, closer to one another spiritually than they are to the general run of humanity.<sup>59</sup> Rather than living in a manner marked by sporadic flashes of spiritual experience that punctuate lives otherwise submerged in the details of mundane existence, these men are set in motion by spiritual experiences of unusual intensity and duration, and are characterized by correspondingly intense and resolute responses. Voegelin never loses sight of the dramatic differences we can see in the responses of a Plato and a Marx. But in his last works he also becomes increasingly impressed by the similarities—even the “equivalences”—to be found, and we would do well to take this into account before deciding that the accounts of ideologists found in works like *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* were Voegelin’s last words on the subject.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269. For a detailed account of how Voegelin’s analysis of spiritual disorder in *The Ecumenic Age* differs from earlier treatments, see my essay, “Gnosticism and Spiritual Disorder in *The Ecumenic Age*,” *Political Science Reviewer* (XXVII, 1998, pp. 17-43).

<sup>59</sup> I have explored this issue at much greater length in, “Brothers under the Skin: Voegelin on the Common Experiential Wellsprings of Spiritual Order and Disorder,” in Glenn Hughes, ed., *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) pp. 139-161.

<sup>60</sup> I don’t wish to push the point too far, for earlier works like *The New Science of Politics* contain many passages that show empathy and understanding for those unable to bear up under the tensions of existence. Even in a relatively polemical work such as this, Voegelin was not in the business of attacking those who could not maintain openness, faith, and the

The point here is not, of course, to suggest some sort of syncretistic view in which we conclude that ideologists are really no different than philosophers and saints. Voegelin's work offers no support to those who would equate Marx and Aquinas. But neither does it support those who would equate Marx and Stalin.<sup>61</sup> Marx and Stalin are both reprehensible characters, but also utterly different ones, as one can see by considering how wildly implausible it would be to find Stalin pacing the hallways in the Kremlin while contemplating how to circumvent Aristotle's conclusions regarding the *proto arche*. Voegelin's account of Marx shows how low his plane of spiritual activity lies beneath that of an Aquinas, but also how much higher it is than that of the Average Joe—much less the Stalins of the world.<sup>62</sup>

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balance of consciousness: "The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss [*sic*]*—the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience....The more people are drawn into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity.*" Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, in *Modernity Without Restraint*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>61</sup> Recognition of a clear distinction between men such as Marx and Stalin is indicated at various points in Voegelin's writing, but nowhere more clearly than in the statement that "the political success of Marxism [in the form it took in the Soviet Union] would cause Marx, if he could see it, to pronounce his favorite four-letter word." "Gnostic Socialism," p. 309.

<sup>62</sup> A word should be said on behalf of the Average Joe, who perhaps does not have particularly vivid experiences of transcendence and who perhaps does not make much of those granted to him, but who nevertheless manages to bear up under the tension of human existence without declaring it senseless and engaging in an activist revolt against its immutable structure.

Although it is a sad fact that readers who are only passingly familiar with Voegelin often think of him as a polemical brawler notable above all for piercing excoriation, the deeper reality is that he was a careful and fair-minded analyst. He criticizes Marx in appropriately harsh terms, calling him an intellectual swindler and a connoisseur of his own dream world. Yet he also shows that Marx was not a fool or a thug but a man who, for all of his historically catastrophic failings, wrestled with the great problems and questions of human existence.

### *Abstract*

Eric Voegelin's most widely known references to Karl Marx are lashing criticisms that depict him as an intellectual swindler whose thought is actuated by the spiritual disease of "gnosticism." Heated and seemingly dismissive criticisms of this type in *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* have discouraged serious study of the broader contours of Voegelin's analysis of Marx, and have contributed to Voegelin's reputation as a fierce polemicist and a right-wing, anti-communist cold warrior. However, this paper's comprehensive survey of Voegelin's references to Marx demonstrates that Voegelin's criticisms are tempered by consistent acknowledgement of Marx's powerful intellectual and philosophical capabilities. More substantively, Voegelin credits Marx with achievements of great significance in political economy, and his endorsement of Marx's diagnosis of the threats to human freedom posed by capitalist economic

institutions supplies an important corrective to characterizations of Voegelin as a conservative ideologist.

The paper provides an extensive review of Voegelin's writings on Marx during the 1940s for his unpublished *History of Political Ideas*. This material indicates that Voegelin achieved a thorough and balanced understanding of Marx's doctrines prior to the sharp criticisms published in the 1950s and 1960s, which should therefore be regarded not as mere polemics but rather as diagnostic extensions from a solid analytical foundation. Voegelin's diagnoses of Marx as a "gnostic" thinker are given a close reading, with particular emphasis on the most sophisticated versions flowing from Voegelin's late work in the theory of consciousness. These versions downgrade the influence accorded to ancient Gnostic literary sources in shaping modern manifestations of gnosticism, emphasizing instead a perennial pattern of spiritual experience and reaction as the thread of continuity linking ancient Gnostics with modern gnostic ideologists. Voegelin's late writings, particularly *The Ecumenic Age*, also show an expanding appreciation of the commonalities running between "disordered" figures like Marx and the great exemplars of spiritual order, once their activities are examined at the level of engendering spiritual experiences. Although this appreciation does not negate Voegelin's main points of criticism (which were never rescinded), it tempers them in important respects. The paper concludes that, when this late development is considered alongside Voegelin's detailed early studies and his acknowledgement of Marx's achievements, Voegelin's analysis of Marx should be regarded not as a rightist diatribe but rather as a balanced and fair-minded assessment of considerable value to students of Marx and Voegelin alike.

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