

# Criticism of Religion

On Marxism and Theology, II

*By*

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## Chapter One

# The Paradoxes of Lucien Goldmann

We should never forget that, for Pascal, man is on every level a paradoxical being, a union of opposites, and that to seek God is to find him, but to find him is still to seek after him.<sup>1</sup>

Lucien Goldmann's *Le Dieu caché* is as much ignored these days as it was discussed when it first came out in 1959.<sup>2</sup> An allusion to Port-Royal, the *noblesse de robe* and Blaise Pascal is all that seems to be needed to evoke a whole argument by Goldmann concerning Jansenism and its historical context in the struggle over royal absolutism in seventeenth-century France, an argument whose problems are now all too apparent. There is more than enough to criticise in Goldmann, so I prefer to focus on what is still valuable, namely, the insight into the heart of Pascal's thought in terms of the dialectic of grace and the political consequences that flow from it. This dialectic shows up most brightly in two closely related contradictions: that between the two great poles of the Elect and the Reprobate, and that between refusing the world and yet living within it. In the first contradiction, we find ourselves in the impossible intermediate state of being in between the Elect and the Damned; in the second, the profound tension comes from the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 295; 1959, p. 327; translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> However, see the useful effort to rehabilitate Goldmann by Cohen 1994.

that both sides of the contradiction are true, for we live in the world and are yet not part of it.

These are the gems of Goldmann's book. I seek not merely to chip those bright stones from his text, but also to see what ramifications they have for political thought and action. Before I proceed, however, a few preliminary comments. Written in that curious in-between space of the 1950s as Europe was recovering from the Second World War, *The Hidden God* is one of the few book-length engagements with theology by a Marxist. However, unlike Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch,<sup>3</sup> who have also written books on theological matters, this book is really Goldmann's *summa*. Along with Jansenism, French history at the time of the rise of absolute monarchy, Pascal and Racine, he also has a good deal to say about Marx, Engels, Lukács, Kant, Descartes, Augustine and so on. The problem is that it goes on far too long. Not only is the Racine section tacked onto the end, but one can go on for page after page through a rather droll and repetitive text until a spark flies and insight suddenly bursts into flame. Needless to say, I focus mostly on those sparks, the brightest two of which are the contradictions to which I direct most of my attention.

Pascal really is Goldmann's hero and the text is strewn with appreciation of Pascal as 'the first exemplary realisation of *the modern man* [*l'homme moderne*]'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, for all these supposed achievements, why is the Marxist Goldmann so interested in one who was an arch-conservative, defending the fixed ordering of society on the basis of privilege and the rights of the king? This question comes to a head when Goldmann notes but plays down Pascal's consistent criticisms of social injustice.<sup>5</sup> He notes that Pascal points to the impossibility of any human law achieving full justice, to the perpetual abuse of power and wealth in sinful human society.<sup>6</sup> Goldmann even recognises that these

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<sup>3</sup> Adorno 1989; 2003a, Volume 2; Bloch 1972; 1985, Volume 14.

<sup>4</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 171; 1959, p. 192, translation modified. Goldmann cannot help himself. Pascal becomes a precursor, if not the first philosopher of dialectical thought and tragedy (Goldmann 1964a, p. 55; 1959, p. 65), the creator of a new moral attitude (Goldmann 1964a, p. 171; 1959, p. 192), a biologist before his time (Goldmann 1964a, p. 227; 1959, pp. 254–5), the great precursor of modern aesthetics (Goldmann 1964a, p. 270; 1959, p. 302), and the first man to bring the questions of risk with its possibilities of failure or success into philosophical thought (Goldmann 1964a, p. 302; 1959, p. 337). In short, it is Pascal who opens a new chapter in philosophy (Goldmann 1964a, p. 234; 1959, p. 263). Needless to say, I find these hero-worshipping sections a little over the top.

<sup>5</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 272–82; 1959, pp. 304–14.

<sup>6</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 112–24.

criticisms are radical and anarchic. And yet he is nonplussed, missing the point that intelligent conservatives are often the best to heed, for they see the problems all too well, raising all the right questions. As Fredric Jameson has commented more than once, intelligent conservatives repay careful attention. One might not like their answers, but the questions are usually spot on. This, I suspect, is the reason Goldmann likes Pascal so much: as a very intelligent conservative he asks all the right questions.

In what follows, my main concern is *The Hidden God*, drawing in other texts where needed.<sup>7</sup> I begin with the central issue of the dialectic of grace, especially the questions of living in between the two states of the Elect and the Damned, the mediation of the wager and then the tension between withdrawing from the world and yet living within it. While my agenda in the discussion of the dialectic of grace is to draw out the political implications of Goldmann's text, for the remainder I find Goldmann wanting. One of the strange and frustrating things about Goldmann's book is that his insights rely upon a problematic method. The main features of that method are homology or 'genetic structuralism' (the contradictions of Jansenism are a direct reflection of the political tensions between the legal officers and the absolute monarchy), a banal dialectic of the part and the whole, and a theory of world vision that is nothing more than the idea of a cultural dominant for a specific economic base. Rather than repeating the criticisms that have been made of this rather vulgar Marxism (although I am quite fond of a good bout of Marxist vulgarity), the more important question is how Goldmann is able to generate his insights with such a method. Is there something to be said for it, or is it more like scaffolding that one removes once the building is complete? My suspicion is that the secret lies with Goldmann's curious dependence on Lukács, especially the pre-Marxist *Soul and Form*.<sup>8</sup> While Goldmann claims that he draws his genetic structuralism from Lukács, it seems to me that this is really a sleight of hand: while it appears that he develops his method from Lukács, what he really does is use specific texts from Lukács to illuminate his interpretation of Pascal and Jansenism. The difference between method

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<sup>7</sup> At least I am most interested in the discussion of Pascal and Jansenism in *The Hidden God*, rather than the strange section on Racine tacked onto the end of the book. In contrast to this section, the small book on Racine (Goldmann 1981) is much better, but then it repeats many of the points made in *The Hidden God*.

<sup>8</sup> Lukács 1974, 1971a.

and content is important: the content of the quotes from Lukács are far more useful than the method he apparently draws from Lukács. The problem is that the method – homology – hardly does justice to the sophisticated and complex dialectic that Lukács employs. Given the value of Goldmann’s take on the dialectic of grace in Pascal and Jansenism, and given the inadequacy of his method, I propose a more useful method for understanding the economic and social context of Jansenism. Finally, I take up Goldmann’s efforts to link Pascal with Marx, with one significant difference: I seek the link at an entirely different level to Goldmann, namely in the tension of Marxism as both a secular and an anti-secular project.

### **The dialectic of grace**

The issue is grace, especially the ‘high’ view of grace championed by the Jansenists. Since grace is so central, it led the Jansenists to the doctrinal position of Predestination. They took their cue from Paul’s texts in the New Testament, especially Romans 8:29, where we find the path that leads from foreknowledge, through predestination to glorification:

For those whom he foreknew (προέγνω) he also predestined (προώρισεν) to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

But how did terms such as foreknowing [*proginōskō*] and predestining [*proorizō*] find themselves in the same boat as grace? The short answer is that the predestination of some to salvation and others to damnation is the exercise of God’s inscrutable but perfectly just will. The long answer is that a number of key assumptions underlie the idea that grace manifests itself in the predestination of some to salvation. The first is the utter unknowability of God, and that applies also to his exercise of grace, which is equally inscrutable.<sup>9</sup> The second is the utter sinfulness and depravity of human beings (one of my favourite doctrines): we can do no good work on our own, and so we must

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<sup>9</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 99–100.



rely entirely on God for any such good work.<sup>10</sup> The third is the irresistibility or inamissibility of grace. The argument goes something as follows: we can do nothing good on our own, let alone anything that gets us a millimetre closer to salvation. Thus, the only way to salvation, or indeed to do anything good, is through God's grace.<sup>11</sup> However, if God offers to give us a hand, if he offers us grace, how do we receive it? Well, we can hardly say 'yes thank you' or 'no thanks', since that would put us utterly depraved creatures in the unacceptable position of controlling whether God can get through to us or not. So grace comes to us whether we want it or not: it is completely undeserved, unexpected and irresistible. However, not all are saved, for some are damned. Being saved or damned has nothing to do with us, for we can neither accept nor reject grace – it all lies in God's nimble and inscrutable hands. Thus, the decision whereby some are saved and others are damned is God's alone. To put it slightly differently: given that we are all fallen and sinful creatures, the default position is that we are all damned. The fact that God actually has decided in his grace to save some of us is a cause for wonder and thanks.

This longer answer appeared in the posthumously published manifesto of Jansenism, the *Augustinus* of Cornelius Otto Jansenius (1640). As the title suggests, it was a reappropriation of Augustine's work, asserting the absolute priority of grace and a predestination in which some are elected to salvation and the rest condemned to damnation irrespective of their own acts or volition. Indeed, it was Augustine who first articulated predestination before Calvin took it up with his admirable rigour. For Augustine, the inaccessibility of the reasons for God's choice between the elect and the damned did not make that choice any less just, for God's justice is perfect. Augustine put in a little contradiction of his own, namely that although God does not override free will, grace does not depend on human acceptance but on the infallible and eternal decree of God.

The problem for the Roman Catholics in the seventeenth century – for it was a movement within Roman Catholicism – was that Jansenism came far too close to the positions of Luther and especially Calvin. There were differences, of course, and they fascinate me, but Jansenism came at a time when the Counter-Reformation was well under way. And one of its ideological

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<sup>10</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 37–78, 99–100.

<sup>11</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 272–3.

centre-pieces was the work of Luis de Molina (1535–1600), especially his *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* of 1588. Over against the Reformers, Molina gave as much room as possible to human works and obedience to the divine commandments. Basically, Molina argued that freely chosen human co-operation with the gift of grace was the ultimate cause of the efficacy of grace. This effectiveness, which boils down to the ability of human beings genuinely to obey God, comes not from grace itself, but from the human decision to obey. Thus, in opposition to the Calvinist and Jansenist position on the total depravity of human beings, who can do no good on their own, Molinism (as it came to be known) gives human beings as much involvement as possible in ensuring their own salvation. Molinism just escapes espousing self-earned salvation by arguing that the free act of human beings to co-operate with God is itself foreknown by God. In short, we can get to the line, but we need a helping hand to get over it. Jansenism was anathema to such a position, and watered down the stark opposition to the Reformers that Molinism represented. It is hardly a surprise, then, that the Jansenists were harassed, hounded and condemned.

If we grant the argument for predestination, then a number of contradictions arise. Of these, Goldmann identifies two that were central for the Jansenists, especially Pascal. The first is the age-old problem: how do we know who is of the elect and who not? Or, to put it slightly differently, if God's grace is available to all, then why are only some chosen? The second contradiction arises from the utter sinfulness and depravity of the world: do we attempt to make our troubled peace with the world, or do we reject it and withdraw?

### *The Elect and the Damned*

In a few enthralling pages,<sup>12</sup> Goldmann goes to the heart of the tension between the Elect and the Damned. This opposition, he argues, is not so much a great divide between two groups of people, between the sheep and the goats, between those who are saved and those who are not. On the contrary, it is a division that we bear within ourselves:

From the point of view of God there are the Elect who cannot be damned and the Reprobate who cannot be saved. On the other hand, from the point

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<sup>12</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 290–5; 1959, pp. 322–7.

of view of man, who ignores every divine decree, the categories of 'Elect' and 'Reprobate' are in each individual case merely permanent *possibilities*. He thinks of himself as an intermediate being who brings them together, but who has not yet chosen and who can never make a definitive choice in *this* life.<sup>13</sup>

As one who has always been intrigued, and even at times affirmed the idea of predestination, primarily on a political and economic level, this is an extraordinarily intriguing argument. But what are the implications of asserting that the unbearable tension between the Elect and the Damned lies within? To begin with, it means that one is caught in between the two extremes: 'one does not show his greatness by being at one extreme, but by touching both extremes at once and by filling in the whole space between them'.<sup>14</sup> Further, the one who must fashion a life between the permanent possibilities of the Elect and the Reprobate is an 'intermediate being [*être intermédiaire*]. What this does, in effect, is introduce a third category between the Elect and the Damned, a third category that then breaks the hold of the binary opposition. And this is precisely what Pascal does, according to Goldmann: he introduces a tripartite division into human existence. Along with the Elect and the Damned, there are also the Called who do not persevere in their calling. The trick with the third category is that it assumes the perspective of human beings. God may have two categories, but what God is up to is well beyond human knowledge since His ways are inscrutable. So we are left with what we know as human beings (the Bible notwithstanding).

Once we take such a perspective, once we assume that all human beings are in fact intermediate beings, then the only possible approach to others is to assume that all people are of the Elect. The reason: since we cannot know God's mind and thereby whether anyone is or is not of the Elect, and since we should not pretend to act like God, we must assume that all have been chosen under pain of making the wrong call. If some do not seem to be of the Elect

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<sup>13</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 293; 1959, pp. 325–6, translation modified. See also: 'The two extreme categories of the Elect and the Reprobate are, in this respect, the two permanent possibilities between which man must choose. They express, on the plane of the individual the two possibilities represented by the wager, in so far as to fear to wager that Nothing exists is to fear damnation, and to wager that God exists is to hope for salvation' (Goldmann 1964a, pp. 294–5; 1959, p. 327).

<sup>14</sup> Pascal 1961, p. 113; 1950, p. 127; translation modified.

through the way they live and act that must mean that they have been called but have given up seeking. In short, Pascal's position means that we must act as though there were no distinction between people.

This is a real insight by Goldmann, it seems to me, one that goes far beyond an exposition of Pascal's thought. On a more personal level, I have often quipped that I have never met anyone who believes in predestination and yet claims to be one of the Damned. After reading Goldmann, I became aware that my quip has a grain of truth in it. For Goldmann's discussion of Pascal brings to the surface certain aspects of the theology of grace all too carefully concealed in the cobwebbed back rooms of Calvinism. For one who imbibed the paradoxes of Calvinism as part of daily life – from Bible readings uttered by a stern but inconsistent father after every evening meal to the ban on studying, working or buying anything on a Sunday – the questions with which I still deal in the capillaries of my existence turn around the question of grace.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, Goldmann's argument fascinates me. What he manages to do is bring out what might be called the universal or democratic nature of the high view of grace.

Extreme, stark, rationalist and brutal – these are the epithets one more often finds attached to Calvinism and Jansenism. Certainly not democratic. Yet, as Goldmann traces out the dialectical logic of Pascal's argument, this is where we end up. The bottom line is that we should assume that everyone is of the Elect and treat them accordingly. The trick lies with attributing to God all of the less desirable features: God is not such a good dialectician, nor indeed is He much of a democrat. Omniscience, it would seem, has its down side too. As far as the dialectic is concerned, God may have already decided who is of the Elect and who of the Damned without too much fuss, but then the dialectic is really the domain of mere mortals like Pascal. It is not that we forever oscillate between salvation and damnation, between heaven and hell, for that would be a frozen dialectic. Rather, by introducing the third term of the intermediate being, Pascal effectively sublates the opposition. It can then conveniently be shunted off to the side (it is only for God to know) and the real issue is allowed to come to the fore, namely that we should act as though everyone is of the Elect.

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<sup>15</sup> See further Boer in press-b.

As for democracy, the issue now concerns the universal, or more specifically the tension between the particular and the universal. In Pascal's case, it becomes a tension between the universality of grace and the particularity of salvation. Again the solution of this old conundrum lies in distinguishing between divine and human perspectives. Thus, what from God's perspective seems to be the particularity of grace (only the Elect will be saved) is, from the human perspective – the only one we in fact know – universal (act as though all are of the Elect and treat them accordingly).

The result is the same: an inherent democratic push within Pascal's thought, although I must admit to disliking the word 'democracy' in light of its tired and battered use in our era. All the same, I would like to think such a democratic logic unveiled by Goldmann may provide one of the reasons for the unexpected tolerance of Calvinism in the home of my parents, The Netherlands. To all appearances, one would have assumed that Calvinism, with its stark doctrine of predestination, would have been among the least tolerant of all forms of Christianity. Yet, in practice, it was not so, for The Netherlands provided safe haven for all manner of religious refugees – Jews, Mennonites and other disparate arms of Radical Reformation, and, of course, the Jansenists when they fled the final persecution in eighteenth-century France. Yet it turns out to be Pascal (in Goldmann's reading) and not Calvin who provides the theoretical reason as to why the Calvinists in The Netherlands may have been so tolerant: the need to treat all as of the Elect.

One more political implication emerges from Goldmann's treatment, namely a distinct political allegory. The strange thing is that it is not the political implication Goldmann himself draws out. He is (far) too keen on the role of faith and the wager within Marxism (on these see more below), but, for some perverse reason, is not interested in the Elect and the Damned. Yet, that is precisely where I would like to locate such an allegory. All too quickly, I can lump people in political versions of the Elect and the Damned: depending on one's political persuasions it may be the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the ruling élite and the ignorant masses, intelligent and stupid voters who must be bought and so on. All too quickly they become reified groups, what may be hated or loved, passionately supported or opposed, the source of all evil or of good. The next step in the allegory is then a timely warning. The political versions of the Elect and the Damned are in fact not two groups embracing one another in a futile and fatal dance; rather, the two political categories are

embodied within ourselves, within our own groups. What appears at first as the Elect turns out to be caught between the two possibilities of the Elect and the Damned. And if *that* is the case, then our mortal opponents, the Damned, are also caught in between, just like us. Now, there are two options at this point. One is to undertake a process of weeding out, of finding the Quislings and informers, of witch-hunting in a brutal search to purify the Elect from the taint of the Damned. Of course, this process never ends until the group destroys itself, for the possibility of the Elect cannot exist without the possibility of the Damned. So the other option is to follow Pascal and treat all as though they are of the Elect. No matter how far away they appear to be, no matter how Reprobate they are, they may well be of the Elect. At this point – dare I say it? – the possibility of a full democracy emerges.

### *Wagering it all*

If the tension between the Elect and the Damned lies deep within, and if we are to treat everyone as though they are of the Elect, then there is one further implication: according to Pascal, we must do all in our power to persuade them to seek God. Hence the need for apologiae, for arguments for the existence of God – in short, for the use of reason to persuade people to search for God. As Goldmann indicates,<sup>16</sup> the contradiction between the Jansenist position on predestination, especially with the emphasis on the utter helplessness of human beings, and the writing of apologies is one that has been pointed out time and again. Even Pascal's colleagues at Port-Royal would have found it strange indeed to appeal to reason. However, Pascal takes the logic of the utter sinfulness of human beings to its logical conclusion and points out that we simply cannot know God's mind on the matter. So we must assume that all people are intermediate beings, that everyone is potentially of the Elect, and so we must do all we can to persuade them to seek God – hence the argument of the wager.

Let me pause at a quiet spot and look at that argument a little more closely. It appears in fragment 233 of the *Pensées*<sup>17</sup> and takes the form of a dialogue

<sup>16</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 290; 1959, p. 323.

<sup>17</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 93–7; 1961, pp. 155–9. The arrangement and numbering of the fragments differs from editor to editor. In the text I follow the standard French edition (Pascal 1950), which was first established by Léon Brunschvicg in the mid-nineteenth

between Pascal and an imaginary interlocutor, about whom we learn that he is so made that he 'cannot believe'.<sup>18</sup> Pascal begins the relevant section by pointing out that since God is infinitely unknowable [*infiniment incomprehensible*], we cannot know who he is or indeed whether he exists. How then to proceed? To a series of objections from his imaginary interlocutor, Pascal pushes one reason after another to argue that you cannot not wager on God's existence. If it is a question of reason, then either choice is reasonable enough. If it is a question of happiness, then 'if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing'.<sup>19</sup> To the objection that one may lose too much by betting at all, Pascal points out that you lose nothing at all by making the wager: to win is to gain infinite life and happiness; to lose is to be as you are now. But still the interlocutor objects, saying he just cannot believe, for that is the way he has been constituted. At this point comes the reply that Goldmann quotes:

You wish to come to faith, but you do not know the way; you wish to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who have been tied like you, and who now wager all they have; they are the people who know the way that you wish to follow and have been cured of a sickness for which you want a cure.<sup>20</sup>

Goldmann is keen to establish that the argument of the wager is not window dressing for someone who actually has faith; rather, it is central to Pascal's thought. More important is his question as to who the interlocutor might be: a free thinker perhaps, a sceptic whom Pascal seeks to persuade. Goldmann takes a different line and argues that the interlocutor is Pascal himself, indeed that the two voices are internal to Pascal. He both believes and does not believe. He is the one who now wagers all he has. In other words, the wager is between the voice that doubts and resists and the one who sees that the wager is an exceedingly good bet.

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century. The English translation by J.M. Cohen (1961) follows the arrangement of the fragments by Jacques Chevalier (Pascal 1954). The catch is that Cohen's numbering of the fragments does not refer to any other numbering system, of which there are many.

<sup>18</sup> Pascal 1950, p. 96; 1961, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> Pascal 1950, p. 95; 1961, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Pascal 1950, p. 96; 1961, p. 158, translation modified; see Goldmann 1964a, p. 286; Goldmann 1959, p. 318.

All the same, Goldmann's argument that the wager is internal is not the only element of Pascal's wager. Another (and, here, I go beyond Goldmann) is the introduction of the element of doubt. Here is truly an element of the dialectic of grace that is almost entirely lacking in Calvinism. All of the elements I have discussed so far – the internalisation of the tension between the Elect and the Damned, the intermediate being caught between these possibilities, the uncertainty of determining who is of the Elect and the wager itself – all of these are unthinkable without doubt. If we never know who is of the Elect (thereby treating everyone as though they are), then we too must fall into that universal group. We too can never be certain, and so we must wager, no matter how good the odds may seem to be.

At this point, Jansenism differs from Calvinism, for in that version of the high doctrine of grace, there is no uncertainty: you are either in or you are not. That means there is no such thing as apostasy. Someone may backslide, may show all the signs of the Damned and yet because they are of the Elect, they will come back. God has decided and there is nothing we can do about it. However, before we can charge Calvin with a certain arrogance, with having been able to climb into God's mind and gain a few morsels of precious knowledge about eternity, he also made sure to insist that we should be slow to judge. Not that he always lived up to such a precept, burning the odd heretic or two at the Genevan stake.

All these fine distinctions are not merely 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties',<sup>21</sup> for they have a number of profound political implications. I am, however, underwhelmed by Goldmann's championing of the wager as the key to the philosophy of Kant and the sciences.<sup>22</sup> To be fair, he does give this argument a twist: Pascal, the sciences, Marxism and even Augustine all share common ground, not merely because they all have the trappings of 'scientific' rigour (and Goldmann does use the epithet as often as he can for Marxism), but above all because they are all based in an act of 'faith'. The content of that 'faith' may differ,<sup>23</sup> but it is the act itself that counts. For all its ingenuity – Marxism and indeed Pascal's theology are scientific but only because they are based on acts of faith – this is hardly a new argument. I find myself

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<sup>21</sup> Marx 1996, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 91–5; 1959, pp. 100–5.

<sup>23</sup> '(Evidence of the transcendent, wager on the transcendent, wager on an immanent meaning)' (Goldmann 1959, p. 104, translation mine).



wanting to say, 'but of course, so let's move on'. But Goldmann is writing in the 1950s, and it may have been a breakthrough argument to make then, especially in a Europe where attaching the word 'scientific' to the study of society or literature or indeed the study of sacred texts such as the Bible allows one to lay claim to a host of associations – rigour, empirical evidence, the absence of extraneous items such as theology, revelation or faith. Half a century later, the point is hardly stunning.

More intriguing is his argument that Marxism as a political movement might do well to see itself in terms of the wager, although not quite in the way he sees it. Like Jansenism with its wager on individual salvation, or Pascal's wager on God's existence, for Goldmann Marxism also operates with a wager: 'in the alternative facing humanity of a choice between socialism and barbarity, socialism will triumph'.<sup>24</sup> Rather than 'triumph', might not doubt be a greater political insight, especially for Marxism? Of course, there is nothing like a little historical hindsight, for the element of doubt is crucial to the wager; no matter how good the odds might be, the risk can never be dismissed. In the current context of rampant and troubled global capitalism, even in China, one would have to say that the wager of Marxism is at best still open and that the odds are not necessarily stacked in its favour. Marxism may have its own wager, but it is a far more doubtful wager than when Goldmann penned this book.

### *In the world and yet not*

One contradiction remains, and that is the one between living in the world and yet not being of the world, between the hermit and the one who continues to live among people in the world. In many respects, Goldmann makes this tension the determining feature of Jansenism as a theological and political movement, with regard to its internal debates, the attitudes to politics, education and so on. But I have a more personal interest as well, for I too constantly feel this tension. On the one hand, I know well the attraction of the ascetic life of a hermit. I longingly seek out my own company, cycle and walk and camp on my own, celebrate pure silence or talk to myself, dodge any responsibility that forces me to deal with people, to organise, engage and talk. Asceticism

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<sup>24</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 301; 1959, pp. 335–6.

is, after all, a deeply pleasurable way to live. And yet, I revel in the bursts of intense interaction with other people, with the to and fro of rapid conversation over a beer or three, with the passion of collective political engagement, with the thrill of flirting and seduction, the tenseness of an argument or a fight. But I could certainly not live in the world in such a way all the time, and all too soon I hanker for the life of a hermit once again.

At this personal level, then, I am interested in how Goldmann's reading of Pascal and Jansenism might explain these two contrary attractions. As before, this personal concern does not exclude a distinctly political angle in my reading of Goldmann, something in which I am also vitally interested. Of course, given the tension itself between living in the world and yet not, the two domains – usually designated by the old but inadequate opposition of the personal and the political – are intimately connected.

To his credit, Goldmann emphasises again and again (perhaps too often) that the tension between the refusal and affirmation of the world is the *lived* contradiction of Jansenism. We can approach such a contradiction in two ways: either the doctrines of grace and predestination were the ideological articulations of such a tension, or this tension between living in and out of the world was the outcome of those theological positions. Both are true, it seems to me, in the fashion of that old Marxist point of the interplay between theory and practice. Goldmann also points out that at its most creative points (Pascal and, to a lesser extent, Racine), this tension became not an either/or but a both/and: it entailed a simultaneous affirmation of knowledge of both the world and of God. In short it was a refusal of the world from within the world – *le divertissement*.<sup>25</sup>

This lived tension raises a crucial question for politics, one that Goldmann touches upon obliquely in his rush to show how close Marx is to Pascal, or rather, how Pascal lays the groundwork for Marx. And that question is what I will call the contradiction of a secular political programme like Marxism. Here, we face a deep contradiction: in eschewing any religious or transcendent reference point, Marxism seems to draw all its insights and ammunition from this world. The economic, political and social realities of existence on this globe are the grist for the Marxist mill. And, yet, Marxism is not bound by

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<sup>25</sup> Pascal 1950, pp. 64–70; Goldmann 1964a, pp. 50–2, 215–18; 1959, pp. 60–2, 241–4; 1981, pp. 6–7.

this world. It sets its sights on the end of capitalism, on the expectations for a world that is qualitatively different and, we hope, better, whatever its name and shape might be. On this score, Marxism rejects the world, this world of capitalism, in favour of another. To my mind, this is a contradiction, indeed a paradox, that may be expressed in terms of the paradox of Jansenism: a refusal of the world from within the world.

With this question in mind, let us see what Goldmann does with the lived contradiction of Jansenism. To begin with, it enables him to make sense of the theological, social and philosophical differences within Jansenism. The two main streams may be characterised as centrist and extremist, or, in Goldmann's overblown terms, 'dramatic centrism [*centrisme que nous appellerons dramatique*]' and 'tragic extremism [*l'extrémisme tragique*]'.<sup>26</sup> Both were based on the belief that the world is irredeemable; in no way can it be changed through one's actions within it. Where they differed was on the level of one's involvement: the centrists sought to stand up for truth and goodness within the world, where they actually had a small place; the extremists also wished to speak out for truth and goodness, but they believed their words would fall on deaf and hostile ears. In other words, the centrists saw a role for Christians within the world, within which they could stand as lights on the hill, whereas the extremists tended all too readily to retreat from the world in disgust and despair. The name that attaches to the moderates or centrists is Antoine Arnauld (1612–94), the theologian who effectively became leader of the Jansenists after the death of Saint-Cyran in 1643, eventually fleeing to the Netherlands in 1679 to escape persecution. The main proponent of the extremists was Martin de Barcos (1600–78), who succeeded Saint-Cyran as abbot in 1643, corresponding furiously with the other Jansenists,<sup>27</sup> until he condemned Port-Royal's acceptance of the 'Peace of Clement IX' in 1669 and thereby broke with the Jansenists as hopeless compromisers.

Goldmann is careful to point out that both embodied the tension between refusing the world and living within it. Their differences were matters of

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<sup>26</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 148; 1959, p. 164; see also Goldmann 1981, pp. 31–6. Goldmann also espies two positions at the further ends of moderation and extremism: the one sought to come to terms with the lies and evil of the world, and the other retreated into complete silence before the absolute sinfulness of the world. Neither was a real option, although Pascal's sister, Jacqueline, belonged to the most extreme wing; see Goldmann 1964a, pp. 143, 148; 1959, pp. 158, 164.

<sup>27</sup> See Goldmann 1956.

emphasis, the one more prepared to make a fist of it in the world and the other less so. But these differences had profound consequences.<sup>28</sup> For Arnauld and the moderates, the task of Christians was to struggle within the world and within the Church, albeit with little hope of success. Thus, on social and political matters, the moderates devoted a good deal of attention to the role of the Christians in relation to the powers that be. They ought to be involved and stand up for truth whenever they found it, for there could in fact be good kings and ministers of the government. Similarly, with regard to philosophy, one should give it due attention as another means for locating the truth, for it may have its own value apart from any religious concerns.

By contrast, Barcos and the extremists saw human beings as thoroughly corrupted by original sin, including Christians; since it was therefore impossible to achieve any significant reform, all one could do was proclaim the truth and retire from the world. The extremists were far more concerned over theological issues such as grace, predestination and original sin, but had little interest in questions of a social, political or philosophical nature. These matters were far too much of the world, having no value in themselves since they are irredeemable.

A difference or two in emphasis can go a long way, it seems. What are the implications for my preliminary comments concerning the analogous tension within a Marxism that is of the world and yet refuses it? Its more secular tendencies begin to sound distinctly like the centrists or moderates: capitalism is a fundamentally unjust system, but we had better make the best of it all the same and use what we can. For example, the parliamentary system is one that can indeed be worked in a Marxist direction, whether through a broad left front, or through coalitions with other parties in order to bring some pressure to bear on the exercise of power. And a moderate position would also argue that capitalism may have its good moments along with the bad, and then search for what might be salvaged in a Marxist programme. The risk is that such a position slips into social democracy, opting for a gentler, kinder capitalism with the various safety nets of medical cover, old age care, unemployment benefits and so forth. A more radical Marxism, by contrast, rejects this world of capitalism and all that goes with it. Nothing much in this world of capitalism is redeemable, for it is at its very basis an unjust and exploitative

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<sup>28</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 150–60; 1959, pp. 166–79.

system. Politically, this radical position becomes all too often the extra-parliamentary Left, eschewing any involvement in a system of government that is far too closely tied in with capitalism, which must be swept away *in toto*. All one can do is condemn predatory capitalism and work for its demise. I must admit that I have more sympathy with this radical position, especially in the way Alain Badiou rejects capitalist parliamentary ‘democracy’ and argues for true politics as that which operates outside the state. The models here are the soviets, or Mao’s collectives or indeed his own Organisation Politique. It is politics without a party, a politics outside the parliamentary system.<sup>29</sup>

I would not want to push the analogy too far, since the danger – like Goldmann – is to make the division between the two groups too sharp. Or, rather, I prefer to follow Goldmann’s emphasis on the continuum: just as the moderates and extremists within Jansenism operate within a continuum that has some assumed positions, so also Marxism’s various emphases fall into a continuum. In other words, to pick up a point I have stressed earlier: the division or tension lies within. It is not so much a split between two absolute positions, between two radical alternatives, but rather a strained and difficult effort to keep the two together. The hermit must still live in the world.

What this continuum between the moderate and extreme Jansenists allows Goldmann to do is locate Pascal, and indeed Racine, within a continuum. If Pascal moves from a moderate position in his *Lettres provinciales* of 1654<sup>30</sup> to the extreme position of his *Pensées* in 1662, then Racine moves the other way in his plays and his personal and political positions.<sup>31</sup> I am less interested in the details of Goldmann’s mapping of Pascal’s biography, lurching as it did from one spiritual crisis to another (especially the major crisis of 23 November, 1654). What is far more attractive is the way he is able to make this tension – refusing the world and yet living within it – the key to that biography.<sup>32</sup> On

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<sup>29</sup> See especially Badiou 2005b.

<sup>30</sup> Pascal 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Goldmann 1981, pp. 55–6.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Until 1654 Pascal looked for truth in the natural world and in the abstract sciences; from 1654 to 1657 he hoped that truth would triumph in the Church and religion in the world, and played an active part in trying to bring this triumph about. But towards the end of his life he learned that man’s true greatness can lie only in his awareness of his weakness and limitations, and saw the uncertainty which characterises any human life, both in the natural world and in the Church Militant.... In doing so, he discovered tragedy, the complete and certain uncertainty of all truth, paradox, the refusal of the world by a man who remains within it and the direct appeal to

this level, Goldmann draws me right in. For the desire to renounce the world and all that is therein is a very strong one for me. All it need be is a corner away from everyone, the ability to retreat into my own world, or an isolated hill from which I scan around in order to affirm that there is no one in sight or earshot, or deep in the bush that absorbs me quickly, realising that I am alone and able to relax. One of my favoured places is in the mountains at the back of my home. All it takes a day's steep ride and I am alone in the old growth forest. And the desire strengthens with age.

This tension, this retreat from the world from within it makes an awful lot of sense to me at a deeply personal level. Yet I am never away from the 'world'. Until now, I have let Goldmann get away with his usage of the term without questioning it. He is quite consistent, for 'world [*le monde*]' means the realm of public, political life, the affairs of state and business. A renunciation of the world is the refusal of such a life, and the tension of which he writes is the tension, or as he prefers, the paradox of refusing that public and political world while yet remaining part of it.

All the same, the tension has more to it than Goldmann perhaps realises. If I focus on the question of renunciation that is dear to me, it is not so hard to realise that retreat is really a retreat from one world to another world. For the nuns of Port-Royal such as Pascal's sister Jacqueline, it was a retreat into the cloistered world of the convent. For a hermit, it is the retreat into the world of one's own mind, body and soul, and (if one is so inclined) of God. Even Zuster Bertken in the Netherlands, who lived from the age of 30 until her death at 87 (1457 to 1514) in a narrow cell about 4 metres long, moved from one world to another. Built for her at the permission of the bishop of Utrecht beside his church, the cell had two curtained windows through which food was passed, but which were never opened so that people could see her face. Upon her death, she was buried in the cell that had been her own world for most of her life.

So also in the forested mountains: it is not merely a world of animals and plants and earth and water, but it is a forest that is there only because human beings have preserved it and decided not to cut it down and feed the global

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God. It was by extending paradox to God himself, and making Him both certain and uncertain, present and absent, that Pascal was able to write the *Pensées* and thus open a new chapter in the history of philosophical thought' (Goldmann 1964a, pp. 182–3; 1959, pp. 204–5).

timber industry. And the bicycle I ride in order to get there, the tent in which I sleep, the mug from which I drink tea all come from that world I seek to escape. So refusing the world from within the world means more than Goldmann seems to think, although we should perhaps reframe it as refusing one world for the sake of another. Is my retreat from the world a resignation and recognition that it is thoroughly 'sinful', totally depraved and irredeemable? In part it is, although at an economic and environmental level more than a theological one. For all my desires to see the end of an economic system that is exploitative at its deepest level, no matter how many achievements have been made, my retreat is a recognition that it will be here for a good while yet. It is also a recognition, in a heterodox way, that the ultimate contradiction between the unlimited growth of capitalism must come up against the reality of a limited planet, that capitalism will only come to an end when it comes up against this limit and can grow no more, or rather capitalism ultimately will destroy the world it has created.

Yet here comes the tension, for I want to resist that sort of fatalism and fashionable catastrophism. If it is not a meteorite, or a new plague out of the jungles of Africa, or overpopulation, then it is the return of Christ on the clouds. So I find myself drawn back into this 'world' of which Goldmann writes, working, thinking and writing tirelessly for a world without capitalism and all that it entails. The reason why Goldmann's take on Pascal, especially this tension of refusal within the world, makes so much sense is not merely because of the Marxism I share with him (although not so triumphalist or indeed moral<sup>33</sup>), but also because Pascal was wrestling with the same problems that are part of my own heritage. My version was Calvinism, which has its own anticipatory features for Marxism, but it too dealt with the problems of an absolute focus on grace, human inability and depravity, and the stark doctrine of predestination.

Neither Goldmann nor I are going to leave such questions at the level of personal desires, except perhaps for the way the personal turns out to be an internalisation of what goes on in the economic and social context. Goldmann's solution is what has been called – and castigated – as homology. The paradoxes of Jansenism, between the Elect and the Reprobate, between the

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<sup>33</sup> Especially when he comments that capitalist society is 'based upon individual selfishness' (Goldmann 1964a, p. 278; 1959, p. 310), Goldmann lines himself up with a distinctly moral Marxism.

world and its refusal, are a direct expression of the situation in which the Jansenists found themselves.

### **Theory: the tight fit of homology**

Goldmann's answer to the question of context is rather simple: Jansenism was the expression of a distinct group or sub-class within the specific political environment of the rise of the absolute monarchy in seventeenth-century France.<sup>34</sup> Or in more detail: the key political contradiction was that the *officiers* of the *ancien régime* (from whose ranks the Jansenists were primarily drawn) were economically dependent upon a monarchical state whose growth they opposed from an ideological and political point of view. They were opposed to a form of government they could not destroy without destroying themselves. This contradiction explains the contradiction of Jansenism – the essential vanity of the world and salvation in solitude and withdrawal, and yet a continued involvement in the world.<sup>35</sup> In short, the contradiction of Jansenism is a direct expression of the contradictory situation of these political *officiers* (legal functionaries with government posts who went by the collective title of the *noblesse de robe*).

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<sup>34</sup> As a theological and political movement, the origins of Jansenism are usually marked by the publication of Cornelius Otto Jansenius's *Augustinus* (1640). Jansenius may have been the ideologue of the movement, but his friend and collaborator, Jean-Ambroise Duvergié de Hauranne, more commonly known as Abbé de Saint-Cyran (1581–1643), was its organiser. Originally abbot of Saint-Cyran, he became in 1633 the spiritual director of the nerve-centre of Jansenism, the convent of Port-Royal. The movement grew swiftly, with two outcomes. First, Port-Royal established a second convent in Paris apart from its one in the marshes south of Paris, and it attracted more and more nuns, including Jacqueline, Pascal's sister. Second, it came under persecution. Saint-Cyran was imprisoned by Cardinal Richelieu in 1637 until his death, and one pope after another sought to condemn Jansenism as heretical until Pope Clement XI's Bull 'Unigenitus' in 1713 outlawed it completely and persecuted the Jansenists, many of whom fled to The Netherlands.

<sup>35</sup> See especially Goldmann 1964a, p. 120; 1959, pp. 133–4; 1981, pp. 28–9. Or, in Goldmann's own words, he seeks to provide 'a general picture of the effect which a certain aspect of the evolution of royal absolutism in France had upon legal circles, and in particular upon lawyers closely connected with the *parlements*. I suggested that this evolution gave rise to an attitude of reserve towards social life and the State – "the world" – but that this attitude was free from any element of active political or social opposition to the monarchy. It was this attitude which in my view, provided the background of ideas and feelings against which any Jansenist ideology developed'. Goldmann 1964a, p. 142; 1959, p. 157.



*Homology*

I have no desire to dwell on the problems of Goldmann's homologies, especially since others have done so.<sup>36</sup> All the same, two elements are worth noting: a literary work, philosophical system or indeed theological position expresses and reflects the interests and aspirations of a distinct social group and class; in order to find such a direct connection, a Marxist analysis must embroil itself in the minutiae of historical detail. Now, Goldmann does his best to avoid slipping into a rather mechanical Marxism (as Cohen shows, he reacted against it), especially in his argument that cultural works express the worldview of a distinct group.<sup>37</sup> Yet, it all too easily does slip into the assumption that the superstructure is the expression of the base. Now, if one is going to engage in vulgar Marxism, then there is no need to pin it to an elaborate theoretical and historical discussion. In the end, it seems to me that Goldmann is able to climb up to one or two striking conclusions – the best of which I have discussed at length in the preceding section – by means of a very rickety ladder, one that collapses somewhere on the way up.

The key words for Goldmann are 'express [*expliquer*]' and 'reflect' or 'correspond [*correspondre*]', which turn up time and again in the chapter on 'World Visions and Social Classes'.<sup>38</sup> Such an approach may take two forms: either a text or philosophical system reflects the general conditions of a particular place and time, so much so that one may read those elements off from the text, or the text in question gives expression to the opinions and beliefs of a distinct author or group. If the former is a more general approach that assumes a reasonably direct correlation between text and context, the latter is more specific and conscious – the text becomes little more than propaganda espousing a platform. Goldmann plays with both options. Not only does Jansenism reflect the specific conditions of a sub-class (the legal officers of the French

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<sup>36</sup> For example, Jameson 1981, pp. 43–4; Evans 1981, pp. 154–5.

<sup>37</sup> Or, as he puts it somewhat later: 'Genetic structuralism, as I have used it so far, presupposes: (1) The bringing to light of a work's *global* semantic model, the formation of which constitutes *the schema of a global system* of relationships between men and between them and the universe; (2) The sociological study of the genesis of this model within the dynamic tendency of the collective consciousness of particular social groups; (3) The extension of this global semantic structure into an aggregation of partial and more strictly formal structures, on all levels which the study of a written text involves' (Goldmann 1980, p. 142).

<sup>38</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 89–102; 1959, pp. 97–114.

parliament during the rise of absolute monarchy), conditions that may be read from the text, but it is also the conscious and deliberate expression of its authors (Goldmann goes to great lengths to argue that Pascal knew exactly what he was doing and executed it brilliantly). It seems to me that even if Goldmann did not have the historical detail at hand, however mediated it might be, he would have been able to read it off the text without too many problems.<sup>39</sup>

Goldmann's distinct preference for texts and ideas that correspond to particular groups and classes becomes even tighter with his desire for specificity. He wishes to lock them in, to identify 'their fit within [*leur insertion dans*] the intellectual and emotional climate which is closest to them'.<sup>40</sup> This desire for a distinct fit or insertion into a time and place leads him into a detailed and ultimately frustrating analysis of the phases in the rise of the absolute monarchy, the changing allegiances between king, aristocracy and bourgeoisie, the different roles of the varying government apparatchiks, the rise and fall in prices for purchasing hereditary offices (*La Paulette*), all in ever more movements of three stages, down to pinpointing the moment when Jansenism as an ideology emerges.<sup>41</sup> The devil is in the detail, it seems to me; or rather, the detail is a blessing and a curse. As a blessing, Goldmann shows how a detailed political and economic analysis is a must for any Marxist historical study. As a curse, he gets lost, for the detail feeds a rather crude theory of the relation between base and superstructure: the latter expresses and reflects the base.

To be fair, once Goldmann has this tight fit, he then wishes to locate this unit within the broader social, political and economic climate of the time – seventeenth-century France. But he does very little of that work, preferring to remain buried in the ever more specific details of what happened on what date. In fact, what he really presents in this book is primarily a political analysis, and there is precious little of the social and economic situation. When he does raise the question of class, especially concerning the shifting alliances between aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in relation to the king, it is strangely divorced from economics. So it seems that, on top of the problems of corre-

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<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in another discipline in which I have dabbled from time to time (biblical studies), critics do this all the time – read the conditions and intentions of authors from the texts alone, without any historical information outside the text.

<sup>40</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 99; 1959, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 103–41; 1959, pp. 115–56.

spondence (homology) and the desire for a tight fit, Goldmann has also fallen into the trap of substituting political analysis for economic analysis. We end up with the strange picture of an isolated group, drawn from disappointed legal functionaries [*officiers*] of the *noblesse de robe*, which spawns Jansenism. Denied the advancement they expected, opposed to the rise of the absolute monarchy and yet still dependent on it for their livelihood, this group produces Jansenism as an effort to cope with their disappointment.

### *Dialectics?*

For all his talk of a dialectical method, there is not much of it in his historical analysis. It does, of course, turn up in the rather banal opposition of the part and the whole,<sup>42</sup> and then more fruitfully in his discussion of the contradictions between the Elect and Damned within Jansenism. Yet, he seems to have used up all his energy for that discussion, for there is little of the dialectic when he gets to the historical context – a direct and tight fit between a subclass and its ideas is not really an example of the dialectic at work.<sup>43</sup>

On this point, Goldmann may be following Pascal further than he thought, for just as Pascal falls short of the full dialectic, so also does Goldmann when he turns to the question of history. Let me explain: Goldmann can never decide whether Pascal is the genuine creator of the dialectic or whether he merely set up its possibility, a possibility that was to be completed by Marx. At times, he goes overboard with his hero and Pascal turns out to be a full practitioner of the dialectic. For instance, in the dialectic embodied in the wager, between God's existence and absence, between the Elect and the Damned, between particular and universal, but above all in the interplay between reason and emotion, Pascal shows that he was, according to Goldmann, thoroughly familiar with the idea of *Aufhebung* even if he does not use the term.<sup>44</sup> Human existence, in other words, is made of antagonistic elements, such as body and mind, good and evil, reason and passion, and yet the catch is that human

<sup>42</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 3–21; 1959, pp. 13–31.

<sup>43</sup> The schematic analysis of 'world visions' as ideological expressions of social realities, changes and movements is hardly dialectic as well. Here we find that dogmatic rationalism, sceptical empiricism, the tragic vision, dialectical idealism, the animalistic view of nature, and mechanistic rationalism all become phases of bourgeois thought (Goldmann 1964a, pp. 14–21; 1959, pp. 24–31).

<sup>44</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 251; 1959, p. 281.

beings can neither accept one of these opposed elements nor live in a state of tension. What is needed, then, is some form of synthesis that overcomes the tensions. At times, Pascal is, for Goldmann, so close to Marx that he may as well be an earlier incarnation. But then Goldmann holds himself back, pointing out that Pascal was unable to make the final step beyond paradox to genuine dialectical thought in which equal and opposite truths come into contact with one another, largely due to the social circumstances of the seventeenth century. The mark of this limit is that Pascal sought a theological solution, resorting to God and faith as the way to sublimate the tensions, rather than the materialist sublation of Marx.<sup>45</sup> Pascal came so close, but did not quite get over the line to genuine dialectical thought. Goldmann may not resort to God, but unfortunately he too does not quite make it to the line of genuine dialectical historical analysis.

If we were going to offer such an analysis, then we would need to begin on a different note. In asking how the texts of Pascal and the thought of Jansenism respond to their economic and social context, I would suggest that a better approach is that such texts give off signals and hints of their context rather than any direct expression. One way in which such hints appear is by seeing texts as efforts to solve intractable contradictions in the social and economic spheres (an approach championed by Fredric Jameson, among others). The catch is that the contradictions do not disappear; they are displaced in the literary and intellectual work in question in all manner of ways, not least of which is that form of the work. Thus, the ongoing debate about the order of the fragments that make up the *Pensées* (especially since they were not ordered by Pascal), the fact that they are fragments and not a complete work, indeed that Pascal was unable to turn this contradictory collection into a coherent and logical work,<sup>46</sup> all suggest that the disruptions of the time manifest themselves obliquely in Pascal's text. And, if we were to include the

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<sup>45</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 215, 218–19, 258–9; 1959, pp. 240–1, 244–5, 289–90.

<sup>46</sup> For all his discussion of paradox and fragment, Goldmann misses the opportunity to make something of the disorder of the fragments, preferring to seek coherence and order: 'The order in which the *Pensées* are presented does nevertheless affect the reader's understanding of the work, and there does seem to me to be one particular order which is better than the others: the one which begins by insisting upon the paradoxical nature of man (wretchedness and greatness), leads us to the wager, and concludes by the valid but not compulsive reasons which Pascal gives, in his discussion of miracles and of the Bible, for believing in Christianity' (Goldmann 1964a, p. 201; 1959, p. 226).

broader economic and social context, then surely it must be the ruptured transition from feudalism and its all-too-strong relics (aristocracy and so forth) to the capitalism championed by the bourgeoisie. That the absolute monarchy, playing off old and new, should arise at this time is no accident, for the era of the absolutist state was itself the crucial vanishing mediator of the larger economic transition under way.<sup>47</sup>

However, there is a final feature of such a method: the responses of texts to their contexts are often unexpected. The answers may be negative or positive, offer a complete alternative, block parts of the context, and so on. That is, texts are semi-autonomous: they may metaphorise their context, they may provide efforts to overcome intractable social and economic contradictions, but they do so in unanticipated ways. For example, a story of kinship or tribal conflict does not necessarily mean that such a text comes from a tribal situation. The text's tribal world may be an imaginary creation in a different context, perhaps to provide an alternative model of human relations or distribution of resources. Or, in the case of Pascal, the way he deals with the problem of being faithful to God while living in an utterly sinful world can hardly be said to be the expression of disappointed hopes, the frustrated thoughts of a jilted public servant. Rather, the dialectic of the Elect and the Damned from the perspective of human beings as intermediate beings who must treat all as though they are of the Elect, or indeed the ingenious effort at a solution through the wager, are unexpected and creative responses to rather than mere expressions of their context. In their form of paradox and contradiction, they may respond to the social and economic contradictions from which they arose, but the specific content is not what one would expect. A more expected response might be the high ground of total refusal in some Jansenists or the pragmatic accommodation of others – as one might expect from disappointed and disaffected public servants – but not Pascal's response.

### **Is Pascal among the Marxists?**

The actuality (in the French sense) of Goldmann's study some fifty years after it was first published turns out to be its insights into the contradictions within Jansenism and especially Pascal. I am, like many others, far less taken with

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<sup>47</sup> See Anderson 1974a, especially pp. 85–112.

Goldmann's method, which singularly fails to live up to all the dialectical huffing and puffing. But then the rickety ladder seems to have done its work.

At this point, a curious anomaly appears, one with three features: the method of homology or genetic structuralism is not up to the task; Goldmann claims elsewhere that this *method* derives from Georg Lukács; and he makes use of the *content* of some of Lukács's work to uncover some features of Jansenist thought. I have provided my reasons already as to why the method of homology is not up to the task, so let me focus on the other two points. As far as developing his method from Lukács, Goldmann claims that Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*<sup>48</sup> is the source of his approach to the sociology of literature.<sup>49</sup> Apart from the problem that this text is one of Lukács's pre-Marxist and rather Kantian works, Lukács argues that a *genre* functions as a response to a distinct social and historical formation. In *The Theory of the Novel* and the more Kierkegaardian *Soul and Form*,<sup>50</sup> he goes so far as to argue that literature gives a clear voice to the tumult and chaos of a world 'abandoned by God' (see my chapter on Lukács). Even in these early works, Lukács already has (perhaps under the influence of Kierkegaard) a rather sophisticated dialectical understanding of the relation between literature and its context. The problem with these works is that the social context is rather vague; by the time of the Marxist work, *The Historical Novel*,<sup>51</sup> he would specify this in specific economic and social terms.

Goldmann is no fool, so what he does with this pre-Marxist work by Lukács is seek to tighten it up. Yet the path he chooses is one that runs in a different direction to Lukács: he seeks to lock in specific texts to distinct groups or subclasses, or he ties a particular genre into the various phases that he organises within a social formation. As for the former, the argument concerning Jansenism as the reflection of the disaffected legal *officiers* within the rising absolute monarchy of seventeenth-century France is an example. As for the latter, the argument in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* concerning the novels of André Malraux seeks to lock those novels into the various phases of commodity fetishism and reification (not surprisingly, there are three – expansion-

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<sup>48</sup> Lukács 1971b, 1994.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen argues that Piaget is also important, especially in Goldmann's idea of the 'transindividual subject' (Cohen 1994, pp. 132–7).

<sup>50</sup> Lukács 1974, 1971a.

<sup>51</sup> Lukács 1983a, 1965.

ist liberal capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the structural crises between 1912 and 1945, and state-regulated capitalism after 1945).<sup>52</sup> While the desire for tightening up Lukács's earlier work is admirable at one level, the way Goldmann goes about it loses the dialectical workings of Lukács's approach.

The third feature of this anomaly is that Goldmann's real insights into Jansenism derive not from the method of homology but from the explicit content of Lukács's texts. What he does is quote a specific text from Lukács when he needs to make a specific point concerning Jansenism. It really is a case of juxtaposing Lukács's arguments concerning different modes of thought or different genres in a different time to the situation and beliefs of Jansenism. Thus, in *The Hidden God*, we find a string of quotations from *Soul and Form*, so much so that the key insights into the tensions of Pascal and Jansenism are in fact provided by Lukács. So, we find the theme of *deus absconditus*, the world abandoned by God (that was also crucial in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*),<sup>53</sup> the tension between faith and reason, between living in the world and yet refusing it, and even the dynamics of conversion in order to understand Pascal's crises of faith – all of which are central to Jansenist theology. By the time I managed to get to the end of the chapter on God,<sup>54</sup> I became so used to seeing a quotation from Lukács at each point made that I suspected this was as much a book about Lukács as it was about Jansenism.

Apart from providing a valuable leg-up the methodological ladder that threatens to tumble at any moment, Lukács enables Goldmann to bring off another sleight of hand. Time and again, Goldmann lists Lukács as a third member of a triumvirate that includes Marx and Engels. Lukács is the great successor who carries on the Marxist intellectual tradition and raises it to even greater heights. And, yet, the Lukács who provides the crucial insights into the tensions of Jansenism is the author of *Soul and Form*, a pre-Marxist and even Kierkegaardian text. However much one might want to argue that the later, Marxist, Lukács was able to give his earlier non-Marxist insights greater depth, all is not as Goldmann would have us believe. It is, in the end,

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<sup>52</sup> Goldmann 1975, 1964b.

<sup>53</sup> Lukács 1971b, 1994.

<sup>54</sup> Goldmann 1964a, pp. 22–39; 1959, pp. 32–49; see also Goldmann 1981, pp. 10–11.

a pre-Marxist Lukács who hands Goldmann his insights into the workings of Pascal's texts.

However, what this sleight of hand allows Goldmann to do is connect Pascal ever more closely to Marx, so much so that they are cousins, if not half-brothers in the same large family. I have commented on some elements of this close association in Goldmann's text above, both in terms of the dialectic (Pascal is a Marxist dialectician, but then not quite) and the tension within Marxism as a programme thoroughly immersed in this world and yet focused on rejecting it in favour of a qualitatively better one. Goldmann develops a number of other comparisons, such as Pascal's search for God being analogous to the socialist search for the ideal community, or, indeed, the rationalist's search for truth and fame – all of which Goldmann's describes as the search for totality and wholeness.<sup>55</sup> Or Christian faith in God is like the Marxist faith in the future: it is a wager that such a faith will, one day, be proved true.<sup>56</sup>

These comparisons between Pascal and Marxism, or indeed between Christianity and Marxism may work at a rather superficial level, and they have been used to castigate Marxism as yet another (secular) religion with a feeble faith. To his credit, Goldman embraces these points to make them a strength rather than a weakness of Marxism. Yet I am less interested in Marxist faith or the search for another 'god'. What is far more fascinating is an insight Goldmann provides despite himself, and that is the tension between a Marxism that rejects the world while being thoroughly immersed in it.

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<sup>55</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 180; 1959, p. 202.

<sup>56</sup> 'Marxist faith is faith in the future which men make for themselves in and through history. Or, more accurately, in the future that we must make for ourselves by what we do, so that this faith becomes a "wager" which we make that our actions will, in fact, be successful. The transcendental element present in this faith is not supernatural and does not take us outside or beyond history; it merely takes us beyond the individual. This is sufficient to enable us to claim that Marxist thought leaps over six centuries of Thomist and Cartesian rationalism and renews the Augustinian tradition. It does not, of course, do this by reintroducing the same idea of transcendence, but by affirming two things: that values are founded in an objective reality which can be relatively if not absolutely known (God for Saint Augustine, history for Marx); and that the most objective knowledge which man can obtain of any historical fact presupposes his recognition of the existence of this reality as the supreme value'. (Goldmann 1964a, p. 90; 1959, p. 99.)



## **By way of conclusion: Marxism as a secular and anti-secular project**

Let me bring the various elements I have drawn from Goldmann – the tension between the Elect and the Damned as an internal tension of an intermediate being, the treatment of everyone as though they are of the Elect, the element of doubt, but above all the tension of refusing the world from within – together in the following manner: the tension within Marxism between being immersed in the world and yet not of it may be put in terms of a tension between secularism and anti-secularism. If we define the base sense of secularism as a system of thought and action, indeed a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world, then Marxism is both thoroughly secular and anti-secular. Other, popular senses of secularism may derive from this basic sense, especially the idea that secularism is an anti-religious programme, that it entails the separation of church and state, and that one must keep theology well and truly away from the proper scientific disciplines.<sup>57</sup> But let me stay with the prime meaning of secularism: as a way of acting and thinking that draws its terms from this world, the implication is that a fully secular programme does not draw its reference point from something beyond this world, whether that is a god or the gods above, or a better society and economic system in the future. On the first count, religion is disqualified; on the second count, Marxism is ruled out of order. So we have a delectable paradox: Marxism is thoroughly secular in one sense (did not Marx develop his deepest insights by immersing himself in the study of capitalism?), but, in another, it is not (it takes as its reference point a better society beyond capitalism).

This tension may take various forms, such as that between a reliance on the logic of history and yet taking action to change history,<sup>58</sup> a tension that lies at the heart of Calvinism: on the one hand, we are in the hands of God who has predestined us to salvation or damnation, and yet we must constantly show the fruits of our election by ceaseless activity. Or, indeed, within Jansenism: even though God may have decided between the Elect and the Damned, we mortals do not know what that decision is and so must act as though everyone were of the Elect and seek to bring them around to realise that.

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<sup>57</sup> The detail of this argument may be found in Boer 2007b.

<sup>58</sup> Goldmann 1964a, p. 303; 1959, p. 338.

The key lies, however, in what Goldmann calls the status of the intermediate being, caught (often unbearably) between the Elect and the Damned. It is not so much that Marxism is either a secular or an anti-secular programme, but that it lies in between these two possibilities. Marxism is engaged in a perpetual negotiation, a dialectic if you like, between rejecting and refusing the world of capitalism and struggling within it. Or, even more tightly, one works within the world in order to bring about its demise.