



Individual and Society in Marx and Hegel: Beyond the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*

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ABSTRACT: Marx's concepts of individual and society have their roots in Hegel's philosophy. Like recent communitarian philosophers, both Marx and Hegel reject the idea that the individual is an atomic entity, an idea that runs through liberal social philosophy and classical economics. Human productive activity is essentially social. However, Marx shows that the liberal concepts of individuality and society are not simply philosophical errors; they are products and expressions of the social alienation of free market conditions. Marx's theory develops from Hegel's account of "civil society," and uses a framework of historical development similar to Hegel's. However, Marx uses the concept of alienation to criticize the liberal, communitarian and Hegelian conceptions of modern society and to envisage a form of individuality and community that lies beyond them.

THE TOPIC OF THIS PAPER IS MARX'S ACCOUNT of the individual and society, and its roots in Hegel's philosophy. In outline Marx's views on this theme are well known, and so too is their connection with the theme of alienation which I shall describe. The Hegelian roots of these ideas are less well documented. Moreover, knowledge of the Hegelian context helps to clarify the philosophical

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assumptions involved in Marx's views, assumptions that Marx himself often does not make explicit. The contrast with Hegel's outlook is also useful in bringing out what is distinctive in Marx's approach.

Recent philosophical discussion of the topic of individual and society has been dominated by the debate between liberalism and communitarianism. I will situate Hegel's and Marx's accounts in this context. My aim is to show that these involve a different and, I shall argue, more fruitful approach, one that raises large and important issues about the character of modern society.

1. *Starting from Society*

Much liberal social thought starts from the assumption that the individual is an atomic entity, "unencumbered" (Sandel, 1982) by any necessary social relations. Individuals are taken to exist and to have an identity that is logically prior to and independent of any social relations. Work is treated as an individual activity to meet individual needs, which involves relations with others only contingently; society is regarded as a mere collection of such individuals interacting together.

Both Marx and Hegel reject this approach. According to Hegel,

There are always only two possible viewpoints in the ethical realm: either one starts from substantiality, or one proceeds atomistically and moves upward from the basis of individuality. The latter viewpoint excludes spirit, because it leads only to an aggregation, whereas spirit is not something individual, but the unity of the individual and the universal. (Hegel, 1991, §156A, 197.)

Marx is equally insistent that social and economic theory must start from the social totality. "Whenever we speak of production . . . what is meant is always . . . production by social individuals" (Marx, 1973, 85). He explicitly contrasts his starting point with the atomistic approach adopted by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1970). According to Marx, Smith begins with the assumption of an isolated individual, a Robinson Crusoe-like figure, working alone to satisfy his own needs. Only subsequently does this figure encounter others, exchange products and enter into social and economic relations (Marx, 1973, 83–5).¹

1 This account of Smith (1970) is widely shared. It is also questioned; see, *e.g.*, Denis, 1999.

Marx's objections to this approach are partly empirical. The supposition of an initial pre-social, purely individual condition — the idea of a “state of nature,” which runs through 18th-century liberal social thought — has no historical basis.

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of clans. (Marx, 1973, 84.)

However, Marx also rejects the individualistic starting point on philosophical, ontological grounds. Production should not be thought of simply as an instrumental activity to meet individual needs; it is always and necessarily a social activity. In working to create a material product, at the same time we produce and reproduce our social relations.² Human beings are *essentially* social creatures.

2. *Communitarian Accounts*

Ideas such as these are now familiar and widely held. The rejection of the idea of the atomic individual has been a fundamental aspect of the contemporary communitarian critique of liberalism (MacIntyre, 1985; Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1985).³ This critique is also applied to liberal society. According to the liberal account, a society based on the free market, in which autonomous individuals can pursue their own interests, best accords with human needs and human nature. In criticism of this, communitarian philosophers argue that liberalism threatens communities by fragmenting them into a mass of competing individuals.

Two contrasting accounts of the nature of that threat are evident among these thinkers. Some argue that in liberal society the bonds of traditional community have actually been shattered and destroyed.

2 “Definite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations” (Marx, 2000, 219).

3 It should be noted that none of these philosophers is happy with the “communitarian” label; nevertheless, it is standardly applied to them.

According to MacIntyre, for example, the picture of the individual and society given in liberal social theory is true: not as an account of universal human nature, but as an account of the way people have become in modern society (MacIntyre, 1985). Under the impact of the market, society has been dissolved into a mass of separate individuals, each pursuing their own independent interests.

However, other communitarian writers have pointed out that this sort of account is not compatible with the social ontology of communitarianism. If we are necessarily social beings, then liberal society cannot be understood as the mere negation and loss of community. If the idea of the “unencumbered” self is a myth of liberal philosophy, it cannot at the same time give a true picture of the individual in modern society. This point is made by Walzer. Modern society cannot involve the total dissolution of community, he argues; “the deep structure even of liberal society is . . . communitarian, we are in fact persons and . . . we are in fact bound together” (Walzer, 1990, 10; see also Taylor, 1991).

Walzer is right to criticize MacIntyre in this way and to insist on our social nature. However, his position takes a more questionable turn when he goes on to argue that the liberal notions of individuality and society are only superficial and mistaken appearances, and that all that is required to overcome them is a change in consciousness. For on the other side MacIntyre is right to point out that there is a basis of objective truth in the liberal account of modern fragmentation, which Walzer thus denies (see Sayers, 1999a, for further discussion).

In short, there is a connection between the liberal account of the individual and society and the objective conditions of liberal society that have produced it. Though both strands of communitarianism that I have described have some awareness of this, neither gives a satisfactory account of it.

3. *Marx*

For this one must turn to Marx. He gives a historical account of liberal society and of the sort of individuality it involves. In pre-modern societies, he argues, people are much more closely embedded in the community than in modern conditions. Social roles are largely fixed and determined for individuals by their place in the social order. In such societies, people “enter into connection with one another only as

individuals imprisoned within a certain definition, as feudal lord and vassal, landlord and serf, etc.” (Marx, 1973, 163). It is only with the development of modern society and the free market that individuals get separated from fixed and predetermined roles and become independent agents, free to pursue their own particular interests. “In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate” (Marx, 1973, 83).

Of course, the market and money are not inventions of capitalism; they existed long before it developed. In earlier periods, however, the main form of economic activity was production for use and direct extraction of surplus value. It is only with the development of capitalism that production of commodities for exchange on the market comes to predominate.

Prices are old; exchange also; but the increasing . . . dominance of the latter over all relations of production, only develop[s] fully . . . in bourgeois society, the society of free competition. What Adam Smith, in the true eighteenth-century manner, puts in the prehistoric period, the period preceding history, is rather a product of history. (Marx 1973, 156.)

And only at the end of this process, according to Marx, does the situation finally come to be reflected in the realm of ideas.

Only in the eighteenth century, in “civil society” [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*], do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social . . . relations. (Marx, 1973, 84.)

In short, the liberal idea that the isolated individual is a universal, pre-social given must indeed be rejected on philosophical grounds. However, a purely ontological critique of liberalism does not give the whole picture. For this way of thinking reflects real historical conditions. The error of liberalism is to mistake this form of individuality for human nature as such and to treat it as universal and existing independent of and prior to any social relations.

This eighteenth-century individual — the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of

production developed since the sixteenth century — appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history's point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature. (Marx, 1973, 84.)

4. *Hegel*

In arguing in this way, Marx is basing himself on an important Hegelian insight, although he develops and extends it greatly. For Hegel was one of the first philosophers to identify and describe the social changes to which Marx is referring and to take cognisance of the economic theorists who were beginning to analyze them. As Marx suggests (1973, 84, quoted above; see also Marx, 1977a), Hegel analyses them under the heading of “civil society.”⁴ He uses this term to denote the sphere of social and economic life governed by the principles of “subjectivity” and “individual freedom” in which the individual acts as an independent agent, responsible for his own beliefs and pursuing his own interests, particularly in the economic sphere of the competitive market.

Civil society, thus understood, is one of the three spheres or “moments” into which Hegel analyses modern society.⁵ According to Hegel, a separate social sphere of this sort, in which people are free to form their own ideas and pursue their own interests, is a distinctively modern development. Of course he is not suggesting that independent thought or self-interest as such are new phenomena. However, in earlier periods, Hegel argues, independent thought and the pursuit of self-interest were both regarded as threats to social stability. Attempts were made to curb free thought, particularly on religious matters, and to control independent economic activity.⁶ The implications

4 Hegel, 1991, §§182–256, 220–74. This term has a prior history in political thought which can be traced right back to Aristotle, but Hegel's use is distinctive and innovative (Riedel, 1984). The same term is taken over by Marx to describe capitalist society as a whole. When Marx is using it in this way, it is usually translated as “bourgeois society.”

5 The other two “moments” of the social whole are the family and the state (Hegel, 1991, §157, 198).

6 It is in this light that Hegel interprets Plato's hostility, in *The Republic*, to any sphere of individual autonomy and his arguments against the Sophists (*ibid.*, §185, 222–3, Sayers, 1999b, 12–15). He maintains that the principle of individuality is introduced into Western philosophy by Socrates and with Christianity. However, it reaches its full development only in modern times in Europe after going through a series of earlier stages (Hegel, 1956).

of this are the same as those of Marx's ideas just described: the creation of an arena of social life in which people are at liberty to follow their own beliefs and the growth of an economic sphere in which they are free to pursue their own interests is a distinctive development of liberal society: "the realm of civil society belongs to the modern world" (Hegel, 1991, §182A, 220).

According to Hegel, the sphere of civil society is governed by two principles. These appear to be independent and unrelated, but they are not: both must be grasped in order to understand civil society. The error of the communitarian approaches that I have identified, I shall argue, is that each sees only one of these principles and emphasizes it exclusively.

Hegel's first principle is that of "the particular individual," with the subjective freedom and autonomy just described (Hegel, 1991, §182, 220). The liberal account suggests that this is the sole component of a free market society, which is conceived as nothing more than a collection or "aggregation" of individuals, all freely pursuing their own interests in their own ways.⁷ MacIntyre in effect endorses this when he maintains that modern society has involved the complete destruction of all communal ties and relations.

However, this is only one side of the story for Hegel. Such "particular individuals" do not exist on their own. Although individuals in modern society appear to be acting quite independently, they are in fact essentially related to other such individuals and bound up in "a system of all-round interdependence" (Hegel, 1991, §§182–3, 220–1). People are related to each other in such a way that they can achieve their ends only by simultaneously satisfying those of others. In this way, "the subsistence and welfare of the individual . . . are interwoven with, and grounded on, the subsistence [and] welfare . . . of all, and have actuality . . . only in this context" (Hegel, 1991, §183, 221). Thus in acting as an individual in civil society we each further a "universal" (*i.e.*, social) end. This "universality," according to Hegel, is the second principle at work in civil society.

Walzer stresses this aspect of social connection in his account of modern society; but, like MacIntyre, he does so in a one-sided (though opposite) way. Hegel, by contrast, insists that both aspects are simultaneously at work in civil society. What this means and how it is pos-

⁷ At least within broad limits imposed by the state in order to prevent the outbreak of a Hobbesian "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 1985, chapter 13).

sible becomes clearer when one sees that what Hegel is describing in abstract philosophical terms is in fact the operation of the division of labor in a system of market exchange. In such a system, individual agents seem to operate separately: one person farms, another build houses, still others work in factories and offices, and so on. Though people act independently, they can do so only within an overall division of labor in which each is providing for the needs of the others. The division of labor is simply another term for the social organization of labor. This social arrangement is established and maintained through the operation of the market.

Hegel's account of the way the market operates is sketchy and vague. It is drawn mainly from the work of economists such as Smith, Say and Ricardo (Hegel, 1991, §189R, 227), but it lacks the empirical and economic detail that these writers bring to their studies.

In a free market situation, individuals seem to be free and independent agents; their social interconnection appears to be external and accidental to them. The social totality seems to have dissolved and to be "lost in its extremes" (Hegel, 1991, §184, 221). Particular and universal, individual activity and social relations, appear to have fallen apart and become detached from each other. However, the outcome of numerous individuals all pursuing their own economic interests is not the mere chaos of a Hobbesian state of "war." Rather, it is a situation governed by apparently objective regularities, the economic laws of the market. These regularities constitute the subject matter of economics.⁸

Hegel has an optimistic view of the outcome of this economic system. The result of all these particular self-interested individuals competing in the market place is that the common good will be served. Particular and universal are reconciled.

Subjective selfishness turns into a contribution towards the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else. By a dialectical movement, the particular is

8 "This proliferation of arbitrariness generates universal determinations from within itself, and this apparently scattered and thoughtless activity is subject to a necessity which arises of its own accord. To discover the necessity at work here is the object of political economy" (Hegel, 1991, §189A, 227). The implication of this is that economics and the laws it describes are products of the modern world — an implication which Marx makes explicit: "the categories of bourgeois economy . . . are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities" (Marx, 1967, 76).

mediated by the universal so that each individual, in earning, producing and enjoying on his own account, thereby earns and produces for the enjoyment of others. (Hegel, 1991, §199, 233.)

This echoes the ideas of thinkers such as Adam Smith who talks of an “invisible hand” benignly governing the market, and Mandeville who sees how the “private vice” of self-interest leads to “public benefits” (Smith, 1970; Mandeville, 1970).⁹ In related contexts, Hegel talks of the way in which the “cunning of reason” mysteriously ensures that a rational result comes from the pursuit of individual ends (Hegel, 1988b, 35; Hegel, 1892, §209, 350; Hegel, 1969, 746). He holds that civil society creates a framework in which liberty and individuality are both realized. In this way, although he rejects the individualistic ontology of liberalism, he shares much with liberalism in his political and economic views (Rawls, 2000).

5. *Alienation*

Marx’s analysis of the workings of capitalism and the market develops out of Hegel’s analysis of civil society, but the critique of liberalism that results is much deeper and more thoroughgoing than Hegel’s. Marx questions the idea that the market always acts to harmonize the interests of competing individuals; its operation leads also to conflict, stagnation and crisis.¹⁰ So far from being the benign mechanism of reconciliation that Hegel describes, it imposes itself on individuals and even on whole communities as an apparently independent and inexorable force. Indeed, we are so used to perceiving the economy in this way that we accept it as normal and it passes almost unnoticed. “You can’t buck the market,” people say, for it appears to be a separate and autonomous power governed by its own objective laws which operate despite the will of individuals or even of society. The Rev. Dr. Colin Morris gave a graphic account of such attitudes in a recent radio broadcast.

9 Uncritical advocates of laissez-faire capitalism (“vulgar” economists, as Marx calls them) still hold such views (Hayek, 1960).

10 “The real point is not that each individual’s pursuit of his private interest promotes the . . . general interest. One could just as well deduce . . . that each individual reciprocally blocks the assertion of the others’ interests” (Marx, 1973, 156).

The Sunday newspapers were full of reactions to the Budget. They said things like: before [the Budget] the Stock Market had been “sceptical” or “nervous,” but now it’s “pleased” or “happy” — as though it’s a sort of living being. It’s the kind of language people once used about that other invisible force called God. In Old Testament times, the people feared Jehovah’s reaction to what they’d done. These days, it’s the Market’s verdict that is awaited with anxiety. (Morris, 2004.)

Marx uses the same analogy in his account of our attitudes to the market. Just as in religion, where things that are our own creations “appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (Marx, 1967, 72), so too in economics we find ourselves at the mercy of forces that we ourselves have created. We have lost control of our own social relations, our own creations and powers, which now appear to rule over us.

Thus in liberal society, on the one hand there is a mass of apparently autonomous individuals each independently pursuing their own interests, though in reality they are interdependent and their activities are connected together. On the other hand, the form of their connection and interdependence resides in an apparently separate economic system that appears to operate according to its own objective laws, and that confronts these individuals as a power independent of them.

In fact, these two aspects go together; they are correlative aspects of the same situation. Marx describes it under the heading of “alienation.”

The social character of activity . . . here appear[s] as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual — their mutual interconnection here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. (Marx, 1973, 157.)

The Marxist notion of alienation is most frequently encountered in relation to labor. Work is alienated when we relate to our own product or creative activity as to something that is independent and opposed to us (Marx, 1975, 322–334). In the present case, alienation

is from economic and social relations. At root, however, these two forms of alienation are the same. For in producing objects we are also producing and reproducing our economic and social relations, as we have seen. Economic relations are also products of human labor. So far from providing conditions for the realization of individuality and social reconciliation, as suggested by Hegel and other liberal philosophers, in conditions of alienation these relations form an independent order which is hostile and opposed to us.¹¹

6. *Marx's Critique of Liberalism*

Both Marx and Hegel agree that when individuals pursue their own interests in a market society, differences and inequalities will emerge: specialization and division of labor are inevitable features of modern economic life. Hegel argues that these need not constitute a barrier to the realization of individuality and liberty. On the contrary, "the individual attains actuality only by entering into existence [*Dasein*] in general, and hence into determinate particularity; he must accordingly limit himself *exclusively* to one of the particular spheres of need [*i.e.*, economic activity]" (Hegel, 1991, §207, 238).

Again Hegel takes a benign view of the impact of the economic system. No doubt it is true that to achieve anything determinate *in a particular activity* one must limit oneself, as Hegel is fond of reminding us (Hegel, 1991, §13A, 47; cf. Hegel, 1892, §92A, 173). It does not follow from this that one must confine oneself exclusively to one specific occupation for the whole of one's life. However, this is what Hegel is recommending and what the modern division of labor in effect dictates. So far from facilitating the realization of individuality and freedom, it limits and restricts it.

As soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood. (Marx and Engels, 1970, 53.)

¹¹ Marx's concept of alienation is sometimes regarded as a feature only of his early writings (Althusser, 1969). This is incorrect. As the discussion here demonstrates, the themes it introduces are present throughout Marx's work.

This, too, is a manifestation of social alienation. The economic relations that we ourselves have created come to act as coercive constraints on us.¹²

This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now. (Marx and Engels, 1970, 53.)

This line of thought provides the basis both for Marx's analysis of liberal society and for his critique of liberalism, a form of critique absent from both communitarianism and Hegel's social thought. Communitarian accounts, as we have seen, fail to understand the way in which, in liberal society, atomized individuality coexists with objectified social relations; they therefore stress one or other of these aspects one-sidedly. Hegel, I have been arguing, has a deeper understanding of this connection, and Marx draws heavily on Hegel's analysis in this respect. However, Hegel believes that liberal society creates the conditions for the realization of individuality and liberty. Though he has some awareness of the alien and negative aspects of liberal society, as we shall see, he tends to discount these as mere anomalies. To repeat, in many respects he is a liberal in his political and economic views.

Marx's critique goes further. He argues that the social relations of the market and the atomized individuality associated with it are forms of alienation which limit individuality and freedom. Genuine community and full individual development will become possible only when we regain control of our economic and social relations and organize society in such a way as to allow for our all-round activity as universal beings. This is impossible, Marx argues, in liberal — *i.e.*, capitalist — society. Economic alienation is an ineliminable feature of this kind of society because it is rooted in the economic system of the market itself. His argument goes as follows.

Each individual in a market economy appears to be operating separately and to be producing independently. In reality, however, their activities are socially connected and coordinated, as Hegel describes.

¹² For Marx the full development of individuality involves the all-round development of our powers and abilities, unconstrained by such limitations.

They are part of the overall social organization and division of labor. But what is the basis of their social connection? It is located in the economic system of exchange through which their products and needs are related. Their social connection becomes explicit and asserts itself only when the products of their separate activities are exchanged in the market. The connection among the activities of individuals, therefore, resides in the economic relations among the goods they produce.

The precise way in which this social connection is established through economic exchange is spelled out by Marx in his account of the “fetishism of commodities” in *Capital*.

As a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other. . . . Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer’s labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. (Marx, 1967, 72–3.)

In this way, both the autonomous individuals in market society and the apparently alien economic system that confronts them go necessarily together. The alienation involved is not only a subjective appearance, it is an objective feature of the situation. Its causes lie in the fact that both our apparent separation and our social connections are made through the economic mechanisms of the market. Relations among producers are established *via* the relation of their products in the market. Social relations are thus not established directly among people, but indirectly *via* relations among things, or rather among the economic values bestowed on things within the economic system. To the producers, therefore, “the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx, 1967, 73). Social relations among people are transformed into economic relations among things — relations that operate in an alien way, independently of us.

What this implies is that in order to overcome this alienation, regain control over our social lives and relate to each other in a directly social and unalienated way, more than a mere change of consciousness is needed. The overcoming of alienation can be accomplished, Marx believes, only with abolition of the predominance of market exchange and the whole system of economic life that goes with it.

7. *The Free Individual*

Thus there is a dimension of social criticism in Marx's theory that is entirely absent from the communitarian critique of liberalism. Moreover, Marx's account of social alienation and its overcoming is located within a larger historical picture. Again, Marx's ideas have Hegelian origins. But even though Marx's account of historical development follows a Hegelian pattern, he uses it to reach a very different assessment of modern individuality and social relations and their place in historical development.

In the earliest forms of society, according to the Hegelian scheme, individuals are in immediate unity with the community. They are united primarily by natural bonds of family and kinship. Society takes the form of a tribe or clan. Its members accept its customs and traditions as unquestioned laws. The individual is submerged in the community, separateness and particularity have not yet developed, and the universal (*i.e.*, the social) predominates.¹³

However, individuality starts to develop within such communities. The resulting tensions and conflicts lead eventually to their breakup. A new historical stage commences in which freedom and autonomous individuality begin to develop. This stage evolves through a series of different historical shapes. With the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, according to Hegel, the third stage is reached. The conditions are finally created for the modern liberal state. This contains a developed sphere of civil society which allows individuals to pursue their own interests, yet within the overall legal and political framework of the state. Liberal society thus combines

¹³ This initial stage reaches its highest development in the ancient Greek Polis, on Hegel's account.

the individualism of civil society within the larger whole of the state. The community is no longer a merely immediate unity; it is now a unity that contains individuality and difference within it: it has a concrete and developed form. For Hegel this is the final stage of historical development, the “end of history.” The fully developed, free individual is at home in such a society, alienation is overcome (Hegel, 1988a, 92–8).

This is not to suggest that Hegel is blind to the problems of liberal society. He is by no means an uncritical advocate of free market capitalism and industrial society.¹⁴ He is particularly concerned by the huge gulf of inequality that, as he could see, was a consequence of the development of capitalism¹⁵ and which, he feared, would spawn an excluded and disaffected underclass or “rabble” (Hegel, 1991, §244, 266). But he can see no effective remedies. He half-heartedly suggests a number of possibilities, including charity, the founding of colonies to which the poor could be exported, even simply “to leave the poor to their fate” (Hegel, 1991, §§243, 243–9, 266–70). He holds out little hope for any of these policies.

Poverty and social exclusion remain as unfortunate “anomalies” in Hegel’s account of liberal society, but they are not usually allowed to disrupt his optimistic picture of it.¹⁶ For Hegel’s historical horizons are limited by liberal society; he cannot see beyond it. When he does despair of a resolution of its problems, instead of looking beyond it, he looks back to an earlier and simpler form of life, where economic activity is still at a local and immediately comprehensible level. His ideal here is the “heroic” society of Homeric legend.

14 Nor are the economists on whom he relies, such as Adam Smith.

15 Cf. Marx’s and Engels’ view that capitalist society was dividing into the “two great hostile camps” of the bourgeoisie and proletariat (Marx and Engels, 2000, 246). If the situation appears different now (at least from our perspective in the economically developed part of the world), arguably that is not because capitalism has ceased to function in this way, but because these effects are now being worked out on a global rather than national scale.

16 According to Knowles, Hegel gives a penetrating analysis of the problem of poverty in capitalist society; he should not be criticized for failing to come up with a solution for it. “The mistake of Marx and . . . of his followers was to suppose that deep and plausible social criticism somehow delivers up distinctive and effective policy prescriptions. This is not a mistake to which Hegel was prone” (Knowles, 2002, 293). This is to misunderstand the purpose of both these writers. Neither Hegel nor Marx is trying to give “policy prescriptions” about what ought to be done. Rather they are seeking to analyze and understand what is actually the case. If there are inherent and ineliminable conflicts in modern society then the liberal order cannot be stable and harmonious, as Hegel maintains. It is inherently contradictory, it is destined to change and be superseded, regardless of what policies are pursued. That is Marx’s argument. See Sayers, 1998, 106–110.

In such a mode of life man has the feeling, in everything he uses and everything he surrounds himself with, that he has produced it from his own resources, and therefore in external things has to do with what is his own and not with alienated objects lying outside his own sphere wherein he is master. (Hegel, 1975, 261.)

Though romantic visions of this sort have had and still have great influence, they were unrealistic in Hegel's day, as Hegel himself was well aware, and they are even more so today. It is impossible for us to return to such simple conditions.

Moreover, such romanticism conflicts with Hegel's historical scheme, which assumes a progressive development. In this scheme, development occurs through a process of alienation and its overcoming. Society moves from an initial stage of simple and immediate unity, through a period of particularity and separation in which individuals are alienated from each other and from the community. The third and final stage is one of synthesis and reconciliation. The individual is reintegrated with the community and with others: alienation is overcome.

It is important to see that alienation, on this account, is not a purely negative phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a necessary stage in the process of development. Equally, however, alienation is not a condition to rest in; for in it individuals are divided from each other and from their social connections. There is a drive to overcome it and find reconciliation; and this, Hegel believes, is achieved in modern liberal society.

The Marxist notion of alienation is often interpreted as a purely critical and negative concept, but seen in the light of its Hegelian roots it is clear that this is incorrect. Marx's account of history makes use of the same basic Hegelian framework. He too sees history as a development in which alienation forms a necessary stage in the process of its eventual overcoming (Sayers, 1998, 88–89, 136–141). Moreover, like Hegel, Marx divides history into three basic stages: an initial condition of immediate unity, followed by a stage of division and alienation, and finally a synthesis of the early stages, a higher form of unity in which concrete individuality can develop within community (Gould, 1978).

However, Marx's specific application of this framework is quite different from Hegel's.

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. (Marx, 1973, 158.)

This “second” form is liberal society, in which independent individuals are bound together by the alien economic relations of exchange and the market. Marx dates its beginning between the 16th and 18th centuries in Europe, when these relations come to predominate (Marx, 1973, 83).

As we have seen, Marx rejects the view, shared by Hegel and liberalism, that this creates the conditions in which true individuality and freedom can be realized and alienation overcome. This is not to deny that modern liberal society involves a real development of individuality and freedom, particularly in comparison with the relative absence of individual autonomy in earlier forms of society. However, even in the freest of liberal societies, individuality and liberty are limited by the alienation that forms a pervasive feature of modern life. On the one hand, individuals seem detached and isolated from each other; while, on the other hand, the enormous economic powers and social relations that we ourselves have created have escaped our control and rule over us as independent and hostile forces. Marx describes the situation with a graphic and powerful metaphor.

Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. (Marx and Engels, 2000, 250.)

The implications of this account are radical and far reaching. The alienation from our productive powers that Marx is here describing, he insists, is an essential and objective feature of capitalist society; it is rooted in the economic forms of market exchange that are constitutive of it. The “sorcerer” is “modern bourgeois society,” and the powers it has summoned up are those of capitalism and the market as such.

But this is not the end of the historical story for Marx. There can and will be another stage, for which capitalism has created the necessary material conditions. “Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage” (Marx, 1973, 158). Only with this further stage, Marx maintains, will we be able to overcome our present alienation and reappropriate the economic and social powers that now rule over us. This will involve a complete transformation of society: the supersession of the predominance of monetary exchange, and of “civil” or bourgeois society as such. Only then will the full and free development of individuality in a true community become a genuine possibility.

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