Hölderlin's Politics of the New Mythology

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ABSTRACT: This paper reevaluates Hölderlin's social and political thought in the 1790s. Against Georg Lukács, I argue that Hölderlin's politics of the new mythology, while utopian, are not mystical. In the *Fragment of Philosophical Letters* and the *Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism*, Hölderlin instead articulates two fundamental claims. *Socially*, the new mythical collectivity must elevate (*erheben*) the social relations produced by bourgeois society, exalting them in aesthetic-religious form, rather than sublating (*aufheben*) them, modifying both their form and their content. *Politically*, realizing this new collectivity requires transcending the state, and so is essentially revolutionary. Hölderlin's prosaic writings thus supplement *Hyperion*'s romantic critique of modernity. They take as their point of departure a sober exposition of the social relations of the market emerging in Hölderlin's time and, from within these relations, excavate a new mythical collectivity capable of suturing the fragmentary divisions of modern life.

KEYWORDS: Friedrich Hölderlin; Georg Lukács; new mythology; utopia; romanticism.

1. Hölderlin and Utopia

In his influential study of Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Georg Lukács praises Hölderlin for avoiding the political mistakes of his Tübingen classmates, Schelling and Hegel.[1] Whereas Schelling opts for reactionary religiosity and Hegel progressive reformism, Hölderlin holds fast to the revolutionary

ideals of the Jacobins.[2] But despite taking pride of place among Lukács's assessment of the *Frühromantiker*, Hölderlin's "indictment of his age" fails, in Lukács view, to move beyond a merely *utopian* and *mystical* vision of a free human community.[3] "Hölderlin," Lukács writes, "takes no notice of the limitations and contradictions of the bourgeois revolution," and, consequently, his "social theory must lose itself in mysticism."[4] Hölderlin's overvaluation of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* renders his vision of a unified society "purely ideological," since *Hyperion* unconsciously combines the "the premonition of the development of bourgeois society . . . with the utopia of something beyond this society, of a real liberation of mankind."[5] Hölderlin thus accepts the promise of the French revolution without taking notice that its realization contradicts the prevailing social conditions of his time.

A casual reader of *Hyperion* would not be faulted for agreeing with Lukács's assessment. While the epistolary novel is undoubtedly sensitive to the social issues of its day, it lacks a determinate vision of the political future. The novel is replete with poetic gestures of unification with nature, anti-fragmentation, and the "world's eternal oneness" but has little to say about the concrete social conditions under which this unity could be realized.[6] Even a sympathetic reader like Lukács will inevitably fail to find in *Hyperion* a feasible political project.

However, Lukács had a decidedly incomplete picture of Hölderlin. Writing his essay in the 1930s, Lukács either lacked access to Hölderlin's most important philosophical essays ("Being Judgment Possibility"),[7] took no notice of them ("Fragment of Philosophical Letters"),[8] or misattributed their authorship ("Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism").[9] Yet these prosaic texts show that Hölderlin's utopian politics of the new mythology, while certainly ambitious, were more than a literary dream. With these texts now available to us, we are in a better position to understand Hölderlin's social and political thought. By situating *Hyperion*

within the context of these essays, we can not only substantiate Lukács's commendation of Hölderlin as sensitive to the social conditions of his time, but also challenge Lukács's criticism that Hölderlin failed to contest these social conditions by developing a sociopolitical theory.

In this paper, I wish to prepare the way for such a reevaluation of Hölderlin's social thought by examining the *Philosophical Letters* in light of the *Systemprogramm* collaboration. The *Letters*, I argue, can be profitably interpreted as being in dialogue with the unifying "mythology of *reason*" called for in the *Systemprogramm*, as both texts share two fundamental contentions.[10] *Socially*, the new mythical collectivity called for by the *Systemprogramm* must elevate (*erheben*) the social relations produced by bourgeois society, dignifying or exalting them in aesthetic-religious form, rather than sublating (*aufheben*) them, modifying both their form and their content. *Politically*, the realization of this new collectivity requires the transcending of the state, and so is essentially revolutionary. Hölderlin here repeats Fichte, who had already taught that "the state is . . . only a *means for establishing a perfect society*" and so "like all those human institutions which are mere means, it aims at abolishing itself."[11]

Taken together, these two contentions, if correct, put into doubt the *mystification* Lukács attributes to Hölderlin's sociopolitical theory. They suggest instead that Hölderlin's prosaic writings supplement *Hyperion*'s romantic critique of modernity with the politics of the new mythology. Lukács is therefore correct to deem Hölderlin's theory of society *utopian*, as it portrays a political ideal that does not exist and provides no satisfactory account of its becoming. However, *pace* Lukács, it is not *mystical*: it takes as its point of departure a sober exposition of the social relations of the market emerging in Hölderlin's time and, from within these relations, excavates a new mythical collectivity capable of suturing the fragmentary divisions of modern life.

2. "I Want to Show That There Is No Idea of the State": The Politics of the *Systemprogramm*

As we have received it, the *Systemprogramm* thematizes five cultural spheres—ethics, physics, politics, religion, and aesthetics—which demand integration in the authors' eyes. These spheres are to attain "eternal unity" in what the fragment calls a "new mythology" (*neue Mythologie*) and a "new religion" (*neue Religion*).[12] The attitude of the *Systemprogramm* is romantic. It aestheticizes philosophy, declaring "the highest act of reason . . . [to be] an aesthetic act" and so rejects the prevailing ideal of the philosopher as someone who, calm and disenchanted, spurns "aesthetic sense."[13]

However, the *Systemprogramm* is not merely an induction into aesthetic philosophy. Calling for the realization of the new mythology, it is also a political manifesto. As such, its politics do not only condemn the present age but seek determinate action, demanding the "*equal* development of *all* forces" capable of realizing the "universal freedom and equality of all spirits."[14] What can we make of the fragment's claim that universal freedom ought to be realized through an egalitarian development of individual forces, one which would release these forces from their suppression by church and state? I suggest that the liberation of diverse forces demanded by the new mythology corresponds to a vision of bourgeois life within civil society, a way of life in which each individual pursues her chosen craft or profession, developing her skills and disposition, and, in so doing, contributes to the good of the whole. The political aim of the new mythology, then, is to elevate and ennoble (*erheben*) bourgeois social relations, releasing them from the fetters of existing state and religious institutions. The *Systemprogramm* lays out two notions essential for Hölderlin's politics of the new mythology: his *political anti-statism* and

his *social immanentism*. These claims divide the fragment's third paragraph on "human works" (*Menschenwerk*), which I will now address in turn.

The first half of the paragraph proclaims *anti-statism*:

> From nature I come to *human works*. First and foremost the idea of humanity—I want to show that there is no idea of the *state* because the state is something *mechanical*, just as there is no idea of a *machine*. Only an object of *freedom* is called an *idea*. Thus we must go beyond the state! For every state must treat free human beings as mechanical gears, and it should not do so; hence it should *cease to be*.[15]

The *Systemprogramm* takes issue with what it perceives as the state's necessary and two-sided mechanism. Not only can the state do nothing but treat citizens mechanically, undermining their freedom; the state is itself a mechanism. Since, according to the *Systemprogramm*, an idea (*Idee*) must be a product of freedom, and because the causality of freedom contradicts mechanical causality, we reach two conclusions: first, that the state is not an idea, i.e., its existence is not a necessary posit of reason; second, that the state's existence infringes upon the genuine idea of human freedom, one in which individuals exhibit freedom non-mechanically (the positive meaning of which the fragment leaves unresolved). This double mechanism of the state leads the *Systemprogramm*'s authors to reject wholesale existing political institutions: "I want to [….] strip down to the skin the whole miserable human work of states, constitutions, governments, legislation."[16] Thus realizing the new mythology entails in part replacing the state form as the proper means for organizing social life.

The second aspect of the *Systemprogramm*'s politics is its insistence on *immanence*. This aspect targets Germany's established religious institutions and their claim to external authority over the "*intellektuelle Welt*." It reads:

> In the end come the ideas of a moral world, divinity, immortality—the overthrow of all asinine superstition, the persecution, by means of reason itself, of the priesthood, which of late has been feigning reason. The absolute freedom of all spirits, who bear the intellectual world within themselves and ought to seek neither God nor immortality *outside themselves*.[17]

The fragment rejects any beyond that would supposedly ground the legitimacy of political institutions or relations to the divine. Yet, according to the *Systemprogramm*, "absolute freedom" lies not in abandoning the theological categories of God, immortality, and divinity outright. Instead, we must recognize how the divine arises *within* our ways of life and remains genuine only insofar as it proceeds immanently from our free practical activity. Genuine freedom stems not from the construction of ever more sophisticated state and religious institutions but from seeking the divine from within our mundane, pre-political forms of life. Like the *Systemprogramm*'s anti-statism, the immanence of the divine within our life forms also requires that we rid ourselves of existing institutions.

While the *Systemprogramm* is more than just a political pamphlet, social freedom remains central to its vision of a new mythology. The fragment contends that the "absolute freedom of all spirits," if it is to become real, must overcome the mechanistic state and the otherworldly priesthood. The sociality of the new mythology is one in which individuals, interacting with one another and between their diverse ways of life, integrate their forces, unmediated by the state, within an organic community that cultivates, equally and fully, their capacities in *this* world.

3. Towards A Social Theory of the New Religion: Hölderlin's *Philosophical Letters*

The *Letters* is the most important text for Hölderlin's social theory.[18] It takes its name from Hölderlin's letter to Niethammer. In the letter, Hölderlin explains that his contribution to Niethammer's journal will take up a dual theoretical task. Not only will the *Letters exposit* the divisions of modern life and thought by tracing their origin back to a single principle, but it will also *reconcile* these conflicting antitheses by proving this principle "to be capable of making the conflict disappear."[19] Hölderlin's *Letters*, in reference to Schiller, aims to explain and overcome the oppositions of Kantian philosophy through art, sharing the desire for spiritual unity encountered in the *Systemprogramm*. But the *Letters* is also a distinctly theoretical project, nebulously couched by Hölderlin in terms of "intellectual intuition," one effect being that the *Letters* present the same sociopolitical claims of the *Systemprogramm* in a more discursive-argumentative manner. As Hölderlin's aborted attempt to complete the *Letters* makes clear, whatever the nature of this principle to be discovered by intellectual intuition is, its *content* must be in part sociopolitical, developing *Systemprogramm*'s themes of social immanence and political mythology.

However, before treating these two themes, some discussion of the text as such is necessary. The draft, as we have it, is incomplete, partly due to loss. Many features of the *Letters* promised in Hölderlin's programmatic letter to Niethammer are absent: neither "intellectual intuition" nor "aesthetic sense" appear in the fragment, nor is there any presentation of a singular principle. Regarding the text itself, we can, following Michael Franz, divide it into three parts: two letter fragments and the author's "hints for continuation."[20] All three concern the experience of a spirit or "communal deity" (*gemeinschaftliche Gottheit*), Hölderlin's name for our social world once it has been dignified through an aesthetic-religious process of elevation, becoming

"raised above need" (*über die Noth erhebt*), to echo a phrase common in the *Letters*.[21] The first letter addresses *how* such an ennobling experience of a spirit is possible; the second letter *why* humanity is driven to have such experiences, and so to form communal representations of the divine; and the final part that the proper name for this unity of representation is *myth*. Like the *Systemprogramm*, the *Letters* treat more than just politics and social theory. We will, therefore, only address the first and third parts, attending to their development of the *Systemprogramm*'s themes of immanence and anti-statism.

The first letter fragment takes up the theme of spiritual immanence insofar as it can arise from bourgeois social relations and the division of labor. In it, Hölderlin asks *how* human beings may elevate above these economic relations and recognize that there is a spirit in the world. Hölderlin characterizes this recognition as the "experience that there is more than machinery, that there is . . . a god in the world,"[22] clearly linking the aim of the *Letters* with the *Systemprogramm*'s immanentism and anti-mechanism.

Hölderlin's answer in the first letter is twofold. First, he contends that divinity does not transcend our ordinary life activity or sphere (*Sphäre*) but arises within it such that, in combination with the spheres of others, it produces a communal deity:

> [E]veryone would . . . have his own god, insofar as everyone has his own sphere in which he is active and which he experiences, and only insofar as several people have a common sphere, in which they are active and suffer humanly, that is, risen above need, only insofar do they have a communal deity; and if there is a sphere in which all live simultaneously and to which they feel they maintain a relation beyond need, then, but only insofar, do they all have a communal deity.[23]

For Hölderlin, the divine is not transcendent but arises from within our ordinary and diverse life activity, emerging when we raise ourselves above the toil of our daily self-maintenance, dignifying our mundane form of life. This spiritual raising takes the form of what Hölderlin earlier calls a "more lively relation"[24] in which natural need is no longer the determining factor, a relation to our sphere that proves itself beyond necessity and so capable of freedom. But this relation is essentially social; it requires individuals to form a community and, consequently, to inhabit a "common sphere" of activity. For Hölderlin, this community engendered through religion counteracts the mechanism of the state, perhaps overcoming it all together.

The second part of Hölderlin's answer concerns aesthetics. It is not enough for the divine to arise within our ways of life; individuals must also have a means for apprehending this communal deity. For this purpose, Hölderlin introductions the notion of a representation (*Vorstellung*), which refers to an aesthetic comprehension of the unified totality of ways of life forming the communal deity:

> It is . . . a need of human beings [*Bedürfniß der Menschen*] . . . to make . . . their different kinds of representation of the divine join one another, and thus to give the limitedness which every single kind of representation has, and must have, its freedom, in that it is contained in a harmonious whole of kinds of representation, and, at the same time, precisely because in every particular kind of representation lies also the meaning of the particular way of life which everyone has, to give the necessary limitedness of this way of life its freedom, in that it is comprehended in a harmonious whole of ways of life.[25]

The aesthetic act of representation thus sutures together the diverse ways of life produced by bourgeois society. It does so not by overcoming their diversity but rather by elevating difference and preserving it, giving it a higher meaning. To give one's particular way of life its freedom is

thus not to deny its limitedness or one-sidedness but to experience, in an aesthetic representation, its essential contribution to the harmonious social whole. Such aesthetically mediated freedom in no way depends upon the state's existence.

In the third part of the *Letters*, notes labeled "hints for continuation," Hölderlin makes explicit the mythicality of the communal divinity exposited in the two letters. These notes thus likely correspond to the reconciling moment Hölderlin had planned in his letter to Niethammer. For Hölderlin, myth captures the general form of difference-in-unity, expressing a whole whose parts are posited neither exclusively (A or B) nor separately (A and B) but "both in one" (*beedes in Einem*).[26] Hölderlin arrives at this formula in his attempt to unify two kinds of relations (*Verhältnisse*): on the hand, religious-intellectual ones, and, on the other, historical-physical. Leaving aside the difficult task of specifying their precise meaning and origin, we may simply note that these relations are quite general, pertaining both to life and to poetry, and roughly correspond to relations of independence and mutual limitation (intellectual relations) versus those of inseparability and coherence (physical relations). Mythology, according to Hölderlin, defines a third category of relation, one which unites these two "so that the religious relations, in their *representation*, are neither intellectual nor historical, but intellectual-historical, *that is*, *Mythical*."[27]

We achieve self-understanding of these "more infinite relations," Hölderlin concludes, by developing a new mythology.[28] This mythology would utilize our social drive to supplement bourgeois social relations with a higher concern for the unity of our aesthetic representations, representations which arise only through the interaction of our diverse ways of life. This new community would therefore aspire to the beautiful harmony of antiquity insofar as it would privilege religious relations over legal, moral, and intellectual ones; that is, it would determine

relations between individuals not as "isolated" or as relations "in themselves" but instead according to "the *spirit* that governs the sphere in which those relations take place."[29] Only a community united by myth and whose social relations are dictated by the spirit of the whole can make good on the promise of liberation found in the *Systemprogramm*. This is why Hölderlin terminates the *Letters* by reminding himself that "one could speak here about the unification of several into one religion, where . . . all honor a communal god in poetic representations, where . . . all celebrate a common higher life, the celebration of life mythically."[30]

4. From Mysticism to Mythology

Hölderlin's prose fragments cannot be said to amount to a robust social theory. Nonetheless, they indicate not only that Hölderlin intended to supplement *Hyperion* with a sociopolitical theory but that he also made some degree of progress in carrying out its exposition. The call for a new mythology echoed by the early Jena romantics—understood by Hölderlin as requiring a new stateless polity in which absolute freedom would be realized through the unfettering of diverse life activity—is given in these fragments further explication with sufficient intimacy to justify reading them together, that is, as forming a roughly continuous line of thought.

However, forming an unbroken line of thought does not entail its success. In a later letter to his stepbrother, Hölderlin suggests that the project of a new mythology was ultimately a failure, running into "difficulties which seem almost insurmountable."[31] So perhaps we must concede to both Hölderlin and Lukács. The theoretical project of the new mythology, even when explicated, fails in the last analysis to give us a determinate model for a political future; it is merely utopian. Nevertheless, Hölderlin's exposition of the new mythology evinces a serious attempt to understand modern society discursively. It reckons with the nascent forms of

alienation and market-based social relations integral to this society but also sees in these relations new possibilities for realizing freedom, affordances locatable in an aesthetic experience capable of elevating and ennobling them. So whatever its other defects, the new mythology was not mystical. Instead, Hölderlin's thinking in this period addresses the aesthetic-religious horizon of a universal spiritual unification—in a word, utopian mythology, not blind ideology.

NOTES

1. Georg Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," in *Goethe and His Age*, trans. Robert Anchor (London: Merlin Press, 1968), 136–56; "Hölderlins *Hyperion*," in *Werke*, vol. 7 (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1964), 164–84. On the lasting influence of Lukács's Hölderlin essay, see Helen Fehervary, *Hölderlin and the Left: The Search for a Dialectic of Art and Life* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977), 59–65; and Meinhard Prill, *Bürgerliche Alltagswelt und pietistisches Denken im Werk Hölderlins: Zur Kritik des Hölderlin-Bildes von Georg Lukacs* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983), 53–118. Pierre Bertaux presents evidence for Hölderlin's Jacobinism in "Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution," *Hölderlin-Jahrbuch* 15 (1967/68): 1–27.

2. Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," 137–38; "Hölderlins *Hyperion*," 164–66.

3. Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," 147; "Hölderlins *Hyperion*," 174.

4. Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," 140; "Hölderlins *Hyperion*," 168. Cf. 149–50; 177–78.

5. Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," 140; "Hölderlins *Hyperion*," 168.

6. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or the Hermit in Greece*, trans. Howard Gaskill (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), 9; *Sämtliche Werke: Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. D. E. Sattler, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1975), 11:585–86, hereafter FHA.

7. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Being Judgment Possibility,” in *Essays and Letters*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth (London: Penguin, 2009).

231–32; FHA 17:149–53.

8. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Fragment of Philosophical Letters,” in *Essays and Letters*, 234–39; FHA 14:11–49, hereafter *Letters*.

9. “The So-called ‘Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism’,” trans. Nicholas Halmi, in Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 170–73; “*Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*,” FHA 14:14–17, hereafter *Systemprogramm*. Written in Hegel’s hand, attribution of the fragment’s authorship between Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling remains a lively debate (the text is included in editions of each author’s works). However, it is generally recognized that Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling all influenced the *Systemprogramm*’s intellectual genesis. I remain agnostic regarding the fragment’s authorship, simply supposing that Hölderlin had a heavy hand in its development and articulation. On the document’s authorship, see Eckart Förster, “‘To Lend Wings to Physics Once Again’: Hölderlin and the ‘Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism’,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995), 174–77.

10. *Systemprogramm*, 172; FHA 14:17.

11. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation,” in *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 156.

12. *Systemprogramm*, 171; FHA 14:17.

13. *Systemprogramm*, 171; FHA 14:14–17.

14. *Systemprogramm*, 172, translation modified; FHA 14:17.

15. *Systemprogramm*, 170–71; FHA 14:14.

16. *Systemprogramm*, 171; FHA 14:14.

17. *Systemprogramm*, 171; FHA 14:14.

18. See Michael Franz, "Theoretische Schriften," in *Hölderlin-Handbuch*, ed. Johann Kreuzer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 232–36; Nathan Ross, *The Philosophy and Politics of Aesthetic Experience: German Romanticism and Critical Theory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 65–87; Dieter Sturma, "Politics and the New Mythology: The Turn to Late Romanticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 314–35. Alternatively, Adrian Del Caro reconstructs Hölderlin's politics through his poetry in *Hölderlin: The Poetics of Being* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 53–63.

19. Letter to Niethammer (24 February 1796), in *Essays and Letters*, 67–68, translation modified; FHA 19:246.

20. Franz, "Theoretische Schriften," 233.

21. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 235; FHA 14:46.

22. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 234; FHA 14:45.

23. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 234, translation modified; FHA 14:45.

24. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 234; FHA 14:45.

25. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 235, translation modified; FHA 14:45–46.

26. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 238; FHA 14:49.

27. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 238; FHA 14:48.

28. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 237–36; FHA 14:48.

29. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 237; FHA 14:48.

30. Hölderlin, *Letters*, 239; FHA 14:49.

31. Letter to Karl Gok (4 June 1799), in *Essays and Letters*, 137; FHA 19:377.

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