

# **From Alienation to Revolution: A Defense of Marx's Theory of Alienation.**

Alex Steiner, May 1997

## **Introduction**

*The following discussion presents an overview of Marx's theory of alienation. In contrast to the usual presentation of the subject, we will demonstrate that Marx's theory of alienation is unintelligible without a prior assimilation of the philosophical method by which it was derived. This in turn leads to a major problem. The philosophical outlook and categories employed by Marx are quite foreign to those, particularly in the English-speaking world, who have been trained in the school of empiricism and its descendants, positivism and analytic philosophy. The process of misapprehension can be likened to an attempt to appropriate the great literature of a foreign language by reference to a phrase book. Compounding the problem is the hostility to socialist politics that is engendered by powerful class interests, generating the grossest caricatures of Marxism which find their way into the popular media. On top of this, a further layer of confusion has been sown by the distorted and vulgar interpretations of Marxism that were spread for decades by the heirs of Stalin.*

*The prognosis for breaking through this logjam is nevertheless far from hopeless. Indeed, the demise of the Soviet Union has opened up the possibility for a genuine renewal of authentic Marxism. The stultifying pressure of an official brand of "Marxism" which functioned as the ideological legitimation of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union no longer commands any credibility. This is the other side of the coin of the so-called "new world order", which appeared to many as heralding the ultimate triumph of capitalism.*

*Marx's theory of alienation has often been presented as something entirely separate, if not completely at odds with his scientific work. Marx the philosopher is counterposed to Marx the author of Capital and the relationship of each to Marx the revolutionary remains a mystery. Depending on the preferences of the author, either the "young Marx" is favored over the "mature Marx" or vice-versa. We will show that maintaining this dichotomy is only possible if the body of Marx's work is either deliberately distorted or misunderstood. Our thesis is that the theory of alienation lays the foundation for a scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production. Neither is understandable without the other. The critique of political economy in turn results in the identification of the working class as the sole agency capable of transforming society and thereby overcoming the proximate cause of alienation.*

*In the course of our investigation, we will engage a number of authors who have contributed to the debate on alienation. In doing so, we make no pretense at providing anything like an exhaustive review of the literature on the subject. That would probably*

*require several volumes. Our intent is to clarify the differences and raise the level of discussion through a critique of the work of several representatives of current ideological trends opposed to Marxism.*

*Whereas the scope of this essay limits the discussion to those concepts that most directly bear on the theory of alienation, it is not possible to completely avoid many other issues of Marxist philosophy. This should not be surprising. A dialectical cognition of any part of an object of investigation cannot be isolated from a comprehension of the whole. At the same time, the part must not be conflated into the whole. Keeping this in mind, we have sought to explore the theory of alienation through an explication of Marx's essentialism and his understanding of human nature. This narrowing of our focus enables us to clarify certain issues that may otherwise remain obscure in the context of a more generalized discussion.*

## **Alienation: The Historical Antecedents**

In beginning a discussion of alienation, it may be helpful to start from a model of a society that is free from this blight. Unfortunately, recorded history does not provide us with an example of such a society. This is no accident. The phenomenon of alienation and recorded history are bound together. Both are coeval with class society. In the discussion that follows we will be examining the specific form of alienation endemic to capitalist society.

Yet it is undoubtedly a fact that alienation predates capitalism. A brilliant analysis of the origin of alienation in the life of ancient Greece is provided by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Hegel, ancient Athens provides us with the one shining example of a society in which there is no contradiction between one's instincts and one's social obligations. This state is described as follows:

“The true ethical life of the ancient world has as its principle that each man should abide in his duty. An Athenian citizen did what was expected of him, so to speak, instinctively.”<sup>1</sup>

Hegel called this harmonious state the Ethical Life. Hegel's exposition of the Ethical Life in ancient Athens was not meant to be a historically accurate account of life in the Greek polis. Rather, it served as a point of reference for his subsequent exposition of the genesis of alienation in human society. This is a society as yet untouched by discordance. As soon as man reflects on his actions, he initiates a process that starts to break up the idyllic Ethical Life. Divine Law, man's original law, comes into conflict with Human Law. In Hegel's view Greek Tragedy provides the first voice of the conflict between Divine Law and Human law. The Oedipus story provides a striking example.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation of this passage is from “Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment”, p. 97, Lewis Hinchman, University of South Florida Press, 1984. The original English version can be found in *The Philosophy of History*, p. 39, G. W. F. Hegel, Dover, 1956.

“...the son does not recognize his father in the man who has wronged him and whom he slays, nor his mother in the queen whom he makes his wife. In this way a power which shuns the light of day ensnares the ethical self-consciousness, a power which breaks forth only after the deed is done...In this truth therefore the deed is brought out into the light of day, as something in which the conscious is bound up with unconscious, what is one's own with what is alien to it, as an entity divided within itself.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of Antigone provides a more developed form of the antithesis between Divine Law and Human Law. Antigone, **knowingly** carries out the dictates of Divine Law, the burial of her brother's corpse, in the face of the sanction of Human Law. The ruler of the city of Thebes, Creon, had forbidden the burial to serve as an example of the punishment awaiting those who rebelled against the city. Antigone cannot allow her brother's body to rot outside the city gates. For her deed, at once affirming Divine Law and defying human law, she is put to death. The pathos of Greek tragedy is the first form of alienation understood and expressed as such.

In the history of philosophy, the conscious reflection of the conflict between Divine Law and Human Law was first articulated by the Sophists. They challenged the traditional notion that the laws of the city were derived from the gods. They propounded the notion that laws were made by men and can therefore be changed by men. Their philosophical nemesis, Socrates, opposed the caprice of the Sophists's conventionalism. Socrates however did not return to a veneration of custom and tradition in defending the necessity of human law. Far from it, Socrates was put to death for the crime of 'corrupting the youth' by spreading impious teaching. Socrates and the Sophists set into motion a great flowering of philosophical speculation about the nature of human society and its inner conflicts. These speculations reached their height with the philosophical and practical search for the best society in the works of Plato and Aristotle.

Following the demise of the ancient societies of Greece and Rome, the philosophical investigation of social antagonism fell into decline as well. Social antagonism of course remained, but the possibility for its articulation in philosophy was closed at the same time as open political options disappeared. The relatively democratic regimes of the Greek poleis gave way to the centralized and authoritarian Roman state. As political engagement became further constricted, Christian messianism replaced philosophy and politics as an avenue for articulating the pathos of humanity.

With Christianity, the concept of alienation is defined in theological terms. The “fall of man” inaugurated the condition of separation of man from god. The myth of the first man and woman being cast out from the Garden of Eden provides us with a new paradigm of man's self-alienation. The original unity that existed between god and his creation was disrupted by man asserting his will, thereby attaining the knowledge of Good and Evil. Conversely, the dream of a return to the primal unity of man with god becomes the passion of the mystic and messiah.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 283, Par. 469, G.W.F. Hegel, Translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977.

For centuries Western philosophy was preoccupied by the themes established in the Christian myths of guilt and redemption. This began to change under the impact of the great social transformations marking the rise of capitalism in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Gradually a new conception of man was replacing the traditional theological interpretation. Man emerged in a more mundane bourgeois form as a creature whose nature is expressed through the activity of buying and selling. A new content emerged within the theological notion of man's alienated condition. The ability to "alienate" one's possessions, transferring ownership from oneself to another, came to have a positive connotation, overcoming the religious and feudal restrictions against usury and the sale of landed property. It was from this usage that the term "alienating" derived its common law meaning of engaging in a contractual obligation.

The Protestant Reformation most clearly elucidated this transvaluation of the traditional theology. It has today become a cliché, but no less true, to point out that the real content of the Protestant Reformation was the preparation and justification on theological grounds of the new morality of acquisitiveness and competition.

The assertion of the absolute right to possess and thereby sell every single thing in nature and society did not go unchallenged, even within the framework of the theological debates of the time. The radical theologian and leader of the German Peasant's revolt, Thomas Munzer, directly challenged Martin Luther, declaring it intolerable, "that all creation has been made into property, the fish in the water, the birds in the air, the offspring of the earth - creation too must become free."<sup>3</sup>

In the realm of philosophy, the social contract theorists extended the concept of alienation from its origins in the world of commerce to apply to the transfer of rights and obligations. Human society enters into a "social contract" in which the rights man is endowed with by nature are transferred to a sovereign body, the State, whose function it will be to ensure that the commercial business of civil society proceeds unhampered. For Hobbes, human liberty was guaranteed by the contract which transforms the state of nature, characterized by *bellum omnium contra omnes* { war of all against all }, into a civil society presided over by a Sovereign. The Sovereign in turn enforces the right of all to alienate their possessions.

The Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century generally held to the positive view of the social contract. A new secular myth of the social contract is created analogous to the Christian myth of the "fall of man". Unlike the Christian myth, there is far less nostalgia among the social contract theorists for a return to the primal state of nature. By entering into the social contract, man begins a process of "denaturing" himself. He defines himself as human in distinction to the natural world of animal instincts. The process of creating and nurturing civilization inaugurates an epoch of progress that was seen as leading eventually to the triumph of Reason against barbarism and superstition.

This was more or less the picture until the great philosopher from Geneva, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, enters the historical scene. Rousseau was the first to grasp the negative

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Marx in "On the Jewish Question", p.60, Karl Marx Selected Writings, edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.

side of alienation. Whereas for Hobbes and Locke, alienation in the economic realm must be defended in order to guarantee civil society, for Rousseau, civil society itself is problematic. He grasped that the seeds of social antagonism are introduced by the unhindered ability to buy and sell. He writes of the profound inequality introduced by the social contract,

“Are not all the advantages of society for the rich and powerful? Are not all lucrative posts in their hands? Are not all the privileges and exemptions reserved for them alone? Is not the public authority always on their side?”<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of civil society resting on private property makes possible modern civilization but it also separates man from nature and therefore from man's natural self. Rousseau expresses this sentiment in the immortal opening line of “The Social Contract”,

“Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”<sup>5</sup>

Rousseau however was far from a romantic worshipper of nature, a view that has often been mistakenly ascribed to him. He saw man's alienation from nature as a necessary evil, as the price man has to pay to participate in the benefits of modern civil society.

“What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and the absolute right to anything that tempts him and that he can take; what he gains by the social contract is civil liberty and the legal right of property in what he possesses.”<sup>6</sup>

While paying homage to the benefits of civil society, Rousseau could not avert his gaze from the poverty and degradation of spirit ushered in by the world of unlimited commerce. Though Rousseau could offer no solution to this conundrum, his critique of civil society is the first formulation of the modern understanding of alienation that was to have a far more comprehensive articulation in the thought of Hegel.

With Hegel, the positive and negative sides of alienation are united in a new synthesis. We shall later explore how Hegel brought together alienation as a separation of man from his natural being with the notion of alienation as a voluntary surrendering of natural rights. It is the immediate successors of Hegel, the Young Hegelians, to which we now turn. From these sources comes the next advance in the theory of alienation, which paradoxically appears at first to signal a retrogression. The Young Hegelians seem to abandon the social and political dimension of alienation that was articulated by Rousseau and return to a consideration of religion. This backward movement however is merely the appearance of things. We shall see that for the most important of the Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach, the return to the religious explanation of alienation has exactly the opposite significance that it had for the Christian mystics.

---

<sup>4</sup> A Discourse on Political Economy, Rousseau, p.35, Everyman Edition.

<sup>5</sup> The Social Contract, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, p.49, Penguin Classics, New York, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

Feuerbach inherits and radicalizes a method of inquiry that was characteristic of the Young Hegelians. The hallmark of this practice was a search for the historical and philosophical truth concealed in religious myths. This mode of deconstruction was pioneered by the Young Hegelian, David Strauss, whose "Life of Jesus" was the first attempt to provide a rational and historical explanation of the myths contained in the Bible. Strauss sought to reinterpret religion as myth and parable instead of historical fact in order to reinforce the higher truths contained in religion. Feuerbach however, building on the work of Strauss and the other Young Hegelians, tried to demonstrate that the myths of religious belief, far from elevating man, degrade him by robbing him of his natural powers.

Feuerbach was notable for developing the critique of religion into a radical atheism and humanism. He asserted, against the idealism of Hegel, that material conditions are the source of ideas. According to his method of "transformative criticism" the hidden truth behind religious mystification can be discovered by reversing the order of precedence between the subject, god and its object, man. Instead of god creating man, as traditional religious belief maintained, it was man that created god. The attributes that are used to describe god are nothing more than the idealized attributes of man himself. Conversely, the religious mentality deprives man of his essential attributes, and leaves him with a meager shell. Feuerbach expressed the kernel of his insight thus,

"Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is - man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations.

But in religion man contemplates his own latent nature. Hence it must be shown that this antithesis, this differencing of God and man, with which religion begins, is a differencing of man with his own nature."<sup>7</sup>

What Feuerbach describes above as the "differencing of man with his own nature" is the key to his development of the concept of alienation. Alienation is no longer seen as the result of a specific contingent historical act, even an imaginary historical act such as "the fall of man" or the "social contract." Alienation is seen as a condition that of necessity arises out of man's essential nature. Although Feuerbach was not the first to conceive of alienation in this manner, (Hegel had already postulated a necessary development of the self-alienated spirit in his "Phenomenology of Spirit"), he was the first to attempt a materialist explanation of this phenomena.

Feuerbach's theory of alienation stands the Christian view of alienation on its head. The problem is not the alienation of man from God as the Christian mystics had it, but rather it is the alienation of God considered as man's creation, from man. This mystification, in which subject becomes object and object becomes subject cascades out

---

<sup>7</sup> "The Essence of Christianity", Ludwig Feuerbach, p33, Prometheus Press, New York, 1989.

from religion proper in the thinking of Feuerbach and invades all areas of man's spiritual life. Feuerbach identified traditional philosophical speculation as simply a hidden form of religious alienation. He writes,

“The essence of speculative philosophy is nothing but the rationalized, realized, presented essence of God. Speculative philosophy is the true, consistent and rational theology.”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the veil of mystification which he attributes to traditional philosophy, Feuerbach sees his own task as that of restoring man's humanity back to man through a penetrating critique which reveals man's true essence. This will be the responsibility of a new science of man, anthropology, whose principles are first delineated by Feuerbach.

“The new philosophy makes man - with the inclusion of nature as the foundation of man - the unique, universal and highest object of philosophy. It thus makes anthropology, with the inclusion of physiology, the universal science.”<sup>9</sup>

The goal of the new science of anthropology is nothing less than the overcoming of alienation through the restoration of man's true nature to himself. This human essence consists in emotions such as love and empathy and has a physical and sensuous dimension that was missing from traditional philosophy. Feuerbach writes,

“Whereas the old philosophy started by saying, ‘I am an abstract and merely thinking being to whose essence the body does not belong,’ the new philosophy, on the other hand, begins by saying, ‘I am a real, sensuous being and, indeed, the body in its totality is my ego, my essence itself.’”<sup>10</sup>

The realization of the essence of man, which is sometimes referred to as “species-being”, is discussed by Feuerbach in terms of such generality that it lacks any specific historical locus. This would later become a focus of Marx's critique of Feuerbach. The following passage exemplifies this problem in Feuerbach's presentation:

“The single man for himself possesses the essence of man neither in himself as a moral being nor in himself as a thinking being. The essence of man is contained only in the community and unity of man with man; it is a unity, however, which rests only on the reality of the distinction between I and thou.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Marx was sympathetic with Feuerbach's attempt to restore the physical dimension to the concept of man, he pointed out that Feuerbach's form of materialism incorporated a new type of abstraction. Feuerbach was unable to conceive of man as defining himself through the particular historical forms by which production is organized. Marx makes this point in the 6<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach,

---

<sup>8</sup> “Principles of the Philosophy of the Future”, Ludwig Feuerbach, p.6, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 54.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

“Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations.

Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is consequently compelled:

1. To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract - isolated - human individual.

2. Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as 'genus' as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals." <sup>12</sup>

Here Marx is noting that a concept of human essence which is not historical is empty. It fails to recognize that this essence is “the ensemble of social relations”. It is not sufficient to say that religious sentiments arise from human needs. While this is true enough, it leaves unanswered the question of how a particular religious practice arises from universal human needs. What is missing is a mediating term between the particular and the universal, in this case the historically developed relations between classes that form the context of the religious practices. A genuine scientific theory of man would show how specific religious practices arose from specific historical developments through man's social practice. Marx elaborated this point further when writing *Capital* many years later.

“For a society of commodity producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material form bring their individual, private labours into relation with each other as homogeneous human labour, Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion.” <sup>13</sup>

A further point of Marx's critique is that it is not sufficient to recognize the secular origins of man's alienated religious expression. What is required is a critique of secular society, showing that the secular society is itself “alienated”, i.e. turned against its true nature. This explains why Marx begins from a critique of political economy, and not as Feuerbach does, from a critique of the religious form of alienation. Marx's restores the political and social dimension of alienation which was so brilliantly if only partially grasped by Rousseau. In one of his earliest published works, he emphasized that German philosophy, having attained its zenith with Feuerbach's critique of religion, must now reorient itself back to the critique of civil society if it is to make any further progress.

“It is above all the task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask the human self alienation in its secular forms, once its sacred forms have been unmasked. Thus, the critique of heaven is transformed into the critique of the earth, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx Selected Writings, “Theses on Feuerbach”, edited by David McLellan, p. 157, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> *Capital*, Volume I, Karl Marx, p. 172, Penguin Books, 1976.



critique of religion into the critique of law, the critique of theology into the critique of politics.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Marx insists that a genuinely radical critique must lead to a transformation in practice of the conditions that create alienated humanity. Marx's exposure of the limitations of Feuerbach's new science would be repeated in a more straightforward manner in the first volume of *Capital*, this time without mentioning Feuerbach by name. Here Marx writes,

“The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development.”<sup>15</sup>

Note that in this passage, taken from his mature deliberations, Marx poses the solution to the question first enunciated by Feuerbach in terms that Feuerbach would undoubtedly have rejected. For Marx, the positive emancipation of mankind, including emancipation from religious mystification, only becomes possible once class society has been overcome. We shall see in the following discussion that this expression of Marx's thought was anticipated in his very early work, “The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”.

## **Marx's Concept of Human Nature**

Marx's theory of alienation, even in its first tentative pronouncement, is located in his analysis of the relations between classes as they have developed within the particular social formation of capitalism. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx points to the intimate relationship between alienation, division of labor and private property:

“Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity - and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.”

“This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces - labor's product - confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is

---

<sup>14</sup> *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Introduction, p. 132, Edited by Joseph O'Malley, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 173.

the **objectification** of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labor appears as **loss of realization** for the workers; objectification as **loss of the object** and **bondage to it**; appropriation as **estrangement** or **alienation**..."

"The **alienation** of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an **external** existence but that it exists **outside** him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien."<sup>16</sup>

For Marx, the historically specific form in which alienation is manifested requires a grounding in a universal concept of man's essential nature. We will see in the following analysis how Marx insists on presenting alienation as an antagonistic unity of the universal, the essence of man, and the particular historical form of social relations based on private property. The universal is defined through man's natural drives and capacities. Man has certain biological needs and the capacities to fulfill those needs, which require a continual interaction with the natural world. The need and capacity for eating is one example of man as a natural being. These are qualities that man shares with other animals. Man is also however, a species being, by which Marx means that man has certain specifically human drives that differentiate him from other animals. Among the specifically human needs and capacities are to be counted the exercise and enjoyment of the senses. These latter type of needs and capacities cannot be seen simply as properties of man in general, in the mode of Feuerbach. They are historically developed as part of a social, as distinct from an individual practice. It is this criticism of Feuerbach that Marx had in mind when he wrote,

"Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity."<sup>17</sup>

Through the employment of the senses and the conscious exercise of man's natural capacities to lift, strike, mold and shape, man objectifies the natural world and thereby defines his essential nature as a species being. This is how Marx explained this in the *1844 Manuscripts*.

"Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or rather, it is only because he is a species being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence.

---

<sup>16</sup> "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", Karl Marx, p.107-108. International Publishers, New York, 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Op cit., Marx Selected Writings, "Theses on Feuerbach", p. 156.

*From Alienation to Revolution: A Defense of Marx's Theory of Alienation*

In creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species in its essential being, or that treats itself as a species being.”<sup>18</sup>

It is easy enough to see that the result of alienated labor is an estrangement from the world of objects, the product of man's activity. Marx insists however that alienation reverberates on a deeper level. Man is estranged from his own activity.

“But the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the act of production, within the producing activity, itself. How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself...

What then constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.”<sup>19</sup>

Man's essential nature is defined by the reciprocal interaction between man's needs and his capacities. New needs continually give rise to new capacities to meet those needs. The development of new capacities creates new needs. Man's history is characterized by the development of new needs and capacities each of which is appropriate to a particular phase of man's historical development. Thus the kind of relatively simple needs and capacities mankind had at the dawn of civilization is much different than the complex set of needs and capacities that contemporary man has. In communist society man would have the most complex and subtle set of needs and capacities to fulfill those needs. This situation was poetically described by Marx in the following passage from the *1844 Manuscripts*.

“Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. If you to enjoy art, then you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a specific expression corresponding to the object of your will, of your real individual life.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Op cit., *1844 Manuscripts*, p 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.110-111.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p 141. Marx is here deliberately contrasting the all-sided development of the human personality that is a natural product of direct human interaction with the inversion of the human personality arising from man's domination by things when social relations are mediated through the production and exchange of

Insofar as human activity serves a social purpose it follows that the activity which defines man as a species being equally defines man as a social being. Both the form and content of man's essential life activity is stamped with a social purpose. Thus the product of the activity of a carpenter is not merely some pieces of wood, but a table, a socially useful object reflecting the purpose of its producer. It is the exercise of such capacities and their continual progression into richer forms that characterize man. This is another way of saying that the essence of man is socialized labor.

In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx repeatedly uses Feuerbach's terminology of "species being" to refer to man's essential nature. However, while the words are Feuerbach's, the content is Marx's. "Species being" no longer connotes an abstract humanity divorced from specific historical expressions. The term is now used in the sense of a universal essence that contains rather than excludes all the specificity of man's successive modes of social relations. It was Feuerbach's abstract use of the term that Marx criticized in the 6<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach where he wrote,

"Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as 'genus' as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals." <sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Marx did not again employ the term "species being" following the *1844 Manuscripts*. Subsequently, Marx would prefer to employ the concept of "socialized labor", emphasizing that man defines himself historically through the evolution of production relations. <sup>22</sup> In the *German Ideology*, this idea is formulated as follows,

"Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production,

---

commodities. This is a theme that Marx would return to in his chapter on the Fetishism of Commodities in Volume I of *Capital*.

<sup>21</sup> Theses on Feuerbach, op. cit. p157.

<sup>22</sup> The fact that Marx dropped the term "species being" in his later writings has been cited by more than one commentator as evidence that Marx's thinking went through a philosophical conversion following the *1844 Manuscripts*. While it is doubtless true that Marx dropped the Feuerbachian terminology to avoid the confusion of falsely identifying his concept with Feuerbach's ahistorical category, it should be kept in mind that the content of what Marx meant by "production relations" are already implied in his employment of the term "species being". There are thus no grounds for citing this change in Marx's terminology as evidence of a supposed "epistemological break."

both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Alienation as Perversion of Man's Essential Nature**

When Marx talks of man's estrangement, he means that man finds himself turned against the human needs and capacities that define him as human. Not only are man's immediate capacities redirected into serving ends other than the ones he himself created, but the potential for developing these capacities and needs in accordance with man's essential nature is thwarted. Specifically, Marx sees that the capitalist mode of production transforms the relationship between humans into a relationship between things that have power over humans. Conversely, the world of objects, of things, takes on a seemingly human existence when things, i.e., commodities determine the activity of men. This is how Marx expresses this inverted relationship in *Capital*.

“Capital-profit (or better still capital-interest), land-ground rent, labor-wages, this economic trinity as the connection between the components of value and wealth in general and its sources, completes the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations, and the immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity: the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things.”<sup>24</sup>

Marx draws several conclusions from the historical fact of man's alienation from the product of his labor. First, as we have seen, man is estranged from himself as a natural species-being. Man is likewise estranged from nature. Man's very existence as a biological and social being rests on a continuous metabolic interaction with nature. In the capitalist mode of production, in which workers are separated from the means of production, this interaction may be and not infrequently is interrupted, thereby jeopardizing the life processes of the individual laborer.

Not only are man's biological functions estranged from him, but the higher spiritual functions as well. Marx put it this way:

“Estranged labor turns thus:

***Man's species being***, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being ***alien*** to him, into a ***means*** to his ***individual existence***. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual essence, his ***human*** being.”<sup>25</sup>

Another aspect of alienation is that man is estranged from his fellow man.

---

<sup>23</sup> *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, p 7, International Publishers, New York, 1967.

<sup>24</sup> *Capital*, Vol III, Karl Marx pp.968-969. Penguin Classics, London, 1981.

<sup>25</sup> *1844 Manuscripts*, p 114.

“An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species being, is the estrangement of man from man.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Marx's Essentialism**

Marx's conception of man's essential nature has unfortunately remained an incomprehensible black box to all but a few commentators. This is due to the fact that the very notion of an “essential nature” has not only been rejected by the prevailing forms of ideological discourse, but the very question has been deemed to be illegitimate. It is not even possible to frame the question without appearing to violate some elementary rules of language.

The historical cause of this problem was the triumph of empiricism in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From that time right down to our own period, the domination of empiricism, at least in the English speaking world has been largely unchallenged. By this we do not mean to suggest that there have not been many books and commentaries written against empiricism, including some from a Marxist point of view. Yet the *lingua franca* of intellectual discourse, and even the unstated presuppositions of much common speculation is deeply rooted in the empiricist metaphysic.

The modern form of empiricism emerged from the mechanistic theories which dominated natural science in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries on the one hand, and the rise of the bourgeoisie and their cult of the possessive individual on the other hand. Reality is interpreted as being composed of a manifold of particular entities, each independent of the other and together forming more complex aggregates. Any description or attempt to understand the behavior of these more complex aggregates were viewed as little more than mental conveniences used to bring together the particular entities which composed it. The contrary thesis that at least some complex entities have a reality in their own right (i.e. are organic wholes) and cannot be simply reduced to the actions of its parts, was denounced by Hume and his followers as “metaphysics”.

The opposition to empiricism in the history of philosophy has been variously dubbed as “essentialism” or “realism”. Essentialism sees reality as consisting of irreducible “natures”, each of which is qualitatively distinct. The essence of an entity is that which defines it as the kind of thing it is. It is what persists in a thing through the changes that it undergoes. We are able to distinguish between necessary and accidental changes of an entity only on the basis of a knowledge of its inner nature.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 114.

The thesis of essentialism was first articulated by Aristotle. This part of the legacy of Aristotle was later misinterpreted by the medieval philosophers. They took Aristotle's discussion of essences to mean that essences have some kind of independent existence apart from their individual appearances. Yet Aristotle never speaks of essences as some separate form of being.<sup>27</sup>

When modern philosophy begins to liberate itself from medieval dogmatism, it goes to war against the notion of independently existing essences. This doctrine is falsely ascribed to Aristotle who in turn becomes a victim of the wrath of many 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. Thomas Hobbes provides us with an example of this skewed account of Aristotle in his *Leviathan*, where he writes,

“...men may no longer suffer themselves to be abused, by them, that by this doctrine of *Separated Essences*, built on the Vain Philosophy of Aristotle, would fright them from Obeying the Laws of their Countrey, with empty names; as men fright Birds from the Corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick. For it is upon this ground, that when a Man is dead and buried, they say that his Soule (that is his Life) can walk separated from his Body, and is seen by night amongst the graves...who that is in fear of Ghosts, will not bear great respect to those that can make the Holy Water, that drives them from him? And this shall suffice for an example of the Errors, which are brought into the Church, from the Entities, and Essences of Aristotle.”<sup>28</sup>

Note that for Hobbes the struggle against the doctrine of independent essences is part and parcel of the struggle against clericalism. Hobbes identifies this tradition, falsely, with Aristotle. This is a misreading of Aristotle that survives to this day.

In opposition to the doctrine of independent essences, Hobbes puts forth a crude type of empiricism. He never even considers that a doctrine of essentialism is possible which does not posit independent essences. The anti-essentialist view propounded by Hobbes has its antecedents in the ancient world, in the philosophy of atomism. According to the atomists Democritus and Lucretius, the world was made up solely of atoms and the void and their combinations. The modern version of atomism received its most finished articulation by Hume and the school of empiricism. The Humean version of atomism posits “sense data” as the ultimate building block of reality instead of atoms. Methodologically however, empiricism leads to conceptions very similar to those held by the ancient atomists. The aim of science, according to the atomist/empiricist outlook, is to reduce all descriptions of reality to the working of ultimate bits of reality whether these be “sense data” or atoms, and the forces that are responsible for their motion and interaction. This reductionist vision of bringing all areas of knowledge, including the social sciences, under the rubric of physics, still remains the dominant view of modern empiricists.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> An excellent account of the role of essentialism in the thought of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx can be found in “Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx” by Scott Meikle, Open Court, 1986.

<sup>28</sup> *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, p. 465, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> The reductionist thesis is popularized by E.O. Wilson in his recent book “Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge”, Knopf, 1998. In a recent interview, Wilson gave the following formulation of his vision:

A necessary corollary to the method of reducing all phenomena to the movement of atoms is the perspective that complex entities, whether biological or social, cannot be conceived as logically coherent, nor can they exhibit any inherent lawful behavior in their own right.<sup>30</sup> It therefore follows from this perspective that to talk of the laws of motion of a social being, for instance, the capitalist mode of production, makes no sense. This is in fact the gist of the more philosophically sophisticated attacks on Marx. The impoverished ontology that results from this “reductionist fallacy” was the object of a withering critique by Hegel. In the *Logic* he writes,

“The breaking up of things into independent stuffs has its proper place only in inorganic nature... Indeed the view that things consist of independent stuffs is frequently applied in domains where it has no validity.

Even within nature, this category shows itself to be inadequate in the sphere of organic life. An animal may, of course, be said to “consist of” bones, muscles, nerves, etc., but it is immediately evident that this is a state of affairs quite different than a piece of granite that “consists of” the stuffs that were mentioned. These stuffs behave in a way that is completely indifferent to their union, and they could subsist just as well without it, whereas the various parts and members of the organic body have their subsistence only in their union, and cease to exist as such if they are separated from one another.”<sup>31</sup>

In a later passage, Hegel makes clear that the error of reductionism when applied to organic nature is enormously compounded if the object of investigation is a social organism,

“The members and organs of a living body should not be considered merely as parts of it, for they are what they are only in their unity and are not indifferent to that unity at all. The members and organs become mere “parts” only under the hands of the

---

“In theory, we should be able to predict many of complex patterns at higher levels of organization, which we call emergent, from a knowledge of the constituent elements and their interactions... Methodologically, reductionism has proven spectacularly successful across a large part of science.” Skeptic Vol6, No.1, 1998, p 79-80, “The Ionian Instauration” an interview by Frank Miele.

An even more militant reductionist is the philosopher Daniel Dennett. His recent book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Simon and Schuster, 1995, even includes a chapter titled, “Who's Afraid of Reductionism?” where we find this gem:

“There is no reason to be compromising about what I call good reductionism. It is simply the commitment to non-question-begging science without any cheating by embracing mysteries or miracles at the outset.” That Dennett cannot even conceive of an objection to reductionism except by recourse to miracles shows the depth with which an atomistic outlook is assumed to be the only possible explanatory principle by which the world can be understood. The principle thesis of atomism is first of all presupposed and then arguments based on this presupposition are used to justify it. This is indeed a vicious circle.

<sup>30</sup> The Late Lord Bertrand Russell expressed the anti-essentialist reductionist view thus:

“There are some who hold that the fundamental category of biology should be that of ‘organism’, and that, on this account, biology can never be reduced to chemistry and physics. This view is derived from Aristotle, and was encouraged by the Hegelian philosophy... It is, to my mind, an erroneous view, and one which, insofar as it prevails, is a barrier to scientific progress.” *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*, London, 1948.

<sup>31</sup> *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, G.W.F. Hegel, Paragraph 126, Addition, Hackett Publishing Co, Indianapolis, 1991.



anatomist; but for that reason he is dealing with corpses rather with living bodies. This is not to say that this kind of dissection should not happen at all, but only that the external and mechanical relationship of whole and parts does not suffice for the cognition of organic life in its truth.

The same applies in a much higher degree when the part-whole relationship is applied to spirit and to the configurations of the spiritual world.”<sup>32</sup>

Intimately tied to the essentialist thesis of the objective reality and lawful nature of a social organism is the notion that such an entity has a goal or final form toward which it evolves. In the history of philosophy, this notion of a “final cause” expressing the potential inherent in a nature is known as “teleology”. Like so much else it was first introduced into the lexicon of Western thought by Aristotle.

For Aristotle, every natural being has a final form, or end toward which it develops, which represents the actualization of its potential. Of course, not all things are genuine natural beings. Some things are mere aggregates, brought together accidentally, such as the pieces of granite mentioned in Hegel’s example. But a genuine nature, such as an amoebae to take a simple animal, or a social system to take the most complex of natures, will have a final form toward which it develops. This does not mean that it will “inevitably” fulfill its final form. Contingencies can derail the natural development of an essential nature. A kitten can be hit by a car and fail to grow into the mature cat it has the potential to become, or the working class may be unable to wrest power from the capitalist class in which case the form toward which capitalist society points, socialism, will not be realized.

The reintroduction of the Aristotelian notion of teleology as the final end, immanent in the object itself, was one of Hegel’s greatest contributions to the history of philosophy. This idea of teleology should be clearly distinguished from the medieval scholastic notion of teleology, in which Divine Providence fulfills the purpose of an external “creator”. Hegel tried to disentangle the concept of teleology and Aristotle’s use of it from the various false interpretations that were the coin of the realm in his time. He wrote,

“The determination of life by Aristotle already contains this internal purposiveness; hence it stands infinitely far above the concept of modern teleology which had only finite, of external purposiveness in view.”<sup>33</sup>

The Aristotelian notion of teleology should also be differentiated from an act of willful deliberation to bring about a desired state of affairs. There is not necessarily any deliberative act involved in a being developing toward its end, unless we are talking specifically about the conscious willful acts of human beings.

Consequent upon the onslaught of the Enlightenment against Scholasticism, a legend emerged about Aristotle and his theory of teleology. In the heat of the battle

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Paragraph 135, Addition.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Paragraph 204, Remark.

against theology, the Enlightenment philosophers did not question the interpretation of teleology that the Scholastics foisted on Aristotle. Thereby Aristotelian philosophy fell into disrepute.<sup>34</sup> The empiricist philosophy of Hume went much further and succeeded in banishing any discussion of final causes from polite company.<sup>35</sup>

At least that was the case until Hegel reintroduced the subject. Hegel demonstrated that the empiricist outlook, although in its time an advance over the dogmatic metaphysics that it criticized, was fundamentally inadequate in accounting for either the phenomena of thought (logic), nature or society. In this regard, Marx followed Hegel. Where they differed was in their respective interpretations of the nature of man and society and their differing vision of the goal (final cause) of each.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, both Marx and Hegel returned to the Aristotelian notion that to know an organism is to know the end toward which that organism is evolving. In the words of Aristotle, "A thing's nature is its end or final cause."<sup>37</sup> This is not to deny that causal explanations, the *modus vivendi* of the natural sciences, have no role to play. The teleological argument is simply that by themselves causal explanations (efficient causes to use Aristotle's terminology) are inadequate to fully explain the behavior of an essential nature such as Socrates or the Athenian State. To truly know Socrates we must know him not merely as a young man, but in his final form, as the mature philosopher who was responsible for "corrupting" the youth of Athens by questioning the role of religion and authority. In *Capital* Marx demonstrates that capital is the final value form of a commodity and thereby to know a commodity is to know that it must of necessity become capital.

## **The Multiple Dimensions of Alienation**

Marx's discussion of alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*, though it takes its point of departure through a critique of political economy and its categories, is never restricted

---

<sup>34</sup> Hobbes again provides a good example of the hostility to Aristotle:

"I believe that scarce anything could be more absurdly said in Natural Philosophy, than that which is now called Aristotle's Metaphysics; nor more repugnant to Government that much of what he hath said in his Politics; nor more ignorantly, than a great part of his Ethics." Ibid. p. 461-462.

<sup>35</sup> A recent example of the dismissal of the explanatory power of final causes can be found in the writing of John Roemer, a contemporary analytical Marxist.

"Too often, obscurantism protects itself behind a yoga of special terms and privileged logic. The yoga of Marxism is 'dialectics.' Dialectical logic is based on several propositions which may have a certain inductive appeal, but are far from being rules of inference: that things turn into their opposites, and quantity turns into quality. In Marxist social science, dialectics is often used to justify a lazy kind of teleological reasoning."

"Rational Choice' Marxism: Some Issues of Method and Substance", John Roemer, in *Analytical Marxism*, 1986.

The above quote has the merit of illustrating the close connection between teleology and dialectical logic. Roemer, who is an avowed opponent of dialectics, can think of no worse epithet to brand dialectics than as a form of teleology.

<sup>36</sup> See the previously cited work by Scott Meikle, "Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx" for a more detailed discussion of teleology.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, 'Physics, The Works of Aristotle', vol 2, 194a28f. Oxford University Press, edited by W. D. Ross,

to a discussion of economic activity conceived in the narrowest sense. It would be a big mistake to conclude that Marx viewed alienation as a phenomena limited to the economic realm. The very act of production should be construed in broader terms than the objectification of labor to produce the means of subsistence. Man not only reproduces himself physically, but spiritually as well. Marx writes that a mode of production,

“...must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part.”<sup>38</sup>

We have seen how activity which is alienated produces objects which thereby take on a life of their own and dominate their producers. In the sphere of economics this is known as the “fetishism of commodities” or the worship of money. Man also creates structures in other areas of life that likewise take on a power of their own, imprisoning their creator.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in the political realm, man’s supreme creation is the state, which paradoxically becomes the most powerful institutional force thwarting man’s desires and ends. In the realm of religion, the supreme creation is the construction of a god, which takes on a life of its own. The relationship between creator and creation is reversed leading to the curious phenomena of man bowing down before his own creation.

The same phenomenon repeats itself in the realm of artistic production. Art cannot escape the law of value any more than material production. The present commodification of the art world proves that art is no exception to the inexorable tendency of alienated social relations to invade all forms of life. As long as we are living in a society characterized by estranged labor, no sphere of human activity can be free of alienation. It is not just artistic activity that is made hostage to the market. The products of this activity reflect the same alienated social relations from which they sprang.

Even the realm of “pure theory” is not immune. It is in the realm of ideology that we find the highest expression of alienation. It is in this sphere that, for instance, we find bourgeois consciousness dominating the thinking of those most oppressed by the bourgeoisie. This is the mode of thinking that equates the owner of capital as a productive member of society and the laborer as nothing more than the extension of a machine, or in some cases as part of a “surplus” population. Another expression of alienated consciousness is the idea that capital is a self-reproducing and self-expanding substance requiring only the mediation of men (buyers and sellers) to ensure its circulation. Men

---

<sup>38</sup> *German Ideology*, Karl Marx, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> The idea that a fundamental phenomena of ‘alienation’ exists and manifests itself in different forms has been challenged by Richard Schacht. According to Schacht, the different conditions with which we have come to recognize a form of alienation are in fact different phenomena that have nothing in common other than a name.

‘It would belabor the obvious to recall the many different phenomena in connection with which the term [alienation] has been employed, in order to show the absence of any significant factual or conceptual connection between a great many of them.’ In *Alienation*, Schacht, p. 246.

Schacht’s thesis logically follows from his prior rejection of Marx’s theory of alienation which posits a fundamental social phenomena of alienation of labor in the process of production. This basic category of social ontology underlies the various superstructural forms of alienation. Having dropped a category that can unify the differences he naturally sees only the differences.

thereby become appendages to the self-valorization of capital. The ultimate form of this mystification is the system of credits (interest bearing capital) of various forms in which the human player seems to disappear entirely.

The universality of forms of alienation should not become a reason for despair. They are paradoxically, a sign of the maturity of the forces developing within the capitalist mode of production that provide the premises for its negation. Ideological mystification reaches such heights, or depths, only when the forces of production evolved to the point where a world culture is for the first time in history a practical possibility. It would therefore be entirely undialectical to see alienation and its products as merely a negative in the manner of the existentialists. For Marx, the negative always contained its other, "the real movement that abolishes the present state of things." Marx reiterated this theme throughout his corpus. It can be found for instance, in the *Grundrisse*, where he discusses the process whereby the worker becomes conscious of his activity as self-alienating. Once this happens, a crucial link in the chain of the reproduction of capitalist social relations is broken. The worker no longer reproduces himself as an instrument to be used by capital for its purpose. The worker has his own purpose and begins to think in terms of serving his own end.

"The recognition of the products as its own, and the judgment that its separation from the conditions of its realization is improper --forcibly imposed -- is an enormous [advance in] awareness, itself the product of the mode of production resting on capital, and as much the knell to its doom as, with the slave's awareness that he cannot be the property of another, with his consciousness of himself as a person, the existence of slavery becomes a merely artificial, vegetative existence, and ceases to be able to prevail as the basis of production."<sup>40</sup>

Another example, this time from the writings of Trotsky, illustrates a dialectical approach to the culture of the past.

"The art of past centuries has made man more complex and flexible, has raised his mentality to a higher level, has enriched him in all-round way. This enrichment is a precious achievement of culture. Mastery of the past is, therefore, a necessary precondition not only for the creation of new art but also for the building of the new society, for communism needs people with highly developed minds. Can, however, the art of the past enrich us with an artistic knowledge of the world? It can, precisely because it is able to give nourishment to our feelings and to educate them. If we were groundlessly to repudiate the art of the past, we should at once become poorer spiritually."<sup>41</sup>

The above lines were penned as part of the struggle against the Proletarian Culture tendency that developed in the Soviet Union in the years following the Russian Revolution. The Proletcultists were mirror images, philosophically, of the existentialists. The latter equated alienated culture with man's essential condition and were blind to the process of its negation whereas the former simply proposed to demolish it and start a new

<sup>40</sup> *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx, p.463, Penguin, 1973.

<sup>41</sup> "Culture and Socialism", in Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, p.86-87, Paul Siegel, editor, Pathfinder Press, 1970.

“proletarian culture.” Both positions are equally undialectical for they keep fixed and separate the positive and negative poles of a contradictory phenomena. This latter point was elucidated by Trotsky in the same article.

“There exists, in fact, a profound contradiction here. Everything that has been conquered, created, built by man’s efforts and which serves to enhance man’s power is culture. But since culture is a social-historical phenomena in its very essence, and since historical society has been and continues to be class society, culture is found to be the basic instrument of class oppression...Over this contradiction many people have stumbled...

And here first and foremost, we have to ask ourselves regarding technique: is it only an instrument of class oppression? It is enough to put such a question for it to be answered at once: no, technique is the fundamental conquest of mankind; although it has also served, up to the present, as an instrument of exploitation, yet it is at the same time the fundamental condition for the emancipation of the exploited. The machine strangles the wage slave in its grip. But he can free himself only through the machine. Therein is the root of the entire question.”<sup>42</sup>

Alienated consciousness expresses itself politically within the workers movement. It is here that we find the source of opportunism and illusions in the viability of capitalism. The peculiar opacity of class relations within the capitalist mode of production, in contrast to their relative transparency within feudal society, is the secret of the difficulty faced in comprehending the basic fact of exploitation. Of course, the class of intellectuals are caught up in these mystifications as well. Ultimately, philosophy itself as well as the social sciences, insofar as they do not critically examine their historical premises, are condemned to be handmaidens of the bourgeois social order. We will later review a number of instances of this condition among contemporary writers.

The analysis of the forms of alienation which Marx first outlined in the *1844 Manuscripts* were to be the subject of his scientific work for the remainder of his life. Marx envisioned a project that would include a critique of the modern state, the world market, law and ideology, as well as political economy. He only managed to complete part of the work on political economy. In the course of this work, Marx certainly developed a more concrete understanding of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production than he had at the start of the endeavor. The concept of surplus value for instance, is as yet unknown in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Nevertheless the essential theme of his life’s work and its direction were already clearly mapped out. This was to be the discovery of the laws of motion of a complex social organism, the capitalist mode of production, their inner contradictions and their transition into their final form, the society of freely associated producers.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.84-85.

## **Alienation and Private Property**

Throughout Marx's analysis in the *1844 Manuscripts*, it is clear that in discussing alienation, he is discussing a phenomena that is specific to the capitalist mode of production in which private property (capital) confronts a propertyless working class.

“Through *estranged, alienated labor*, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labor of a man alien to labor and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labor creates the relation to it of the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor.) *Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labor*, of the external relationship of the worker to nature and to himself.”

“*Private property* thus results by analysis from the concept of *alienated labor*, i.e., of *alienated man*, of estranged life, of *estranged man*... Only at the last culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, appear again, namely, that on the one hand it is the *product* of alienated labor, and that on the other it is the *means* by which labor alienates itself, the *realization of this alienation*.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite Marx's clear statement that his analysis of alienation is tied to a specific historical formation and specific class relations, some commentators have insisted that the object of Marx's discussion is an abstract, ahistorical, generic “Man” which Marx appropriated from Feuerbach. An argument of this kind has been made by anti-Marxist commentators such as Daniel Bell<sup>44</sup> as well as the late self-proclaimed Marxist theoretician Ernest Mandel.<sup>45</sup> It has also been championed by the apologists for Stalinism.<sup>46</sup> As will soon become clear, the objective content of these various interpretations of Marx's early writing is to separate the concept of alienation from its historical grounding in the analysis of capitalism.

The practical program that emerges from Marx's analysis of alienation is at its core profoundly revolutionary. In Marx's view, the overcoming of alienation is a practical

---

<sup>43</sup> Op Cit. *1844 Manuscripts*. p. 117.

<sup>44</sup> In the course of accusing Marx of abandoning the concept of “alienation” in his later writings, Bell says the following:

“For in his system, self alienation becomes transformed: man as ‘generic man’ (i.e. Man writ large) becomes divided into classes of men. The only social reality is not Man, not the individual, but economic classes.”

“The End of Ideology”, Revised Edition, The Free Press, New York, 1965, p365-366.

<sup>45</sup> Mandel writes that in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

“...alienated labor is contrasted to the qualities of generic man, as a “species being” ... and alienation can be understood at first sight, if not as externalization in the Hegelian sense then at least as the negation of an “ideal human being” such as never existed.”

In “The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx”, New York and London, 1971, p. 161.

<sup>46</sup> Among these must be counted Roy Pascal, the translator of the German Ideology. In his introduction to the International Publishers Edition, he claims that the “German Ideology” is Marx and Engels, “...first and most comprehensive statement of historical materialism... (and contrary to their earlier work) is almost completely free of idealistic traces of Hegel or Feuerbach.” p. ix. We will meet once more the charge against Marx of his “youthful idealism” later in our discussion.

task - the emancipation of the working class through the political struggle to abolish the social relations rooted in private property. By insisting that existing social relations cannot be superseded merely in thought, Marx's thinking had advanced beyond any of the Left Hegelians, including Feuerbach. This is clear in the Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx points out the inadequacy of Feuerbach's merely contemplative critique of religion:

"...after the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice".<sup>47</sup>

The above was written in 1845. However, the thought behind it is clearly expressed in several instances in the *1844 Manuscripts*. For example, when discussing the inadequacy of Hegel's idealist supersession, of alienated social relations, Marx writes:

"On the one hand, this act of superseding is a transcending of the thought entity; thus private property as a thought is transcended in the thought of morality. And because thought imagines itself to be directly the other of itself, to be sensuous reality - and therefore takes its own action for sensuous, real action - this superseding in thought, which leaves its object standing in the real world, believes that it has really overcome it."<sup>48</sup>

From the foregoing it is also clear that in enunciating a project for overcoming alienation, Marx had a particular vision of "revolutionizing practice" in mind. Although some of the political implications of "revolutionizing practice" were not yet spelled out in the *1844 Manuscripts*, the goal of social revolution leading to the construction of a new society is clear enough. This project flows directly out of Marx's analysis of private property, which contains as its logical and historical premise the social division of labor, the separation of the producer from the means of production and the entire gamut of alienated social relations which distort man's basic nature as species being. The negation of any one of these categories requires the negation of all the others. If alienation is to be overcome, then, private property as well as the social division of labor, as well as the separation of the producers from the means of production must be overcome.

In drawing out the revolutionary implications of his theory of alienation, Marx shoots down the reformist thesis that incremental changes of the type that seek to ameliorate the level of exploitation, can lead to the transformation of social relations. This point is clearly expressed in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

"An enforced increase of wages (disregarding all other difficulties, including the fact that it would be by force, too, that higher wages, being an anomaly, could be maintained) would therefore be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity... Wages are a direct

---

<sup>47</sup> "Theses on Feuerbach", Karl Marx Selected Writings, p 157. ed. David McLellan, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1977.

<sup>48</sup> "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", Karl Marx, p.186.

consequence of estranged labor, and estranged labor is the direct cause of private property. The downfall of the one must involve the downfall of the other.”<sup>49</sup>

Marx never veered from this analysis. In a much later work, written after Marx had deepened his understanding of the capitalist mode of production, the inseparability of the wages system and alienation is clearly reiterated:

“To say that the most favorable condition for wage labor is the most rapid possible growth of productive capital is only to say that the more rapidly the working class increases and enlarges the power that is hostile to it, the wealth that does not belong to it and that rules over it, the more favorable will be the conditions under which it is allowed to labor anew at increasing bourgeois wealth, at enlarging the power of capital, content with forging for itself the golden chains by which the bourgeoisie drags it in its train.”<sup>50</sup>

Finally, in one of his last published writings, in the context of a polemic against the Lassallean obfuscation of the relationship between wages and the capitalist mode of production, Marx wrote,

“...the system of wage labor is a system of slavery, and indeed of a slavery which becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labor develop, whether the worker receives better or worse wages.”<sup>51</sup>

The use of the term “slavery” in this context should be understood not merely as an epithet aimed against capitalism, but a description of a condition whereby the worker becomes further entangled in alienated social relations the more those relations become a necessary part of his social existence. Insofar as the worker produces not simply objects, but the very relation to capital that dominates him, he is in effect weaving the very web that imprisons him.

In contrast to Marx's position, if alienation can be divorced from the historically specific social formation of capitalism then it follows that a program for “overcoming” alienation may be either indifferent or hostile to the program for socialist revolution. This viewpoint was succinctly expressed by one author who writes about the “abolition of alienation within capitalism itself”.<sup>52</sup> It is hardly an exaggeration to say that how one understands the concept of alienation is determined by and in turn shapes one's attitude toward the question of reform or revolution.

## **The Misadventures of Essentialism after Marx**

Unfortunately, essentialist philosophy and the teleological view with which it is intimately connected once more fell into disrepute in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 117-118.

<sup>50</sup> “Wage-Labor and *Capital*”, Karl Marx Selected Writings, p.262, ed. David McLellan.

<sup>51</sup> “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, Karl Marx, 1875,p.329, from Marx and Engels, Selected Works, Progress Publishers, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> “The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx”, David MacGregor, p.244, University of Toronto Press, 1984.



with the disintegration of the Hegelian school. In Germany, a mere three decades after his death, Hegel was consigned to the status of a “dead dog” to quote Marx’s description of the period. Following the intellectual reaction caused by the defeat of the 1848 Revolution, there emerged various schools of subjective idealism such as those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and the conservative positivist philosophy exemplified by Ernst Mach on the other. In the English-speaking world there did persist a brand of right wing Hegelianism for a time in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as exemplified by the philosopher F.H. Bradley. This remnant of Hegelianism was soon supplanted by the triumph of empiricism and analytic philosophy with its profound anti-essentialist outlook. This remains the dominant philosophical mode to this day.

Outside of classical studies and neo-Thomism, essentialism persisted only in the philosophy of Marxism. Within the Marxist movement, however, the outlook of essentialism was gradually replaced by the dominant empiricism and positivism of the time. The German Social Democracy, which was the official representative of Marxism from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the outbreak of World War I, combined an official adherence to the philosophy of Marxism with an opportunist day to day practice. This eventually led to the development of revisionism as represented by Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein was influenced more by the philosophy of Kant and Mach than by Marx.<sup>53</sup> Even among the defenders of Marxist orthodoxy, particularly Karl Kautsky, the cognition of capitalist society as a dialectically developing essential nature was replaced with a dogmatic belief in the inevitability of socialism combined with an opportunist day to day to practice not much different than the reformist perspective propounded by Bernstein.

This dismal situation changed only with the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Lenin had prepared for the revolution during his period of exile by turning to a study of Hegel’s “Science of Logic”. The results of this investigation, published as Volume 38 of the Collected Works and known as the “Philosophical Notebooks”, show that Lenin had reworked the fundamental problems of Marxist philosophy by going back to its source in the work of Hegel. Lenin’s reading of Hegel presaged a renewal of interest in the philosophy of Marxism that inspired much creative work in the early years of the Soviet Union by such thinkers as Rubin, Preobrazhensky, Voronsky, Vygotsky and Oparin. The dogmas of the Second International and the vulgarization of Marxism that it propounded were openly challenged. It was in this period for instance, that Lenin called for the establishment of a society of “materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic”. This was also the period when Ryazanov and his team of scholars began translating and publishing the previously unpublished works of Marx.

---

<sup>53</sup> An excellent summary of the philosophical and political views of Bernstein can be found in the essay, “Reform and Revolution in the Epoch of Imperialism”, by David North, Mehring Publications.

This highly creative period soon came to an end by the middle of the 1920s with the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the adoption of the anti-Marxist dogma of “socialism in one country”. Creative thought was suffocated in the interests of an official catechism serving the interests of the new bureaucratic elite. The rich body of Marxist philosophy was reduced to a few “iron laws” of the historical process. The outlook of the inevitable victory of socialism (or rather the Stalinist caricature of socialism) was resurrected from the ideological arsenal of the pre-War Second International.<sup>54</sup> The upshot of the rise of Stalinism and the consequent defeats of the workers movement was a far worse caricature of Marxism than even the most vulgar reformist of the Second International could conceive.

### **The discussion of alienation after Marx**

Marx's theory of alienation has been mined more or less continuously since the publication in the early 1920's of George Lukacs groundbreaking “History and Class Consciousness”. Although at the time of publication Lukacs did not know of the existence of the *1844 Manuscripts*, where the theory of alienation is most explicitly discussed, he was able to reconstruct a version of Marx's theory of alienation from his own analysis of Marx's published writings. All in all this was a remarkable feat of intellectual scholarship.

We will not attempt any overall assessment of Lukacs work here. Suffice it to say that Lukacs raised certain fundamental philosophical issues that had been ignored for decades by Social Democracy. These issues concerned the relationship of spontaneity to revolutionary consciousness, the same issues that had been raised by Lenin when he set out to build a revolutionary party. Lukacs analyzed the spontaneous consciousness that develops in the working class out of its day to day struggles and showed this consciousness to be inevitably limited by the alienated social relationships that are the hallmark of capitalism. He contrasted the approach of Lenin to the vulgar mechanical materialists of the Social Democracy who simply saw a continuous line of progress from the day to day struggles to the ultimate aim of socialism. He saw the intervention of conscious revolutionaries as the decisive catalyst in transforming the working class from a class in itself to a class for itself, ie. the realization of its revolutionary potential. Certainly much of what Lukacs wrote in his seminal work is open to criticism. A serious engagement of the issues presented in Lukacs work could have led to a revived interest in these critical issues of philosophy and method within the Marxist movement.

---

<sup>54</sup> “Socialism at the beginning of its development is weaker only in the degree of its development, only because it is immature, but from the very first day of its existence it is stronger according to *type*, stronger as a new, more progressive quality, free from those contradictions which the capitalist system has already showed itself powerless. That is why the new order appears finally as the victor, that is why it can conquer only by concentrating on its elements of real superiority and developing them with the utmost speed. That is why every step of socialist advance makes the fate of capitalism ever more hopeless, notwithstanding the ever more intense opposition of the capitalists.” This liturgical refrain is taken from the “Textbook of Marxist Philosophy” published at the height of the Moscow Trials in May, 1937. This catechism and similar ones were translated into dozens of languages and circulated by the millions.

Unfortunately, by the time Lukacs work became known the Communist International had already entered the period of Stalinist degeneration. Far from the spirit of openness and engagement with philosophical issues that Lenin evoked when he called for the establishment of a society of materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic,<sup>55</sup> the attack on Lukacs resembled a Papal Bull rather than a serious discussion of ideas. Lukacs was denounced at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International by Zinoviev, who characterized his work as a revision of Marxist philosophy. With the strangulation of thought that was ushered in by Stalinism, further discussion on the theme of alienation in the works of Marx was subsequently exiled from the workers movement. Lukacs himself sought to accommodate to the twists and turns of Stalinism in the subsequent half century of his political activity.

Nevertheless the Pandora's box had been opened and interest in the theme of alienation continued to elicit new recruits. Having been banished from the workers movement by the bureaucratic dictates of Stalinism and Social Democracy, the discussion of Marx's theory of alienation became for a period the province of academics and intellectuals who were cut off from the workers movement. Most prominent among these so-called "Western Marxists" were the members of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer, Adorno and most significantly, Marcuse.

Interest in Marx's theory of alienation received another big jolt with the publication in the 1930's of Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844". Here for the first time a manuscript became available which showed the origin of Marx's theory of alienation as a continuation and negation of the Hegelian theory of alienation. Despite this landmark event in the history of Marxist scholarship, the immediate impact of the publication of the *1844 Manuscripts* was minimal.

Although Herbert Marcuse wrote the first substantive investigation in English of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* in his "Reason and Revolution", the discussion of alienation did not begin in earnest till the late 50's and early 60's when Erich Fromm popularized the first English translation of the *1844 Manuscripts* in his book "Marx's Concept of Man".<sup>56</sup> Subsequently "alienation" became a buzzword among academic circles in

---

<sup>55</sup> "Taking as our basis Marx's method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects, print in the journal excerpts from Hegel's principal works, interpret them materialistically and comment on them with the help of examples of dialectics in the sphere of economic and political relations, which recent history, especially modern imperialist war and revolution, provides in unusual abundance. In my opinion, the editors of *Pod Znamenem Markizma* should be a kind of "Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics". V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, p233-234.

<sup>56</sup> One witness from the interwar years wrote the following:

"In view of the prominence the theme of alienation has since acquired, it is surprising in retrospect that Marxists then paid hardly any attention to it. I cannot recall a single discussion of the topic during the 1930's, although Sidney Hook's "From Hegel to Marx" had some references to this idea. It came forward only after the Second World War".

"Polemics in Marxist Philosophy", George Novack, p.19. Monad Press, New York, 1978.

According to a recent book, Marcuse's work met a singularly hostile reception among English speaking left intellectuals such as Max Eastman, Sidney Hook and Edmund Wilson. "Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism a Critical Study", Kevin Anderson, pp.199. University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1995. Novack,

sociology, psychology, art, literature as well as philosophy. The term “alienation” was removed from its origins in the works of Hegel and Marx and a vulgarized version of the concept of alienation became the cornerstone of many fashionable theories in contemporary sociology, psychology and popular culture.<sup>57</sup>

We shall leave this literature aside and concentrate on the discussion of the role of alienation in the theory and practice of Marx and Marxism. Avowed opponents of Marx as well as self-proclaimed Marxists began to prune the pages of the *1844 Manuscripts* to find the pot of gold that would prove their case. The discussion of alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts* became an irresistible force among academics across the political spectrum and took on a highly ideological and polemical tone almost at once.

Among anti-Marxists, it soon became *de rigeur* to have published something discussing the *1844 Manuscripts*. Some of these works were fueled by the anti-communist hysteria fed by the Cold War and McCarthyism. A typical line of argument sought to demonstrate Marx's kinship with earlier German philosophy, particularly that of Hegel, who was himself caricatured as glorifying totalitarianism, and thus being a precursor both to Nazism and Stalinism.<sup>58</sup> Another popular mode of attack by the anti-Marxists consisted in the separation of the “Young Marx” from the “Mature Marx”. The “Young Marx” was supposed to be a humanist and a liberal democrat, sharing Hegel's concern with “alienation” as a phenomena that encompasses man's longing to belong to contemporary social institutions. The “Mature Marx”, on the other hand was depicted as an economic determinist and fanatic statist who turned his back on the liberal traditions of earlier German philosophy. We will not dwell here in any detail on these arguments as they have been adequately answered elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

in the above cited work, does not even mention Marcuse's work.

<sup>57</sup>

A typical example is David Reissman's “The Lonely Crowd”, which discusses the empty and shallow culture of conformity in terms of “alienation”.

A good example of the way in which the concept of “alienation” was misappropriated out of its context in the works of Marx can be found in a work by the sociologist Robert Blauner. He writes that alienation is: “a quality of personal experience which results from specific kinds of social arrangements”. He adds, “Today, most social scientists would say that alienation is not a consequence of capitalism per se but of employment in the large-scale organizations and impersonal bureaucracies that pervade all industrial societies.” Blauner, “Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and his Industry”, p3, 15.

Since, Blauner defines alienation as “a quality of personal experience” it is of course a tautology to say that “alienation is not a consequence of capitalism”. Once removed from any grounding in the concept of man as self-transcending species-being and the particular forms of social relations through which humanity develops, as discussed in the *1844 Manuscripts*, alienation can be defined in any way one wishes and used to prove whatever point one wishes.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Karl Popper's diatribe, “The Open Society and Its Enemies”. Sir Popper was a fanatical anti-Hegelian, blaming the great philosopher for the evils of Nazism and Stalinism. His venom is if anything directed more at Hegel than Marx. He indicts those parts of Marx's legacy which according to his schema derive from the Hegelian heritage and praises those areas of Marxism which he believes derive from a scientific, anti-Hegelian outlook. Needless to say, Popper's judgments regarding Hegel and Marx are based on the crudest falsification and deliberate misstatement of their work. For a devastating reply to Popper's attack on Hegel, see the article by Walter Kauffman, “The Hegel Myth and its Legends”, reprinted in the anthology, “Hegel Myths and Legends” Edited by Jon Stewart, Northwestern University Press, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> A typical contribution from an anti-communist perspective is that of Daniel Bell. In the following passage, Bell provides his assessment of the revival of interest in Marx:

*Surprisingly, a mirror image of these jousts among the open anti-Marxists were being waged concurrently by self-proclaimed Marxists and scholars sympathetic to Marx. We will examine in some detail a number of contributions to the debate on 'alienation' from these quarters. We hope in the course of our investigation to clarify the differences between the revolutionary philosophy of Marx and the apologetic standpoint of his critics.*

## **Marx Reinterpreted: Alex Callinicos and the Empiricist Metaphysic**

We will show in what follows that the empiricist based opposition to teleology logically entails a repudiation of the theory of essential nature and this in turn leads to an opposition to Marx's conception of human nature. With the abandonment of any notion of human nature, Marx's theory of alienation cannot be grounded, and this too is tossed overboard. Furthermore, since Marx's reworking of Aristotle's theory of essential natures appropriates the dimension of historical development introduced by Hegel, the dialectic of motion and change also has to be jettisoned. The final result of those who seek to reinterpret Marx in light of an empiricist metaphysic is a version of Marx as a clever social scientist who made certain "empirically verifiable" predictions about economics and politics.<sup>60</sup>

This tendentious reading of Marx requires no small feat of gymnastics when it comes to providing a coherent account of his intellectual development. Proponents of this interpretation have to spin many wheels explaining how the *1844 Manuscripts*, in which the essentialist and teleological content of Marxism is unmistakable, were the work of an "immature" Marx who managed to outgrow his initial philosophy in his more

---

"To the extent that this is an effort to find a new, radical critique of society, the effort is an encouraging one. But to the extent - and this seems as much the case - that it is a form of new mythmaking, in order to cling to the symbol of Marx, it is wrong. For while it is the early Marx, it is not the historical Marx. The historical Marx had, in effect, repudiated the idea of alienation... The irony, however, is that in moving from 'philosophy' to 'reality', from phenomenology to political economy, Marx himself had moved from one kind of abstraction to another. For in his system, self alienation becomes transformed: man as 'generic man' (ie. Man writ large) becomes divided into classes of men. The only social reality is not Man, not the individual, but economic classes. Individuals, and their motives, count for nought."  
End of Ideology, op. cit., p.365-366.

A more than adequate reply to Bell and similar bowdlerizers of Marx can be found in the work by Istvan Meszaros, "Marx's Theory of Alienation", Harper, 1972.

Hannah Arendt indulged in the same type of attack as Bell, contrasting the idealist humanism of the early Marx to the economic determinism of the mature Marx. In "On Revolution" she writes:  
"Marx's place in the history of human freedom will always remain equivocal. It is true that in his early work he spoke of the social question in political terms and interpreted the predicament of poverty in categories of oppression and exploitation; yet it was also Marx who, in almost all his writings after the Communist Manifesto, redefined the truly revolutionary elan of his youth in economic terms." "On Revolution", p 58.  
Hannah Arendt, Viking Press, New York.

<sup>60</sup> This reinterpretation of Marx is championed by G.A. Cohen and other so-called "analytical Marxists".

mature “scientific” works. We have already shown several instances in which Marx’s later work was informed by the theory of alienation. One could add many more quotations from Marx illustrating the point. Ultimately however, such differing interpretations can never be settled by gathering a preponderance of quotations. The decisive question becomes, does a particular interpretation provide a coherent account of Marx’s overall intellectual and political development? In particular, does a reading of *Capital* make sense which is cut off from the theory of alienation and its philosophical premises? This question gets to the heart of the matter. We cannot even say what the subject of *Capital* is without first addressing the question of Marx’s philosophical method. As we shall see, proponents of the thesis of the epistemological break between the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the Marx of *Capital* consider the latter to be an investigation of ‘economics’ which entail a set of empirically verifiable predictions. On the other hand, we are proposing a very different reading of *Capital*, one which takes as its starting point the forms of appearance through which alienated social relations are manifested in their qualitative and quantitative development. Marx traces these forms as they metamorphose into ever more fantastic shapes, the realization of their potential.

Alex Callinicos, a supporter of the British Socialist Workers Party is an opponent of the view we have championed. He writes:

“At the core of the Manuscripts is a teleological philosophy of history in which the development of social forms is explained by their role in bringing about the culmination of the historical process, communism.”<sup>61</sup> In the discussion that follows, Callinicos simply assumes that any explanation based in a teleological outlook must *eo ipso* be absurd, not even warranting a refutation. Callinicos is implicitly identifying teleology with the sin of “reading history backwards.” He is in effect accusing Marx of taking the results of a historical process and seeing all past development as part of a Transhistorical drive to bring about precisely the world with which Marx begins. He is thereby echoing the charge that Marx himself hurled at the bourgeois political economists, who viewed previous societies as merely less developed forms of the present bourgeois social order.

"Hence, the pre-bourgeois forms of the social organization of production are treated by political economy in much the same way as the Fathers of the Church treated pre-Christian religions."<sup>62</sup>

The identification of teleology with the technique of “reading history backwards”, thereby demonstrating the trivial and empty nature of teleology, is a common misinterpretation. There have of course been many practitioners of this version of “teleology”. Marx, however was never one of them. Contrary to Callinicos’ imputation, the teleological conception which informed Marx’s work did not grant him a license to ignore empirical data. Marx’s work was guided by the precept that the essential nature of an entity and its final form must be discovered in reality, not generated out of whole cloth.

---

<sup>61</sup> Marxism and Philosophy, Alex Callinicos, p 42, Oxford University Press, 1985.

<sup>62</sup> *Capital*, Vol I, Op. cit. p.175.

An expanded version of the charge that the early Marx was guilty of “reading history backwards” was made in a recent article by Ellen M. Wood, who said,

"Marx was, at first, very much a part of this tradition. In his earlier accounts there are many of the same assumptions about the existence of capitalism in the ancient world...Here too the existence of capitalism was assumed in order to explain its coming into being, as capitalist impulses, present 'in the interstices of feudalism', were liberated by breaking the 'fetters' of the feudal system." <sup>63</sup>

According to Wood, Marx held onto these conceptions until,

"...Sometime between the German Ideology and *Capital*... a radical change took place." <sup>64</sup>

There is simply no factual basis for Callinicos' and Wood's accusation against the early writings of Marx. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx set about trying to discover the immanent laws governing the genesis of capitalism. He explicitly makes a criticism of those economists who would “read history backwards” instead of analyzing the real historical developments. He writes,

"Do not let us go back to a fictitious primordial condition as the political economist does, when he tries to explain. Such a primordial condition explains nothing; it merely pushes the question away into a gray nebulous distance. It assumes in the form of a fact, of an event, what the economist is supposed to deduce - namely, the necessary relationship between two things - between, for example, division of labor and exchange. Theology in the same way explains the origin of evil by the fall of man; that is it assumes as a fact, in historical form, what has to be explained." <sup>65</sup>

Considering that he has disposed of the teleology of the early Marx, Callinicos drops the other shoe and challenges Marx's essentialist concept of human nature. He writes,

“An explanatory apparatus is provided by Marx's concept of human nature and by the Hegelian dialectic, in the sense of the triadic structure through which the subject of history must pass to realize its true potential. But this concept of human nature, at the same time as it underlies the philosophy of history, subverts it. Formally, man plays the same role in the Manuscripts as he does in Feuerbach, providing the basis for a theory of history as man's passage through alienation. But the content of *Gattungswesen* {species-being} has so changed as to prevent it from effectively playing this role. An account of human nature which denies that there is such a thing as human nature, in the sense of a fixed set of needs and powers, but instead claims that these needs and powers change in response to man's evolving relationship to nature...”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Ellen M. Wood, p.149, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>65</sup> E.P.M. Op. Cit. p.107.

<sup>66</sup> Callinicos, Op. cit. p42-43.

Callinicos cannot help but acknowledge that the *1844 Manuscripts* include a concept of human nature intertwined with a historically specific analysis of social relations. The problem for Callinicos is that the specificity of the historical analysis “subverts” the universality of the concept of human nature. The alleged problem disappears however as soon as we approach the matter of the relationship between the particular and universal dialectically. For Marx, a universal essence is never an empty generality divorced from the particular. Such a concept would be what Hegel called an “abstract universal.” Contrariwise, every individual can be adequately described only as a “concrete universal”, i.e. a universal that includes all the richness of the particular. Thus, the specificity of the historical analysis, far from “subverting” the notion of a universal human nature, is precisely what gives it content. Callinicos misses this because his undialectical approach cannot conceive how opposites, the **particular** of social relations and the **universal** of man’s self-definition through his interaction with nature, can coincide in the **individual** alienated subject.

Having himself rejected Marx’s essentialism, his teleology and his concept of human nature, Callinicos asserts that the later Marx did likewise. First, he claims that Marx dropped teleology as a guiding principle in his later work.

“Marx was only led consciously to abandon the teleological metaphysic which provide the Manuscripts with their theory of historical change after the appearance in late 1844 of Max Stirner’s ‘The Ego and his Own.’”<sup>67</sup>

Then, Callinicos follows up by claiming that Marx took the next logical step and dropped his essentialist theory of human nature.

“On the other hand in *Capital* Marx’s theory of human nature plays no directly explanatory role.”<sup>68</sup>

Callinicos explains that the project Marx embarked on, after his earlier “metaphysical” period, was really nothing more than the construction of plausible models for predicting certain events in capitalist society.

“The tension in the Manuscripts was thus resolved. Marx’s metaphysical theory of human nature henceforth does not play a directly explanatory role. Instead, **it provides the philosophical rationale of a scientific research programme** {our emphasis} whose main concepts, the forces and relations of production, serve to specify the historically variable forms in which social production is organized and admit of empirical corroboration and refutation via the falsifiable hypotheses they generate.”<sup>69</sup>

Callinicos would reinterpret the categories Marx discovered in his analysis of the capitalist mode of production as merely hypotheses which can be either confirmed or refuted by empirical data. Thus he says of the labor theory of value,

---

<sup>67</sup> Callinicos, op. cit. p. 43,

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 44.



“...the truth of the labor theory of value cannot be derived from the truth of Marx's theory of human nature, since the latter is treated as a metaphysical theory which can be neither confirmed nor refuted by experience, rather it depends upon the falsifiable empirical hypotheses derived from it.”<sup>70</sup>

There are several problems with this manner of interpreting Marx. First to assert that the categories Marx discovered, such as absolute and relative surplus value, can simply be refuted by a series of contradictory “facts” shows a profound misunderstanding for how scientific knowledge develops. No great scientific theory worthy of the name can simply be tossed aside even when it proves inadequate. Rather, the truth of that theory is incorporated into a more comprehensive theory. For example, Einstein's theory of relativity did not simply “refute” Newtonian physics, but showed that Newtonian physics was a special case of a more comprehensively understood universe. Similarly, were Marx's categories to prove inadequate, they would not simply be “refuted” but would be integrated into a more comprehensive theory. This is an illustration of what Hegel called the “negation of the negation.” In this sense nothing is ever lost in the development of human culture and science. The old is preserved and transcended in the new, a concept which Hegel's use of the German word *aufheben* perfectly captures.

There is however, a more serious objection to Callinicos' view of Marxism as an empirically verifiable research project. The very notion presumes a dichotomy between essential natures and “facts”. “Facts” in this context is another name for the empiricist building blocks of sense data, and essences are seen, in the words of Daniel Dennett, as little more than “similarity clusters”.<sup>71</sup> In fact, (pun intended) this dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘essences, categories or concepts’ is one of the axioms of the empiricist outlook. The alternative, dialectical view is to see that there are no facts isolated from concepts and no real concepts empty of sensory experience. So-called “raw” sense experience is merely naïve, unreflected experience, and is not yet knowledge. Knowledge begins when we mediate sense experience through concepts. If the “facts” we are examining pertain to a highly complex social organism, then the very registration of certain observations requires a previous development of analysis with which to encompass the “facts” within the framework of their determinate relations. This is precisely what Marx had in mind when he wrote,

“The simplest economic category, say exchange value, presupposes population, moreover, a population producing in specific relations; as well as certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given concrete, living whole.”<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> Dennett writes, “We don't need ‘essences’ or ‘criteria’ to keep the meaning of our words from sliding all over the place; our words will stay put, quite firmly attached as if by gravity to the nearest similarity cluster.” *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett, p.421, Little Brown and Company, 1991.

<sup>72</sup> “Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy”, Karl Marx, p101, Penguin Books, 1973.

Having rejected the philosophical kernel tying together Marx's theory of alienation, it is not a very big leap for Callinocos to assert that in his later writings Marx abandons the explanatory content of the theory of alienation. He writes,

"...the concept of estranged labor is used in Marx's later writings to describe the *effects* of this mode of production rather than to account for them."

Callinicos manages to butcher the theory of alienation by suggesting a causal relation between the mode of production and alienation. We have seen that the *1844 Manuscripts* envisaged alienation as a fundamental condition of the perversion of human nature which is coextensive with the development of private property, the division of labor and the separation of the producer from the means of production. To say that any one of these modes of viewing capitalism is the cause of the other makes as much sense as saying that in the activity of walking the movement of the right foot causes the movement of the left foot. The absurdity of the latter statement merely highlights that in describing the phenomena of walking, we can pinpoint different aspects of a single movement, without suggesting that any of these aspects have a causal priority to the others with which they are organically intertwined. Similarly, for purposes of analysis we can break down different aspects of the capitalist mode of production without thereby suggesting a causal relationship between them.

Callinicos finds himself in a quandary. He does not dispute that Marx held an organic dialectical view of alienation and the capitalist mode of production in his early writings. Likewise, he grants that the theme of alienation plays a role in the later writings. At the same time, he is committed to an empirical, anti-organic interpretation of the theory of alienation. He attempts to reconcile his own anti-organic and anti-essentialist view with Marx by minimizing the significance of the theory of alienation in Marx's later writings. What he cannot ignore, he decides to reinterpret. Callinicos baldly states that following the *1844 Manuscripts*, the phenomena of alienation was treated by Marx in the manner of contemporary sociology; as a quantifiable and observable appearance. An example of the treatment of alienation which Callinicos wishes to foist upon Marx can be found in a blurb for a recent sociological study.

"In view of developments in modern society, the concept of alienation is now increasingly applied to empirical research in a variety of fields. Included here are theory driven evaluations of empirical research on migrant workers, as well as comparative studies on differing liberation ideologies in South Africa."<sup>73</sup>

As we have previously noted, contemporary sociologists are free to redefine alienation in whatever manner they wish. We can only point out that their empirical and reductive treatment of alienation is the opposite of Marx's essentialist comprehension of this category. We wonder for instance, how Callinicos would interpret the following paragraph, written 15 years after the *1844 Manuscripts* and presumably reflecting Marx's mature thought.

---

<sup>73</sup> Advertisement for the book *Alienation, Society and the Individual : Continuity and Change in Theory and Research*, edited by Felix Geyer, Walter R. Heinz

“The product of labour appears as alien property, as a mode of existence confronting living labour as independent, as value in its being for itself; the product of labour, objectified labour, has been endowed by living labour with a soul of its own, and establishes itself opposite living labour as an alien power...”<sup>74</sup>

In this fragment, which is part of a much longer discussion of the contradictory quality of labor within the capitalist mode of production, we can point to certain features of Marx's treatment of alienation that are far removed from the empirical measuring rod of Callinicos. First, Marx is clearly treating alienated labor as an essential category that is inseparable from a society organized around the production of commodities. Second, it is clear that alienated labor has an ontological dimension that can not be accounted for by any kind of measuring activity. In other words, either alienated labor has a real existence in capitalist society, or it doesn't. It makes no sense to attempt to measure the “quantity of alienation” unless we presuppose the real existence of the quality of alienation. Therein lies the weakness of the empiricist approach, which cannot account for this quality.

To buttress his argument Callinicos quotes Allen Wood to the effect that,

“Marx's use of it (alienation) in these writings, I suggest is no longer explanatory; rather it is descriptive or diagnostic. Marx uses the notion of alienation to identify or characterize a certain sort of human ill or dysfunction which is especially prevalent in modern society.”<sup>75</sup>

Note the use of the expression “dysfunction which is especially prevalent in modern society.” We no longer even have a **causal** relationship between alienation and **capitalism** here. Instead we have an **association** between “**modern society**” and a **dysfunction** called “**alienation**”. The connection between alienation and capitalism has now become so tenuous that it is scarcely discernable. The very reality of alienation as a social phenomena is itself thrown into question.

The rejection of alienation as a fundamental category of the capitalist mode of production encourages a diagnosis of alienation as a form of psychological disorder. The implication behind this analysis has a clearly reformist character. The dysfunction of alienation may be alleviated, presumably under the right conditions, without ever confronting the fundamental relations between classes. In the discussion that follows, we will find an echo of this sentiment among all those who are opposed to the revolutionary implications of Marx's theory of alienation.

---

<sup>74</sup> Grundrisse, op. cit., p. 453-454.

<sup>75</sup> “Karl Marx”, A. W. Wood, p.7, London, Henley and Boston, 1981.

## **Stalinism Contra Marx: The Case of John Hoffman**

In his 1975 book, "Marxism and the Theory of Praxis", John Hoffman, then a supporter of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the British Communist Party, engaged in a polemic with the school of "Praxis" theoreticians such as Gayo Petrovic and Shlomo Avineri. In the course of his work, Hoffman, posing as a defender of "orthodoxy" had to take on Marx himself. This comes out most clearly in the course of a diatribe against the *1844 Manuscripts* in which Hoffman counterposes the "young idealist" of the early writings to the "mature Marx". Arguing against Avineri, he writes,

"What is "empirically verifiable" about the Manuscripts' demand for "the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man"? If this is not the projection of socialist demands into "the misty realm of philosophical fantasy", then what, may we ask, is?"<sup>76</sup>

Hoffman in his arrogance, thinks he can simply take a quote out of context, which 'sounds idealist', and make his case by asking if it can possibly be "empirically verifiable". If we reconstruct this quote back into its proper context, it soon becomes clear that there is nothing mystical here at all. The full quote in which this statement appears reads as follows:

"Communism as the positive transcendence of private property, as humans self-estrangement, and therefore, and therefore **as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man**; (my emphasis A.S.) communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being - a return become conscious and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development."<sup>77</sup>

Despite the fragmentary nature of this comment, its meaning becomes clear when read in conjunction with theme of the entire manuscript. The "human essence of man" are man's powers and capacities as they develop historically through socialized labor. We also know that this is the subjective side of the definition of man. As a producer, man also transforms the objective world of which he is a part. Marx put in thus,

"In creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being."<sup>78</sup>

The objective side of man as producer is the "world of objects" which he creates. This is of course what is "appropriated" by man as a **consumer** of the product of his labor. Marx's deeper point however, is that "appropriation", meaning the ability to truly use and enjoy the products of one's labor, is only possible when estranged social relations have been overcome.

"It is only when the objective world becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man's essential powers - human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own

---

<sup>76</sup> Marxism and the Theory of Praxis, p. 175, John Hoffman, Lawrence and Wishart, 1975.

<sup>77</sup> EPM. p. 135.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

essential powers, - that all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his object: that is, man himself becomes the object.”<sup>79</sup>

In challenging Marx's notion of man “appropriating human essence” Hoffman is in fact tossing out the entire edifice of Marx's conception of human nature and the possibility of overcoming its alienated social forms. The philosophical justification of Marx's entire project has disappeared to be replaced with stale formulae.

To further his case, Hoffman portrays Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts* as sharing the abstract humanism of Feuerbach. In doing so Hoffman stumbles on the same dichotomy between the universal and particular that trapped Callinicos. He cannot fathom how Marx can speak of a universal human nature which is not an ahistorical abstraction in the manner of Feuerbach.

There is another nuance which seems to escape Hoffman's reading of the *1844 Manuscripts*. It is most appropriate to describe man as fully human, as opposed to a worker or a capitalist, when the historical period of man's self-alienation is overcome and class society has been transcended. Therefore, when Marx discusses human nature in the context of overcoming alienated social relations, he is not repeating the mistake of petty bourgeois socialists such as Proudhon, who failed to conceive of man in his historically specific class relations. Marx is describing the realization of man's human potential that will be possible only with the liberation of society from class oppression.

Hoffman misses this and takes Marx to be spinning abstract resolutions of class conflict in the manner of Proudhon. What particularly raises his ire is the following statement from the *1844 Manuscripts*,

“This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism, equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man - the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this riddle.”<sup>80</sup>

Hoffman comments on this passage as follows,

“It is true that Marx sees the reconciliation of man and nature as the theoretical solution to a practical problem for it is, he says in an important passage, *communism* which is the true resolution of the strife between man and nature, essence and existence, freedom and necessity, the species and the individual, and this *political* twist to Feuerbach's “anthropological” humanism is an important advance. But the idea itself of doing away with *abstract* strife is a mystical absurdity which comes straight from Feuerbach, who like many of the other Young Hegelians, saw in the “new philosophy” the unity of all “antithetical truths”. The belief that resolving philosophical riddles would

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 140.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

transform mankind was very widespread. Unite man and nature, ideals and reality, existence and essence, freedom and necessity and we have the messianic climax to the whole of history.”<sup>81</sup>

Admittedly Marx's language is poetic. But where is the “mystical absurdity” of “abstract strife”? There is indeed a real content here which Hoffman completely dismisses as the ravings of a romantic youth. After analyzing the implications of private property and alienated labor, which are two sides of the same phenomena, Marx brings several different strands of thought to a resolution. The overcoming of alienation through the achievement of classless society, brings to an end a certain epoch in the history of humanity, the epoch dominated by man's conflict with nature and with his fellow man. Man's freedom can only be realized when we have gotten beyond the period of nature imposing its necessity upon man. If these sentiments seem Utopian to Hoffman, then his quarrel is not just with the early Marx. It is also with the Marx who wrote *Capital*. In the conclusion to the third volume of *Capital*, Marx expresses exactly the same sentiments in just as poetic a tone. He writes,

“ The realm of freedom only begins where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production. This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish within this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite.”<sup>82</sup>

Of course the imagery of the later statement is far richer and more concrete than the earlier formulation. What else is to be expected? The prose reflects the insights developed over a lifetime of study and engagement. What is remarkable though is the philosophical consistency between the earlier and later versions. The conceptual content is identical.

We will examine one more instance where Hoffman claims to find an element of mysticism in the early Marx. In a criticism directed against Marx employment of the concept of “objectification” Hoffman writes,

“Objectification is not simply the manner in which people produce and reproduce their material life in their daily toil: the concept still possesses the divine, ‘constitutive’

---

<sup>81</sup> Hoffman, Op. cit. p. 171.

<sup>82</sup> *Capital*, Volume III, Op. cit. p.958-959.

significance that we find in Feuerbach when he speaks of the object as being the creation of the subject's own objective nature."<sup>83</sup>

Specifically, Hoffman objects to the following passage from *1844 Manuscripts*,

"The object of labor is therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created."<sup>84</sup>

What Hoffman finds objectionable here is that,

"...production cannot 'objectify' matter, it can only change its objective form, for of course the material world is not the product of human creativity but, in the last analysis, its *source*."<sup>85</sup>

Hoffman's point is that when Marx uses a term such as "creation" he is not distinguishing between *creatio ex nihilo* {creation out of nothing} and the transformation of an objectively existing external world. If this were true, then Marx would be guilty of making a concession to solipsism. Hoffman is in effect accusing Marx of holding out an olive branch to the worst forms of subjective idealism. But if we read his remarks in context, then it is absolutely clear that when Marx talks of "objectification" or "creation" he always means "transformation". For example, elsewhere in the discussion where Hoffman locates the offensive quote from Marx, we read,

"The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labor is realized, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces."<sup>86</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that some of the verbiage which offends Hoffman can be found throughout Marx's later writings. Take for instance the following passage from *Capital*.

"...the capitalist production process proceeds under specific material conditions, which are however also the bearers of specific social relations which the individuals enter into in the process of reproducing their life. Those conditions, like these social relations, are on the one hand the presuppositions of the capitalist production process, on the other its results and **creations**; the are both produced by it and reproduced by it."<sup>87</sup>

One may well ask why Hoffman expends so much energy setting up a straw man, and one that is rather easy to blow over? The answer is to be found in the target of his attacks and its political context. Hoffman is engaged in a polemic with the praxis theorists, who championed the early writings of Marx and set them up against the later

---

<sup>83</sup> Hoffman, Op. cit. p. 170.

<sup>84</sup> E. P. M. Op. cit. p. 114.

<sup>85</sup> Hoffman, Op. cit. p. 170.

<sup>86</sup> E. P. M. Op. cit. 109.

<sup>87</sup> *Capital*, Volume III, Op. cit. p. 957.

Marx. The praxis theorists simply represented another version of the theory of a “break” between the early Marx and the later Marx. They favored the “early Marx” whereas Hoffman quite clearly favors the “later Marx”.

We will defer an assessment of the praxis theorists. It is not necessary for us to come to a defense of the ‘praxis’ theorists in order to highlight a key point of our assessment of Hoffman. For Hoffman chooses to attack the ‘praxis’ theorists precisely on the grounds of their emphasis on the role of the subjective in transforming the world. In doing so, he is in fact attacking one of the key points of Marxism itself. What Hoffman’s brand of ossified “orthodoxy” seeks to maintain is a dichotomy between the objective and the subjective. He wishes to place the objective conditions of society on one side of an equation and build a Chinese wall between this reality and conscious political practice. This line of attack has a definite political agenda that is rapidly brought to light. In the course of a polemic against Sartre’s critique of Stalinism during the French struggles in 1968, Hoffman writes,

“Sartre offers no serious examination of the objective circumstances surrounding the French struggles of 1968, but why should he bother? The loyalty of the armed forces, the unity of the left, its popular standing in the country at large, the democratic quality of the existing constitutional channels for change - what do these ‘empirical’ factors matter in comparison with the ‘relations of reciprocity’ which exist in the ‘wild freedom’ of the fused group? A brilliant opportunity to ‘storm heaven’ has been lost and the French Communist Party (the PCF), predictably described as ‘a brake on any revolutionary movement in France’, is of course to blame.”<sup>88</sup>

We will for the moment leave aside the history of the events of 1968. We shall also leave aside commenting on Hoffman’s obvious prostration before the fetishized forms of the bourgeois state, i.e. what he calls ‘the democratic quality of the existing constitutional channels for change.’ What is of interest here is the method by which Hoffman assesses the maturity of the objective conditions for revolution. Hoffman lists a number of “factors” which he takes to express an unfavorable objective situations; the loyalty of the armed forces, the unity of the left, etc. It does not even occur to him that these so-called objective “factors” are not fixed qualities but are capable of dynamic transformations. The key ingredient is the role of consciousness, which in a revolutionary situation, can become a decisive part of the objective situation. In this way, the subjective interpenetrates and becomes part of the objective situation. In assessing the objective role played by a political organization, the key question, that Hoffman avoids, is what role did that organization play in advancing or retarding the growth of revolutionary consciousness? If this question were asked, then the reactionary role of the French Stalinists in the events of 1968 could not be evaded.

We are now in a position to solve the riddle posed by Hoffman’s heavy-handed attack on the early writings of Marx. The necessity to keep the subjective separate from the objective, the denial that the subjective can become a material force, is a requirement for those forces which play an active role in opposing revolution.

---

<sup>88</sup> Hoffman, *Op. cit.* p. 217.



In using the *1844 Manuscripts* as a polemical punching bag, Hoffman defends a version of “Marxism” whose revolutionary core has been eviscerated. Hoffman’s case is far from unique. It serves as a model for the kind of intellectually dishonest sleight of hand that has been practiced by Stalinism and its apologists for decades.

As a whole, Hoffman’s work is far more sophisticated and scholarly than the great majority of books in this genre. Interwoven with his distortions are many correct observations. Were this not the case, the work would have about as much credibility as the infamous History of the CPSU. This is one feature that particularly distinguishes Hoffman’s book from such tirades of Stalinist “philosophy” as “Pragmatism, the Philosophy of Imperialism”<sup>89</sup>. It is precisely the technical superiority of Hoffman’s book that make his distortions all the more egregious. Rarely has the connection between bad theory and anti-revolutionary practice so clearly come to light.

### **Marx as the Illegitimate Offspring of Hegel: The Case of Richard Schacht**

In his 1970 book “Alienation”, Richard Schacht presented a scholarly study of the concept of alienation as it emerged in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its later evolution in Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Schacht’s books starts with an excellent explanation of Hegel’s concept of alienation as described in the section “Culture and its Realm of Actuality” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

“Hegel holds that the world in which man lives is, to a considerable extent, a world he himself has created. Social, political, and cultural institutions constitute what he refers to as “the social substance”, or more frequently, simply “the substance”. The social substance has come into existence and has been sustained in existence, through centuries of human activity. As a product of the human spirit, Hegel considers it to be essentially “spiritual”.<sup>90</sup>

It is through this concept of man’s social substance, which is created by man’s activity, that Hegel identifies the essential nature of man.

“It is only with the emergence of social substance that spirit takes on a form which is not merely particular, subjective and ephemeral, as is the life of the individual without it. He (Hegel) considers it crucial that spirit should take on such a form; for it is of the very nature of spirit as he conceives it that it should be objective, enduring, and, above all, universal.”<sup>91</sup>

”That which is universal in the realm of interpersonal interactions is the social substance; and it follows from this that if the individual is to achieve universality, he must “make himself conformable” to it, and live in accordance with it... since man must

---

<sup>89</sup> Pragmatism: Philosophy of Imperialism, Harry K. Wells, International Publishers, 1954.

<sup>90</sup> Alienation, Richard Schacht, p 39, University Press of America, 1970.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

attain universality if he is to realize his essential nature as spirit, Hegel considers unity with the social substance to be something essential to man.”<sup>92</sup>

Hegel's concept of alienation flows directly out of his concept of man's essential nature. Schacht notes that alienation is first of all that condition in which man is separated, estranged from his essential nature. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel presents man's history as a history of the development of consciousness, which starting from an original unity of the individual consciousness with the universal social substance, evolves into various forms of discordance (alienated consciousness) until a new unity is reestablished at a higher level. An otherworldly religious consciousness is one form of self-alienation, where the turn away from the world of social substance results in the individual being “alienated from its actualization, its inner nature from its existence.”<sup>93</sup>

Still another form of self alienation that is encountered in the history of spirit is the individualist. He seeks to cultivate his individuality at the expense of his connection to the social substance. Though the form of alienation of the individualist is the opposite of that adopted by the otherworldly spiritualist, the outcome is the same, separation of the living individual from the social substance.

The various forms of the self-alienation of spirit, are necessary moments of a historical process that Hegel sees as leading ultimately to a supersession of alienation in all its forms through the attainment of Absolute Knowledge. Hegel binds this moment to the French Revolution as the action in which man finally comes to terms with Absolute Freedom and attains self-consciousness of its implications. With the supersession of alienation, man's essential nature is realized, “individuals who have achieved universality as well as concreteness, and universal and objective forms (i.e., the social substance) which are at the same time concretely embodied.”<sup>94</sup>

On the basis of a close textual analysis Schacht convincingly shows that Hegel also employed the term alienation in a secondary sense. According to Schacht's interpretation, the second sense of alienation employed by Hegel, is that of a **surrendering**. This in turn,

“... derives from the notion - frequently met in social contract theory - of the surrender or transfer of a right to another. It might be said to involve a ‘making alien’.”<sup>95</sup>

According to Schacht, this surrendering is actually a necessary and positive activity if alienation in its primary sense is to be overcome. Thus, unity with the social substance can only be restored if the individual willingly surrenders his individuality.

“Unity between the individual and the social substance can be restored (and self-alienation overcome) only if willful self assertion is given up.”<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>93</sup> “Phenomenology of Spirit”, p 377-378, G.W.F. Hegel.

<sup>94</sup> Schacht, *Op Cit.* p.54.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 44. Schacht maintains that the dual meaning of alienation is contained in Hegel's use of the German *Entfremdung*.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 54.

As Schacht further clarifies, this act of surrendering, and the positive connotation ascribed to it by Hegel, has its antecedents in the social contract theorists such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

“Hobbes talks of the individual ‘renouncing’ or ‘divesting himself’ of ‘the Right of doing anything he liketh’; while Locke speaks of men “quitting” or “resigning up” the “natural power” of judging and punishing offenders. And Rousseau discusses the idea of the individual “alienating”, “renouncing” and “divesting himself of” his “natural liberty”, and “giving himself to all, without reservation.”<sup>97</sup>

Schacht's explication of Hegel's employment of alienation in this dual sense is key to understanding the difference between Hegel and Marx. In pointing to the connection between Hegel's theory of alienation and social contract theory, Schacht has exposed its non-scientific and apologetic standpoint.

The social contract theorists were guilty of a common logical fallacy, that of assuming to be natural and immutable what was in fact a historically specific social form whose genesis had to be explained. Instead of explaining the development of an acquisitive, competitive individual from the development of capitalist social relations, the social contract theorists assumed this acquisitive individual preexisting all social relations and justified existing social relations by pointing to the supposed “nature” of man. As Marx pointed out on many occasions, this apologetic standpoint, which requires historical blinders, is also the standpoint of the bourgeois political economists. It is the basis of all the contradictions that characterize bourgeois political economy, especially its more vulgar apologists.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel ultimately reconciles himself to the assumption of man's acquisitive nature that was the hallmark of the social contract theorists and the political economists. Unlike the social contract theorists, Hegel's concept of man dialectically transforming his spiritual life to higher and higher forms throughout history rules out a social theory based on an ahistorical and immutable human nature, such as was posited by the social contract theorists. Hegel in fact exposes the empiricist and mechanical outlook that dominated the social contract theorists. He criticizes the social contract theorists for seeing society as an aggregate of individuals who are only held together by an act of will, the social contract. He writes,

“In modern times, the atomistic view has become even more important in the political realm than in the physical one. According to this view, the will of the single individuals as such is the principle of the State; what produces the attraction is the particularity of needs and inclinations; and the universal, the State itself, is the external relationship of a contract.”<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.55.

<sup>98</sup> *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, G.W.F. Hegel, pp 155-156, Paragraph 98, Remark. Hackett Publishing Co, Inc., Indianapolis, 1991, translated by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris.

In contrast to this atomistic conception of society Hegel viewed civil society and the State as an organic whole which could not be reduced to its parts. Nevertheless Hegel manages to recreate Adam Smith's possessive individual in the guise of the ultimate mediation between particular wills and the universal needs of civil society. According to Hegel, a civil society grounded in private property provides the final form of just social relations and a constitutional monarchy ensures the rights of all members of society. He cannot conceive of anything superceding these historical structures.

Likewise for Hegel, the source of "compulsion" in the capitalist mode of production is relocated from the objective requirements of class relations based on domination and servitude to the subjective and voluntary accommodation of individuals to civil society. For Hegel, this accommodation represents the end of alienation. Here the difference between Hegel's and Marx's concept of alienation could not be clearer. In Hegel we find that overcoming alienation ultimately means the "surrender" of individuality in order to realize the idealized constitutional monarchy outlined in the "Philosophy of Right." For Marx on the other hand, alienation will be overcome once the coercive power of class society is overcome, enabling the new society of freely associated producers in which human beings will consciously direct their interaction with nature and each other.

It follows that Marx rejects Hegel's secondary conception of alienation. The surrender of individual will for the sake of uniting with the universal institutions of civil society is part of the baggage Hegel inherited from the social contract theorists. Marx does retain "surrendering" in his concept of alienation, but its meaning has clearly been transformed. "Surrendering" for Marx becomes the coercive relationship of the laborer to capital in which part of one's humanity is lost, to be appropriated by another.

In contrast to his excellent presentation of Hegel's theory of alienation, Schacht manages to get everything upside down and inside out when presenting Marx's theory of alienation. First, he demonstrates that he is ignorant of Marx's critique of the social contract theorists and political economists by ascribing to Marx a positive valuation of the standpoint of political economy. He writes,

"Marx views Hegel's account of "the historical process" as an abstraction, but one in which the outlines of "the real history of man" can be discerned. Accordingly, he undertakes to bring it down to earth, to cut away the accretions due to its development in abstract form, and to set forth "the real history of man" in the concrete terms, appropriate to it - those of "political economy." He finds justification for this endeavor in Hegel himself; for he persuades himself that 'Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy.' " 99

Yet for Marx, "political economy" is always "bourgeois political economy". When Marx says that Hegel's standpoint is that of political economy, he is not complimenting Hegel. Far from it, this is the heart of Marx's critique of Hegel. In the

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p.79.

1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx makes it perfectly clear that he does not share the standpoint of “modern political economy”. The nature of Marx’s appraisal of Hegel leaves little room for doubt when we examine the context from which Schacht’s brief quote is taken. Marx writes,

“Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy. He grasps labor as the essence of man – as man’s essence in the act of proving itself: he sees only the positive, not the negative side of labor.”<sup>100</sup>

On the immediately preceding paragraph Marx explains that the following commentary will,

“... demonstrate in detail Hegel’s one-sidedness and limitations as they are displayed in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*.”<sup>101</sup>

It is hard to fathom how even the most cursory reading of this text can escape the conclusion that in evaluating Hegel’s debt to the political economists, Marx stresses the limitations engendered in the Hegelian system as a result of that heritage. This is not to deny that elsewhere Marx points to the positive contributions of the political economists, but the identification of Hegel with the standpoint of political economy in this particular context is tantamount to an indictment of Hegel’s one-sided and apologetic viewpoint.<sup>102</sup> The kernel of Marx’s brief concerning the limitations of political economy appears at the very beginning of his discussion on “alienated labor”. He writes,

“We have proceeded from the premises of political economy... On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities...”<sup>103</sup>

The task Marx set himself was the theoretical critique of political economy, a task that he accomplished in the course of a lifetime of study and analysis of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production. This strictly scientific endeavor was the necessary foundation for the practical supercession of political economy through the construction of the socialist movement in the working class. To place Marx in the camp of political economy, as Schacht implicitly does, is roughly the equivalent of nominating the Sultan to the College of Cardinals.

The function this topsy turvey portrait of Marx serves is to establish that Marx held the same presuppositions as Hegel as to the necessity for “civil society.” Having set up his straw man, Schacht depicts Marx as being nothing more than a critic, and an inconsistent one at that, of civil society. Schacht even tries to find common ground

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p.177.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p.177.

<sup>102</sup> Marx sums up the positive contributions of the classical political economists in *Capital*;

“Let me point out once and for all that by classical political economy I mean all the economists who, since the time of W. Petty, have investigated the real internal framework of bourgeois relations of productions...”

*Capital Vol. I, p. 174-175, note 34, Penguin Classics, 1976.*

<sup>103</sup> EPM, Op. Cit. P. 106.

between Marx's view of private property and Hegel's defense of private property, as enunciated in the *Philosophy of Right*.

“Marx even retains the Hegelian emphasis upon the importance of property in this connection. He is commonly thought to have advocated the complete abolition of private property. This is a profoundly mistaken interpretation of his position as it is set forth in the “Manuscripts.” He terms the communism which proposes this a “crude communism” and rejects it, arguing that this would “negate the personality of man in every sphere.” And he accepts Hegel's contention that property is essential to the realization of personality and urges instead its “genuine appropriation”.<sup>104</sup>

In providing a confused account of Marx's critique of ‘crude communism’ Schacht seeks to transform Marx into a defender of private property. Marx's polemic against “crude communism”, included in the *1844 Manuscripts*, notes that this early form of communism represented only the first immature critique of private property. Without delving beneath the surface appearance of property in its bourgeois form, this early form of communism took over the method and categories of bourgeois social relations and the constellation of values used to justify it. The early communists tended to simply denounce private property and its acquisition where the political economists had praised it. Marx opposition to these early communists was not based on a supposed opposition to the program of the abolition of private property. Marx's point was that the simple negation of private property leads to its generalization throughout society. This is concretized in the political program of the early communists who sought to distribute the bounty of private property to all classes.

“It (crude communism) considers immediate physical ownership as the sole aim of life and being. The category of worker is not abolished but extended to all men. The relationship of the community to the world of things remains that of private property.”<sup>105</sup>

To this empty negation of the early communists Marx's contrasts his own formulation of “communism as the positive abolition of private property and thus of human self-alienation and therefore the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man. This is communism as the complete and conscious return of man conserving all the riches of previous development for man himself as a social, i.e. a human being.”<sup>106</sup>

The above citation also shows how completely Schacht distorts Marx when he suggests Marx used the term “genuine appropriation” in conjunction with private property. The full quotation makes clear that Marx's meaning is exactly the opposite. What is “genuinely appropriated” {in a future communist society} is not private property, but “the human essence of man”. We have already seen in the previous discussion on Hoffman's attack on Marx, the implications of the “appropriation of the human essence of man.” Marx is referring to the consumption and enjoyment of man's products, but this is quite the opposite of “private property.” Marx states,

---

<sup>104</sup> Schacht, Op. Cit. p77.

<sup>105</sup> EPM, Op. Cit. p133.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

“Private property has made us so stupid that an object is only ours when we have it - when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. - in short, when it is used by us... All these physical and mental sense have therefore - the sheer estrangement of all these sense - the sense of having... The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human sense and qualities.”<sup>107</sup>

The “human essence of man” cannot be realized except through the abolition of private property. This point is made explicitly a few sentences later:

“The positive abolition of private property and the appropriation of human life is therefore the positive abolition of all alienation, thus the return of man out of religion, family, state, etc. into his human, i.e. social being.”<sup>108</sup>

Finally, in case there is any question as to Marx's attitude toward private property in his later writings, we can cite the following famous passage from the Communist Manifesto:

“The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.”<sup>109</sup>

Elsewhere Schacht constructs an argument based on the translation of “abolition” from the German “*aufheben*”. Schacht stresses the Hegelian meaning of this term with its implication of preservation and simultaneous transcendence. He writes,

“Marx's call for the *Aufhebung* of private property is frequently understood in the former, narrower sense, as a call for its simple abolition. In fact however, it is a call for the transformation of the institution of private property, to bring it into accordance with its essential nature.”<sup>110</sup>

The above statement merely highlights the hopeless confusion that has overtaken the author. It is indeed the case that Marx used the term “*Aufheben*” in the Hegelian sense. What must be untangled is precisely what is being preserved and what is being transcended. To say that what is being transcended is “the institution of private property to bring it into line with its essential function” does not really clarify anything but only compounds the confusion. What is this “essential function” and how does it express itself in the “institution of private property”? A close reading of Marx's text will show that it is the institution of **private** property that must be overcome. What is preserved is the objectified labor expressed in property. Property must become **social** property in order to express its essential nature. Property which remains within the constricted social form of private property must necessarily take on an alien role inimical to its creator, man as social being. Schacht's formulation suggests that property can transcend its alienated function and still remain private. This is an utter absurdity from Marx's point of view.

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>109</sup> Communist Manifesto, in Karl Marx, Selected Writings, McLellan, ed. p.232.

<sup>110</sup> Schacht, Op. Cit. p. 77, note 10.

Likewise, if the product of labor is to overcome its alienated social form, then the process of labor itself must be liberated from the shackles within which it is imprisoned by the wages system. This does not imply that labor will cease, any more than the objectification of labor, its product, will cease to be appropriated. Rather, the society of freely associated producers will replace class society and the wages system.

We must reiterate that Schacht's distortion of Marx is not the result of poor scholarship or deliberate intellectual sabotage. It has a deeper significance. Schacht cannot comprehend Marx's concept of private property because he does not approach the subject matter that concerned Marx as a coherent whole. Marx is analyzing a social organism, capitalism, in which each part bears a necessary relation to the whole. Furthermore, each part expresses in itself every other part and is in turn determined by the nexus of its interrelationships. Understood in this way, we can see that alienated labor is not some epiphenomena caused by private property, it is private property, manifesting itself in another form. Schacht on the other hand, approaches the subject as an empiricist, thinking that different parts of the social organism can be treated independently and rearranged at will. This leads him to split off alienated labor from private property and treat each as if they had no relation to each other. Schacht complains that Marx's insistence on treating alienation as a social phenomena rooted in the exploitation of labor causes him to miss the phenomena of alienation as an expression of the plight of individuals.

“In conceiving of this alienation in terms of a separation through surrender to another, however, Marx obscures its basic character, ... It would seem more fruitful to drop all reference to the mediation of an “alien will” in the explication of the concept of such alienation itself, and to focus solely upon the relation of labor to the individual.”<sup>111</sup>

What Schacht is saying is that the concept of “alienation” would be much more acceptable if we could just remove it from its social context in class society and examine it as an individual phenomena. This is precisely the methodology which animates most sociological and psychological studies of alienation. As we have seen from the previous discussion, such an enterprise commands a long list of sympathizers, including Bell, Blauner, Callinicos, A. W. Wood and Hoffman. This sociological comprehension of alienation leaves us with a doctrine that is entirely alien to Marx's theory of alienation.

In making this point, we do not mean to suggest that “alienation” in the common sense of the term is not experienced by individuals and expressed in myriad forms. Who would deny the power of this theme in works such as Camus, *The Stranger* or Kafka's *The Trial*? At the same time, the attempt to comprehend this phenomena in terms of an isolated anomic individual is itself an expression of alienated consciousness. By way of contrast, Marx's theory of alienation presents a precise account of social relations as they have historically developed within the capitalist mode of production. The psychological dimension is real enough, but only by virtue of the fact that we are living in a historical epoch dominated by the alienation of labor. The journey from alienated labor in the process of production to feelings of alienation in individuals is not a simple one. Many

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p. 92.



layers of social mediation are required before the forms of social relations are expressed in consciousness. Nevertheless, if the materialist conception of history has any content, then there is indeed a relationship between alienated labor and alienated consciousness. Otherwise the origin of alienation becomes a mystery, to be explained in terms of the “human condition” as the existentialists have done, or exemplifying the “fall of man” from divine grace as proclaimed by Christian theologians.

In the case of Schacht, the rejection of Marx’s theory of alienation, and its revolutionary implications, leads directly to plea for a reformist practice. He writes:

“This alienation should not be considered a “direct consequence” of existence under the “system of alienation”. The strongest plausible claim would be that it is a common result of such existence. If Marx’s position is modified in this way, a case can be made for it.”<sup>112</sup>

Here Schacht rejects the **necessary connection** between alienation and its social context. “Alienation” is only a **likely** outcome of certain social relations. Note the similarity of Schacht’s conclusion with the statement which we previously quoted bearing the approval of Callinicos:

“Marx’s use of it [alienation] in these writings, I suggest is no longer explanatory; rather it is descriptive or diagnostic. Marx uses the notion of alienation to identify or characterize a certain sort of human ill or dysfunction which is especially prevalent in modern society.”<sup>113</sup>

It is no small irony that an avowed supporter of Marx, Callinicos, and an open critic of Marx, Schacht, should reach identical conclusions. The key to this puzzle lies in the adoption of the identical method of empiricism by both protagonists. The practical implications of the empiricist reinterpretation of Marx’s theory of alienation can now be clearly drawn out. Once the inseparable link between the struggle for a revolutionary transformation of society and the project of overcoming of alienation is broken, we are left with a practice that adapts itself to existing class relations. It is through this mechanism that empiricism in philosophy leads to a practice of accommodation.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

<sup>113</sup> A. W. Wood, Op. Cit. p.7.

## **Conclusion**

We have tried to demonstrate the coherency of Marx's philosophical outlook as it informed his work throughout his active life. The unity of Marx's work is inconceivable without an understanding of this framework. We have seen how in the case of a number of commentators, both professed sympathizers and opponents of Marx, the rejection of Marx's philosophical foundation leads directly to a denial of the unity of his work and the development of a myth concerning a supposed "break" between the "Young Marx" and the "Mature Marx". Our investigation has concentrated primarily on the empiricist-minded opponents of Marxist philosophy. That is appropriate as it is from the camp of empiricism that the main lines of attack against Marxism have been issued in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet lest we forget, empiricism is not the only philosophical outlook opposed to Marxism. There are today many varieties of subjective idealism and irrationalism doing battle with Marxism. Pragmatism, postmodernism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism and many other "isms" are seeking to bury Marxism. We hope that this essay is the first of an ongoing effort to engage and expose the vacuity of these challenges to Marxism.

© Copyright 2004 by Alex Steiner. All rights reserved.