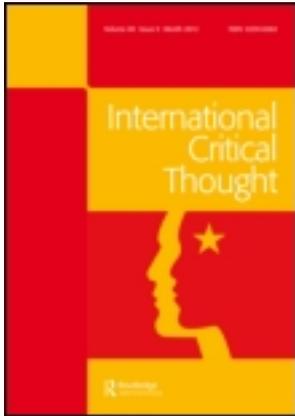


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## International Critical Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rict20>

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Available online: 24 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Sean Sayers (2011): Alienation as a critical concept, International Critical Thought, 1:3, 287-304

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2011.609265>

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## Alienation as a critical concept

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This paper discusses Marx's concept of alienated (or estranged) labour, focusing mainly on his account in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. This concept is frequently taken to be a moral notion based on a concept of universal human nature. This view is criticized and it is argued that the concept of alienation should rather be interpreted in the light of Hegelian historical ideas. In Hegel, alienation is not a purely negative phenomenon; it is a necessary stage of human development. Marx's account of alienated labour should be understood in similar terms. It is not a merely subjective discontent with work; it is an objective and historically specific condition, a stage in the process of historical development. Marx usually regards it as specific to capitalism. The criticism of capitalism implied in the concept of alienation, it is argued, does not appeal to universal moral standards; it is historical and relative. Overcoming alienation must also be understood in historical terms, not as the realization of a universal ideal, but as the dialectical supersession of capitalist conditions of labour. Marx's account of communism as the overcoming of alienation is explained in these terms.

**Keywords:** Marx; Hegel; alienation; labour; morality; social criticism

'Alienation' is one of the most familiar terms of Marxist philosophy. It is one of the few theoretical terms from Marxism that has entered into ordinary language. It is commonly used in the social sciences and there is a huge academic literature on the topic. And yet it is one of the most misunderstood and misused terms in the whole of Marxism. In ordinary speech and even in the social sciences it is usually taken to describe vague feelings of malaise or meaninglessness, particularly with respect to work. A similarly vague meaning is sometimes attributed to Marx as well. According to Leopold (2007, 68), for Marx alienation is 'a kind of dysfunctional relation (for example, an unnatural separation or hostility) between entities'. Elster (1985, 74) and Wood (1981, 50) follow Plamentatz (1975, 140) in trying to identify both a 'social' and a 'spiritual' sort of alienation, the latter being defined by Elster (1985, 74) with spurious precision as 'either a lack of sense of meaning, or a sense of a lack of meaning'.

Almost universally, alienation is taken to be a moral and a critical notion. Whatever others may intend by it, Marx's use of the term cannot be understood in these ways. Marx's meaning is precise and specific. It derives from the Hegelian philosophical tradition in which he formed his ideas. Understanding the concept of alienation in this Hegelian context makes this clear and sheds important new light on it. That is what I shall argue in this paper.

'Alienation' is one of the usual translations of Marx's terms '*Entfremdung*' and/or '*Enttäusserung*'. The translations 'estrangement' for the former and 'externalization' for the

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latter are also common.<sup>1</sup> According to Lukács (1975, 538), ‘*Entfremdung*’ and ‘*Entäusserung*’ were originally the German translations of the English eighteenth century usage of ‘alienation’ in an economic or legal sense to mean the sale of a commodity or relinquishment of freedom. I am not aware of any decisive evidence to show that Marx uses the terms to denote distinct theoretical concepts; he appears to use them interchangeably (cf. Bottomore in Marx 1961b, xix).<sup>2</sup> I will not attempt to distinguish them or Marx’s use of them; I shall refer to them both with the word ‘alienation’.

Marx talks of alienation in connection with a number of areas of life – religion, politics, social and economic relations – but particularly labour. I shall focus on the area of labour in this paper.<sup>3</sup> In Marx’s usage, a person is alienated when something that is their product or activity takes a form which is independent of them and working against them. For Marx, alienation, thus understood, is not a purely subjective phenomenon, it is an objective, social condition which can be overcome only through historical changes (cf. Hardimon 1994, 119–22).

Marx clearly uses the concept of alienation in a critical manner, but what sort of criticism does it involve? Almost invariably it is taken to be a moral and humanist criticism based upon a notion of universal human nature. This is supposed to provide the standard by which Marx criticizes alienating social conditions. Honneth (2007, 14) gives a good account of this approach:

According to Marx, human beings’ central feature is their capacity for objectifying and realizing themselves in the product of their labor; it is only by this act of objectification that individual subjects are in a position to achieve certainty of their own powers and thereby attain self-consciousness. Thus the possibility of freely and willingly experiencing their own labor as a process of self-realization forms the deciding precondition for a good life. However, this condition is destroyed by the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, since wage labor robs the active subjects of any control over their activity. Capitalism therefore represents a social form of life that sets human in opposition to their own essence, thus robbing them of any prospects of a good life.

Although there has been an immense amount of argument about the place of the concept of alienation in Marx’s work, this sort of account is seldom disputed. It is at the basis of the ‘humanist’ Marxism that celebrates the concept of alienation (and Marx’s early writings in which it is prominent) for adding an ethical dimension to his thought – a dimension which, it is argued, is missing from his later work (Fromm 1963). A similar account of alienation is also given by structuralist ‘anti-humanists’ who argue that Marx abandoned the idea of universal human nature and the concept of alienation in his later work (Althusser 1969). Others question both these positions and argue that Marx retained the concept of alienation throughout – but many of these also regard alienation as a humanist moral concept.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will argue that there are serious deficiencies in this sort of account. The concept of alienation is more complex and less readily assimilated to the familiar pattern of universalist moral thought than it suggests.

One more preliminary: I share the view that the concept of alienation remains a part of Marx’s thought throughout his work, though I shall not attempt to establish this point here. However, the

<sup>1</sup> For useful summaries of issues of translation see Arthur (1986, 49–50, 147–9) and Marx (1975a, 429–30).

<sup>2</sup> This is disputed by Kain (1982, 75–92).

<sup>3</sup> Similar arguments apply to these other areas as well, I believe, but I do not have the space to establish that here. I hope to return to it on another occasion.

<sup>4</sup> See Avineri (1968), McLellan (1971, ix, 237), Mészáros (1970), Plamenatz (1975), Tucker (1961), etc. For a contrary view, see Cowling (2006). See (Leopold 2007, 1–10) for a good summary of these arguments. I shall not attempt to resolve them here.

most extensive explicit account of it is in the *1844 Manuscripts*. I shall focus mainly but not exclusively on that work in the present paper.

### Hegel on work

As Honneth says, Marx's concept of alienated labour is based on a distinctive theory about the place of work in human life. This derives from Hegel. Labour is a fundamental concept in Hegel's philosophy. It is also a fundamental concept in classical economics, one of the other main sources of Marx's ideas in this area. In economics, work is generally taken to be a painful and unpleasant activity in which we are obliged to engage because we have material needs that we cannot satisfy in an easier way. It is treated as a purely instrumental activity, a mere means to the end of meeting our needs.

According to Hegel, by contrast, work is not only an instrumental activity to meet natural needs, it is also a 'spiritual' activity, an activity that distinguishes humans from other animals. Other animals are purely natural beings. They have a direct and immediate relation to nature; both to their own natures (their appetites and instincts) and to the natural environment. They are driven by their natural desires and instincts, and they directly consume what is immediately available in the environment.<sup>5</sup>

Work involves a break with this natural and immediate relation to nature. In work, gratification is deferred; the object is not consumed immediately, it is worked upon and transformed for use later. A mediated and distinctively human relation to nature is thereby established. This break, this alienation, from nature is not the end of the story, however, for it is also through work that we overcome this alienation. Through work we objectify ourselves in our products, we give human form to the world around us. We come to recognize our powers and capacities as real and objective, and thus we develop as self-conscious agents. All labour, according to Hegel – indeed, all activity which has an intentional material effect – involves objectification and leads to self-development in this way.

In transforming our environment and our relationship to it, we also transform ourselves. Human nature is not an unchanging universal. It develops and changes, both in the individual and socially in the course of history. Work and alienation play an essential role in this process. Although work entails a breach with natural immediacy and leads to a condition of alienation, it is also the means by which this breach is overcome. For through it we humanize the world and change ourselves. We begin to make ourselves at home in the world and overcome our alienation.

The process of development involved here follows a characteristic pattern. Starting from an initial condition of immediacy and simple unity, it moves through a stage of division and alienation. It culminates eventually in a higher form of unity, a mediated and concrete unity which includes difference within it. According to Hegel, all human ('spiritual') phenomena follow a path of development of this sort. Individual human development proceeds from an initial state of infant simplicity and innocence, through stages of division and alienation, to adult maturity and self-acceptance.

A similar pattern is present also in the course of social and historical development. The earliest societies are simple unified communities. For example, clan groups and the early stages of the ancient Greek society take this form. With historical development, division and alienation occur and individuality and difference are increasingly manifest. In Europe, the eventual culmination, according to Hegel (1956), is a modern liberal form of society. This, he believes, is a

<sup>5</sup> There are numerous exceptions to this. For further discussion see Sayers (2005, 611–12).

higher form of social unity in which individuality and difference are contained within a unified social order.

Hegel uses the Biblical story of the Fall of Man to explain this account. As he interprets the story, the Garden of Eden embodies the idea that human beings initially led a simple life, in harmony with each other and with nature. Social development disrupts this innocent state. With the Fall comes division: alienation from others and from nature. According to the Bible, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and they are expelled from the Garden as a punishment. The usual interpretation is that the original condition of simplicity is the ideal to which we should aspire, and the story is taken to imply an idyllic and romanticized vision of life before the Fall and a yearning to return to it. Hegel's interpretation is very different. He does not idealize the past or advocate a return to it. On the contrary, historical development is leading towards a higher and different form of unity in the future.

The disunion that appears throughout humanity is not a condition to rest in. But it is a mistake to regard the natural and immediate harmony as the right state... Childlike innocence no doubt has in it something fascinating and attractive; but only because it reminds us of what the spirit must win for itself. The harmoniousness of childhood is a gift from the hand of nature: the second harmony must spring from the labour and culture of the spirit. (Hegel 1892, 55, para. 24 Addition)

### Marx on alienation

Marx takes over these Hegelian ideas and develops them in a radical and critical way. Like Hegel, he sees labour as a distinctively human form of activity. It is an 'essential' human activity, it is our 'species' activity. Moreover, he regards labour – all labour – as a process in which we objectify ourselves in our products. However, Marx makes a crucial distinction between 'objectification' (*Vergegenständlichung*) and 'alienation'. Work does not always lead to self-realization. In conditions of alienation, this does not occur. 'The object that labour produces . . . stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer' (Marx 1975b, 324).

In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx distinguishes four aspects of alienated labour, of which such alienation from the *object* of labour is the first. Workers are also alienated in relation to the *activity* of labour. This is the second aspect. Work is experienced as painful and unpleasant, as forced and not free. This is the way in which classical economics conceives of work, and it is how work is often experienced in fact. According to Marx, however, this is characteristic of *alienated* labour, it is a feature only of specific social and historical conditions. For implicit in the concept of alienation is the idea that labour need not have this character. Work can be a self-realizing activity, alienation can be overcome.

Marx takes over the Hegelian account of human nature and of the role of work in human life that I have been explaining. This is embodied by Marx in the notion of 'species being'. This is our distinctively human being. Work is our 'species activity', the activity which distinguishes humans from other animals. These are driven by appetite and instinct. Their activities are directly the means to satisfy their material needs. In conditions of alienation, our work is reduced to its 'animal' character – it becomes a mere means to satisfy our purely material needs. Thus we become alienated from our 'species being'. This is the third aspect of alienation that Marx distinguishes.

For the classical economists, work is an essentially individual activity to satisfy individual needs. It may or may not take place within the context of relations with others; these are purely contingent and external. Marx rejects this account. Like Hegel, he sees human beings as essentially social. Work, as a human activity, always and necessarily occurs within a context of social relations. In the *1844 Manuscripts* and subsequently, Marx makes this point by

maintaining that in work we create not only a material product, but at the same time we also produce and reproduce our social relationships.

Through estranged labour man not only produces his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to alien and hostile powers; he also produces the relationship in which other men stand to his production and product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men. (Marx 1975b, 331)

In other words, social relations are just as much the creation of human labour as are its more tangible material products, and labour is objectified in them just as it is in our material products (Colletti 1975, 50–51).<sup>6</sup> We should be able to recognize the products of our labour then as confirmations of our powers and abilities. In conditions of alienation, however, they become independent of us and opposed to us. This is the fourth aspect of alienation, the alienation of ‘man from man’. In the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx’s account of it is brief and sketchy. However, what Marx is referring to is the way in which economic forces have dissolved communal bonds with the result that individuals are atomized, and economic forces take on a life of their own and obey their own objective laws.<sup>7</sup> This is how both individuals and the economy are usually regarded in economics. However, Marx argues, individuals are not separate atoms; and economic laws, unlike natural laws, are specific to particular forms of society. Classical economics thus presents what are the alienated forms of specific societies as though they are objective and universal. In this way, Marx’s critique of political economy in this area parallels his critique of the economists’ picture of labour described earlier, in that alienated labour is treated as if it were the universal form of it.

### Marxism as critique

Marx describes his project as the ‘critique of political economy’.<sup>8</sup> The main categories of political economy are criticized for portraying the capitalist system as in accord with universal human nature. The concept of alienated labour plays a central role in this, as we have seen. His account of alienation is usually taken to imply a humanist moral critique of present kinds of work and social relations. Alienation is portrayed as a purely negative condition that thwarts the realization of a universal human nature. Work and its products should be avenues of self-realization but they are turned into their opposites.

One should be cautious about attributing such ideas to Marx. Of course Marx condemns capitalism, but the view that the main purpose of the concept of alienation is moral criticism is mistaken, even in relation to his early work. Like Hegel and others in the post-Kantian philosophical tradition (Hegel 1991, Preface; Nietzsche 1994, Preface; Heidegger 1962, 211; etc.), Marx insists that his primary aim is theoretical understanding rather than moral condemnation. This is not to suggest that the moral account is entirely mistaken. Marx does indeed hold the view that

<sup>6</sup> This is true not only of alienated labour but of all labour. ‘M. Proudhon the economists understands very well that men make cloth, linen, or silk materials in definite relations of production. But what he has not understood is that these definite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc’ (Marx 1978c, 103) .

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Leopold (2007, 65–6). These ideas are much more fully developed later in Marx (1973, 156–65), and in the analysis of ‘the fetishism of commodities’ (Marx 1961a, chapter 1.4), discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> This is the title of Marx (1971b). It is also the subtitle of *Capital* in its original version, though this is changed in the English translation of 1867 supervised by Engels. However, it is also the title that Engels (1964) gave to his article of 1844 cited by Marx (1975b, 281; 1978d, 5) as an important influence on the early development of his thought.

work can be a self-realizing activity, and that in conditions of alienation this potentiality is thwarted. However, human nature is not an unchanging universal; it is a historical phenomenon which develops dialectically. Work and alienation play an essential role in this process. Hence alienation is not a purely negative phenomenon; its impact is more complex and contradictory.

In Hegel, as we have seen, work entails a break with purely natural conditions. It involves a separation of humans, as self-conscious beings, from an initial situation of natural immediacy. Equally, however, it is through work that we overcome this division from nature. We give human form to the world around us and come to recognize our powers and capacities as real and objective. We transform our environment and our relationship to it, and in the process we transform ourselves. Marx follows Hegel in comprehending work in these terms.

It is . . . in his fashioning of the objective [world] that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labour is the *objectification of the species-life of man* . . . and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he has himself created. (Marx 1975b, 329)

Marx derives this picture directly from Hegel, as he explicitly acknowledges in a much quoted passage.

The importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* . . . lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object, as alienation and as supersession of this alienation . . . he therefore grasps the nature of *labour* and conceives objective man – true, because real man – as the result of his *own labour*. (Marx 1975b, 385–6)

The full significance of what Marx says here has not been sufficiently noticed. The process of human development that Marx describes follows the characteristic Hegelian and dialectical pattern described earlier, though of course the specific stages of development are quite different to Hegel's. Starting from an initial condition of immediacy and simple unity, this moves through a stage of division and alienation, to culminate eventually in a higher form of unity, a mediated and concrete unity which includes difference within it.<sup>9</sup>

As this passage makes clear, Marx's account of the role of alienated labour in human development conforms to this Hegelian pattern. It must be comprehended in these terms. An important implication of this is that *alienation is not a purely negative or critical concept*. Alienation does not involve the pure negation of human possibilities in the way that the moral interpretation implies.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, a stage of division and alienation is an essential part of the process of human development. It represents the beginning of the process of emancipation through which human beings are gradually freed from a condition of natural immediacy and develop self-consciousness and freedom. Alienated labour and alienated social relations play an essential role in this process (Arthur 1986, 12, 67, 72, 148; Leopold 2007, 86).

This is not to suggest, of course, that alienation is a satisfactory state or a condition to 'rest in', as Hegel puts it. On the contrary, it is a condition of disunity, it involves distress and suffering. However, these negative aspects themselves drive us to seek to overcome them and seek unity. According to Hegel, this cannot be found by a return to earlier conditions.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen (1978, chapter 1) gives a good account of this process, though he does not connect it with the concept of alienation. See also Cohen (2000, chapters 3–6).

<sup>10</sup> 'Alienation has not only a *negative* but also a *positive* significance' (Marx 1975b, 388, 391). This a central theme of the sections on 'Private Property and Communism' and 'Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy' (Marx 1975b).

Rather, we are driven on, to look for a ‘higher’ unity. This is not given immediately; it must be created. And this can be achieved only through the activity of labour. Marx gives specific detail to this picture. Thus, alienated labour creates the material conditions for a higher, communal form of society. This is what Marx (1971a, 819) calls ‘the civilizing mission’ of capitalism. However, it does not contribute to human development in only an external and instrumental way. It is also the process by which the producers transform themselves. Through alienated labour and the relations it creates, people’s activities are expanded, their needs and expectations are widened, their relations and horizons are extended. Alienated labour thus also creates the subjective factors – the agents – who will abolish capitalism and bring about a new society.

Seen in this light, alienated labour plays a positive role in the process of human development; it is not a purely negative phenomenon. It should not be judged as simply and solely negative by the universal and unhistorical standards invoked by the moral approach. Rather it must be assessed in a relative and historical way. Relative to earlier forms of society – strange as this may at first sound – alienation constitutes an achievement and a positive development. However, as conditions for its overcoming are created, it becomes something negative and a hindrance to further development. In this situation, it can be criticized, not by universal moral standards but in this relative way (Sayers 1998, Part II).

This sort of account is criticized for implying a quasi-theological narrative of fall and redemption (cf. Lear in Honneth 2008). In some respects it does conform to that pattern. Hegel is quite explicit about this, as we have seen. He appeals to the Biblical story of the Fall to explain his position. In and of itself, the fact that this account has this form is not a valid objection to it. There is nothing wrong with portraying human development in this way, provided that reality actually conforms to this pattern, and it is illuminating to see it in this way. However, Hegel is also criticized for presenting his account of history as a ‘theodicy’ which is designed not just to describe the pattern of historical development but to reconcile us to the evil and suffering that it has involved. Again he is explicit about this.

Our approach is a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God. Leibniz attempted a theodicy in metaphysical terms . . . so that once the evil in the world was comprehended in this way, the thinking mind was supposed to be reconciled to it. Nowhere . . . is there a greater challenge to such intellectual reconciliation than in world history. This reconciliation can be achieved only through the recognition of that positive aspect, in which the negative disappears as something subordinate and overcome. (Hegel 1988, 18)

Marx’s idea of progress is criticized for portraying historical development in similar terms. However, Marx cannot be accused of trying to justify the destructive impact of historical development, particularly not in its capitalist form. His outrage at the suffering and misery caused by capitalism is evident in almost everything that he wrote. Nevertheless, he does argue that this suffering does not refute the idea of progress. Indeed he portrays it as an inescapable part of the process. While historical development proceeds through conflict and strife like a blind process of nature, this is the way it occurs. In this sense, Marx does seek to ‘reconcile’ us to it, but his description is far from what is usually understood by a ‘theodicy’. ‘Has the bourgeoisie . . . ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?’ (Marx 1978b, 662). Only in the future – when ‘a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the markets of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to . . . common control’ – only then can historical development be made to take a more benign form (Marx 1978b, 664).

### Alienation as a historical condition

This is Marx's Hegelian, historical and dialectical account of alienation and its role in human development. At least, these are its abstract and formal outlines. However, as a historical condition alienation is a feature of concrete and specific societies. It comes about at a certain point in the history of particular societies and it will be overcome given certain historical developments. When does it start? How will it end?

For Hegel, modern liberal (i.e., capitalist) society means an end to the alienation of individual and community that characterizes earlier forms. Marx, of course, rejects this view. He regards alienation as an inescapable feature of capitalist society. It is also clear that he believes that alienation can be overcome with the advent of communism.<sup>11</sup> But is alienation confined to capitalism, or does it also exist in precapitalist conditions? Marx is surprisingly inexplicit about this, particularly as regards alienated labour as such (Elster 1985, 77). What he does say on the topic seems contradictory. In the *1844 Manuscripts* for the most part he appears to assume that alienated labour is specific to capitalism. This is Lukács' view. He points out that when Marx (1975b, 330–1, 324) talks of the product of alienated labour being 'owned by another', he is clearly describing the situation of 'the so-called free worker who has to work with the means of production belonging to another and for whom, therefore, these means of production as well as his own product exist as an independent, alien power' (Lukács 1975, 549).

Marx is even more explicit that alienation is specific to capitalism in his celebrated account of 'The fetishism of commodities and the secrets thereof' in *Capital*, volume I (Marx 1961a, chapter 1 section 4). There he describes the way in which social relations under capitalism take on the alien and 'fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1961a, 72). He contrasts this with the 'simple', 'clear' and 'intelligible' way in which social relations appear, both in precapitalist forms of society and in a future 'community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common' (Marx 1961a, 77–9).

A similar account is presented in a well known passage in the *Grundrisse*, which is a preliminary draft for this section of *Capital*. In this, moreover, Marx presents the development as a dialectical process which moves from an initial condition of simple unity, through a stage of alienation, towards a higher form of unity. The process of social and economic development, as he describes it, begins with precapitalist conditions in which there are 'fixed personal (historic) relations of dependence in production' (Marx 1973, 156). These are 'the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points' (Marx 1973, 158). With the coming of capitalism they are dissolved and replaced by the alienated relations of the market in which:

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production ... appear 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 ... appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. (Marx 1973, 157)

These alienated relations will eventually be overcome. '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) is explicit that 'the

<sup>11</sup> This is the explicit theme of Marx (1975b); it is fundamental to his account of genuine as contrasted with 'crude' communism. It remains Marx's view throughout his work.

second stage creates the conditions for the third' – that is, a passage through capitalism and alienation is necessary in order to create the conditions for their overcoming and for communism (cf. Gould 1978, chapter 1).

In other places, however, Marx appears to maintain that alienation is a more pervasive phenomenon, and not confined to capitalism alone. Thus at one point in the *1844 Manuscripts* he describes feudal landownership as a form of 'alienation' (Marx 1975b, 318; Arthur 1986, 22–5). Elsewhere, too, he seems to suggest that features of work usually associated with alienation are present in other kinds of society as well. In *The German Ideology*, for example, he suggests that the division of labour as such is a form of alienation (Marx and Engels 1970, 53). This has existed throughout known history. Similarly, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973, 611) suggests that work is regarded as purely instrumental and unfree, not just in capitalism but in all class divided societies.

Is alienation, then, specific to capitalism or is it present in all societies with class divisions? The question is wrongly posed, I believe. Rather than trying to answer it, the concept of alienation that it presupposes should be questioned. The historical account that I have been describing sees alienation as a necessary stage in a larger process of development. This is a general theoretical schema for thinking about the course of human change. It is quite possible to apply it in different ways, even to the same historical phenomena. There is no single right way. We should not be looking for a single unique condition of alienation. Rather, we should ask whether specific historical changes can usefully be seen as following a pattern of alienation and its overcoming – and, if so, how? There are various ways in which this can be done, various time scales on which these stages can be seen to occur. Different conceptions of alienation will correspond to these.

For example, the entire course of human social development can be thought of as starting with a stage of natural simplicity and unity. Engels (Marx and Engels 1978, 473n; Engels n.d. [1961?], chapter IX) explicitly posits such a stage, which he calls 'primitive communism'. With class divisions, humanity enters into a long development taking it through numerous forms of division and alienation. Eventually, according to Engels, it will transcend these in a future classless society. On this view, alienation has been a feature of class divided societies throughout history.

It is unclear whether Marx accepted the hypothesis of an initial prehistoric stage of 'primitive communism'. Some passages, as I have suggested, seem to imply a similar picture.<sup>12</sup> More frequently, however, he treats alienated labour as a specific feature of capitalism, with the implication that labour in precapitalist societies is not alienated. This is not to suggest that people in precapitalist conditions do not experience their work as toil and as unfree. Of course, in such societies work is often felt to be harsh and unpleasant; and it is often experienced as a forced imposition, either by the imperatives of natural needs or by coercion from others or both (for example, in conditions of slavery or to pay taxes or tithes). On the reading that I am arguing for, however, alienated labour means something more precise and definite than mere dissatisfaction with work. It is not a universal and abstract moral notion; it has a specific historical reference.

It is illuminating to interpret Marx's account of the four aspects of alienated labour in the *1844 Manuscripts* in this light, as descriptions that apply specifically to labour in capitalist conditions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The account of history in terms of changes in the division of labour in Marx and Engels (1970) can be read as suggesting such a picture. See also Cohen (1978, 24, 299) for some further evidence. Cohen's case is not entirely convincing in my view, but I will not pursue the question here.

<sup>13</sup> Marx is referring specifically to the alienation of the worker. In the *1844 Manuscripts* he promises to go on to discuss the alienation of the non-worker (capitalist) but the manuscript breaks off as he is about to do so. One can only speculate about what he might have said (Sayers 2011, chapter 2).

(1) The crucial factor that creates alienated labour with the coming of capitalism is the predominance of commodity production and wage labour. In precapitalist conditions commodity exchange plays only a limited role. Production is to satisfy needs that seldom extend beyond the household and the local community. There is a direct and immediately visible connection between work and the needs it satisfies. With the coming of capitalism this changes. The direct connection between work and needs is broken. Money and the market now intervene between producer and consumer. The product is no longer created to satisfy local and immediately apparent needs; it is made for exchange on the wider market.

Moreover, in the capitalist system the producers no longer control the exchange process. They are dispossessed of everything except their ability to labour. They are now wage labourers who own neither their tools nor the materials they work on, nor the products of their labour. These now take the form of capital which becomes a power independent of the workers and opposed to them. This is the concrete meaning of the first aspect of alienation described by Marx (1975b, 325), alienation from the object of labour. It is not a vague, subjective lack of connection with the product, but a specific and objective economic condition.

It is important to see that the impact of alienated labour thus understood is not purely negative. By severing its connection with the object, labour is at the same time freed from the subservience, even bondage, to the object that exists in precapitalist forms of labour – in serf labour, where it is quite explicit, and in craft labour within a restrictive guild context. Alienated labour thus creates the conditions in which more universal forms of work and life can develop (Sayers 2011, chapter 3). In this way, the loss of connection with the object in alienated labour also liberates it and creates the conditions through which the object can later be reappropriated in a fuller fashion.<sup>14</sup>

(2) As to the second aspect – alienation from the activity of labour – again what Marx is referring to is not a general sort of discontent but a specific condition brought about by the advent of wage labour. Work in all conditions is an instrumental activity in that it is aimed at producing goods that satisfy human needs (use values). In precapitalist societies work is an autonomous activity which for the most part directly meets the needs of the household and locality. With the coming of capitalism, work itself becomes a commodity, undertaken for wages. People no longer work for themselves but for another, and their activities are owned and controlled by that other, by capital.

The external character of labour for the worker is demonstrated by the fact that it belongs not to him but to another, and that in it he belongs not to himself but to another. . . . The activity of the worker is not his own spontaneous activity. It belongs to another, it is a loss of his self. (Marx 1975b, 326–7)

Again such alienation is not a purely negative phenomenon. Though work is no longer done to meet the particular needs of the household or community, it now caters for more general needs. These are mediated through the market; they appear in an alien form. In working for another, for wages, work is freed from an immediate connection with the satisfaction of particular needs; it acquires a more universal character. In this way, the worker is no longer connected only with particular individuals and the locality but is brought into a wider network of social relations. In becoming a wider social activity, moreover, work becomes part of a more extensive division of labour. And even though this division of labour appears to be an alien and external imposition, it is in fact the estranged form taken by the social character that the labour has acquired.

<sup>14</sup> As Engels (1958a, 563–4) puts it, ‘Only the proletariat created by modern large–scale industry, liberated from all inherited fetters, including those which chained it to the land . . . is in a position to accomplish the great social transformation which will put an end to all class exploitation and all class rule’. See Sayers (1998, chapter 5).

The social power, i.e. the multiplied productive force, which arises through the cooperation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labour, appears to these individuals . . . not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus cannot control. (Marx and Engels 1970, 54)

These alienated forms of activity will ultimately be reappropriated and brought back under conscious human control. Alienated labour and the relations it creates play a crucial role in preparing the way for this.

All-round dependence, this natural form of the world-historical co-operation of individuals, will be transformed . . . into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them. (Marx and Engels 1970, 55)

(3) In precapitalist conditions, work is a direct response to natural need. In this respect it is like a natural activity, such as breathing. It is not a *means* external to life; it is inseparable from life itself. With wage labour, the direct connection between work and needs, production and consumption, is broken. The result is that productive and socially useful work – our ‘essential’ and distinctive ‘species’ activity – is made into a means to earn a wage. Work becomes a purely instrumental activity, related only externally to the needs it satisfies – any kind of work will do as long as it pays. Our species activity is reduced to a mere means to satisfy physical needs and we are alienated from it. This is the third aspect of alienation. However, this alienation of productive activity also constitutes a step on the way towards our emancipation from purely natural conditions. For in this way productive activity ceases to be quasi-natural and quasi-instinctive; it becomes a conscious and, ultimately, a freely chosen activity.

(4) The fourth aspect is the alienation of ‘man from man’. Marx’s account in the *1844 Manuscripts* is sketchy, as I have said, but in later works he analyses this aspect of alienation in detail: for example, in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, under the heading of the ‘fetishism of commodities’ (Marx 1973, 156–65; 1961a, chapter 1.4). In these places, moreover, he explicitly presents such alienation as specific to capitalism and commodity production.

In precapitalist conditions, people are bound together in a quasi-natural community. The market destroys this. In working for wages, individuals appear to be working purely for themselves, independently of others. The community seems to be fragmented into a mass of atomic individuals. At the same time, the goods produced appear to take on an economic life of their own in the market. On the one hand, society appears to be composed of a mass of separate individuals each pursuing their own interests; and on the other hand, the economy appears to obey laws that are objective and independent of human will. Both appearances are deceptive. Unlike natural laws, these economic laws are historical phenomena specific to capitalist society, and so too are these individuals who are alienated from each other. ‘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 1961a, 76).<sup>15</sup> What appear to be impersonal economic laws of the market operating between commodities, between *things*, are in fact alienated social relations between their producers, between *people*. They are the social form of human creative activity, but in an alien and external form.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hegel (1991, 217, para. 189 Remark) who maintains that economic laws and their study are features of the ‘modern world’.

Such alienated economic forces do not exist in precapitalist societies, in which the market does not dominate, and where ‘the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour, appear . . . as their own mutual personal relations’ (Marx 1961a, 71–2). They are specific to capitalism. And such alienation will be overcome in a future society, in which productive activity will be brought back under conscious social control. The global economic system of capitalism creates the necessary conditions for this by developing economic and social relations in a universal fashion.

In these ways, the conditions for the overcoming of alienation are created by alienated labour itself. Alienated labour creates not only the objective, material conditions for its overcoming (though it does create these and they are essential); it also creates the subjective and human conditions. For alienated labour is not simply a means to an economic end, as it is portrayed to be by economic theory. It is not a purely negative activity which also produces a desired result. It is a more complex and contradictory phenomenon. It contains a positive as well as a negative aspect within itself. It itself produces the conditions for its own supersession. ‘Labour is man’s coming to be for himself within alienation or as an alienated man’ (Marx 1975b, 386).

The idea that alienated labour is a necessary stage in historical development is sometimes thought to be inherently conservative. So far from explaining the critical force of the concept of alienation, it is said, it has the effect of rationalizing capitalism and justifying it as ‘progressive’. This is not the case with Marx. His arguments are targeted mainly at those political economists who try to justify capitalism by claiming that it accords with universal human nature. The moral critique of capitalism condemns it in similarly universal terms. These are equally unsatisfactory, I have argued. The historical approach judges capitalism relatively. It does indeed maintain that capitalism forms a necessary stage in historical development. However, it is *only a stage*, hence its necessity is limited and relative. It is progressive, but only relative to previous conditions, not inherently. With time it ceases to be progressive and becomes a hindrance to development. It can then be criticized in these terms, relative to the conditions of the future whose advent it is impeding. Likewise, it is necessary, but only for a specific time, for capitalism is only a stage which in time will be superseded (Engels 1958b, section I).

This is Marx’s historical theory at least, but it would be wrong to be too dogmatic about it or assert it as an inviolable law. Marx himself did not do so. Towards the end of his life, he considered it possible that there might be a revolution in Russia which would build socialism on the basis of existing Russian rural communes without going through a capitalist stage (Sayers 1999). Marx and Engels discuss this in the Preface to the *Communist Manifesto* written for the Russian edition of 1882.

In Russia we find, face-to-face with the rapidly flowering capitalist swindle and bourgeois property, just beginning to develop, more than half the land owned in common by the peasants. Now the question is: can the Russian *obshchina* [peasant commune], though greatly undermined, yet a form of primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of Communist common ownership? (Marx and Engels 1978, 471–2)<sup>16</sup>

Marx and Engels do not rule out this possibility. Such a transition might occur, they go on to say, given the right international circumstances (i.e., if a ‘proletarian revolution’ in the West occurs at the same time to support it). Historical processes are complex and unpredictable, Marx acknowledges; they cannot be predicted with any certainty.

<sup>16</sup> There has been some speculation that this expresses Engels’ views and that Marx’s were different but there is no convincing evidence for this. For a good account of the arguments see Chattopadhyay (2006, 54–5).

More recently, these issues have been raised by the Russian and the Chinese revolutions. Both attempted to leap over the capitalist stage and create communist societies on the basis of predominantly precapitalist conditions. Lenin (1969) and Mao (1967) each argued that exceptional international conditions had made this possible. With the collapse of the Soviet system and the evolution of China into a rampantly capitalist society, doubt must be cast on the very idea that the forms of ‘actually existing communism’ that were created in these societies were forms of communism at all. It is possible therefore that these developments, so far from being exceptions to the theory that capitalism is a necessary stage, are rather confirmations of it (McCarney 1991).

### The overcoming of alienation

How can alienation be overcome? This too must be understood in terms of the historical and dialectical account that I have been giving. According to this, as we have seen, alienated labour is not the purely negative phenomenon implied by the moral account of it. It is not the mere thwarting of an unchanging human nature. It has an essential role in the process of human self-development; it constitutes a necessary stage in the process. Moreover, the overcoming of alienation is not accomplished simply by negating or abolishing the conditions that give rise to it. It cannot be achieved by a return to earlier, precapitalist conditions. Even though these are not alienating, they would no longer satisfy us. On the moral account, by contrast, there is no reason why alienation should not be overcome in this way. Kamenka (1966, 124–8), for example, takes Marx’s concept of alienation to criticize capitalism in a way that implies this. He is then puzzled by its inconsistency with Marx’s insistence that socialism requires an industrial base. According to the historical account, however, overcoming alienation presupposes the achievements of alienated labour and builds upon them. It involves an advance beyond alienation to a higher stage.

In short, the overcoming of alienation is not a bare negation of it. It takes the form of a dialectical supersession in which the conditions of alienation are not only transcended and negated, but also preserved and built upon for the result.<sup>17</sup> Hegel uses the word ‘*aufheben*’ to describe this sort of development. This term has been variously translated into English as to ‘supersede’, ‘transcend’, or ‘sublate’, but none of these adequately captures the German meaning which, according to Hegel (1969, 107), combines the ideas both of negation and preservation. ‘To sublimate (*aufheben*) has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it means to put an end to... Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved.’

Again these are the formal and abstract philosophical outlines of the process. What is its concrete character? How can the alienation that is a specific feature of capitalist society actually be superseded? Marx says little about this, either in the *1844 Manuscripts* or subsequently. He was famously reluctant to speculate about the future. However, what he does say, in the *1844 Manuscripts* and elsewhere, sometimes seems to imply that alienation results from the fact that the product of labour is owned by capital and not the producer, and that it is used to dominate and exploit the worker. In other words, Marx seems to be suggesting that the capitalist system of private property is the main cause of alienation. That fits in well with a common understanding of Marx’s ideas, and it suggests that what is needed to overcome alienation is the abolition of capitalist property, private property in the means of production.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The negative which emerges as a result of dialectic, is, because a result, at the same time the positive: it contains what it results from, absorbed into itself, and made part of its own nature’ (Hegel 1892, 152, para. 81 Addition).

Undoubtedly this is an essential aspect of Marx's account, but it is not the full story. It is not sufficient, either as an account of Marx's views or of the realities of the situation. In a passage towards the end of the manuscript on 'Estranged labour', Marx (1975b, 331–2) insists that private property is not the cause of alienated labour but rather its consequence. This has puzzled a number of commentators (Arthur 1986, 156). It is particularly problematic if, as is often the case, alienation is taken to be a purely subjective attitude towards work. On the other hand, if 'alienated labour' is interpreted as I have been suggesting, to refer to wage labour and to the objective economic system of which it is a part, then Marx's words make good sense and cohere with the rest of his philosophy. What Marx is saying is that it is the economic system of wage labour and capitalism that gives rise to the property system, not vice versa. This is the basic thesis of what later becomes known as 'historical materialism'.<sup>18</sup>

What this also implies is that more needs to be changed than the property system in order to overcome alienation. It is important to see that this is Marx's position, both in the *1844 Manuscripts* and in subsequent works. One of his most extended accounts of the overcoming of alienation is contained in the section of the *1844 Manuscripts* entitled 'Private Property and Communism'. Marx there criticizes what he calls 'crude' communism. This involves the abolition of private property and its conversion into communal or state property. This is contrasted with what he regards as genuine communism which requires a much deeper and fuller transformation in order to create the conditions for the 'true appropriation of the human essence' (Marx 1975b, 348; Sayers 2011, chapter 7).

In his later writings, this account is superseded by the theory that postcapitalist society will be divided into two stages. The first stage has many of the features attributed to inadequate conceptions of communism in 1844.<sup>19</sup> In particular, it involves the abolition of capitalist private property by transforming it into communal property.<sup>20</sup> In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx criticizes this as resting on a restricted and unsatisfactory idea of 'appropriation'. In his later work, however, he regards this as a necessary first stage (Marx 1978a, 531). Only after a period (of unspecified duration) will the conditions be created for the transition to the second stage of 'full communism' and 'true appropriation'. As Marx makes clear, this will involve not only the legal and political changes achieved in the first stage, but the much wider and deeper human and social transformation required for alienation to be decisively overcome.

The idea that such a transformation is needed in order to overcome alienation is a constant feature of Marx's thought, but he indicates only in general terms what it will involve or how the overcoming of alienation can actually be brought about.<sup>21</sup> In the *1844 Manuscripts*, however, there are indications of some of the human changes that it will lead to. The account

<sup>18</sup> For a different account see Arthur (1986, 20–22).

<sup>19</sup> Particularly the second type of communism described briefly in Marx (1975b, 347–8), as communism that 'has not yet comprehended the positive essence of private property' and which thus 'is still held captive and contaminated by private property'.

<sup>20</sup> This first stage was what the 'actually existing' communist societies of the USSR, Eastern Europe, etc., attempted to institute.

<sup>21</sup> Some of the main changes he has in mind are suggested in a well known passage from the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme'. 'In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!' (Marx 1978a, 531)

is vague, but suggestive and even visionary nevertheless. Two sets of themes emerge. ‘True appropriation’ will entail a transformation of our relations (1) to objects and (2) to our fellow human beings. These themes can be related to the four aspects of alienated labour that Marx describes, though Marx does not explicitly do so.

(1) All our ways of relating to objects – ‘seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving’ – are, for Marx (1975b, 351), ways we have of ‘appropriating’ them. Alienated labour and the system of private property limit and constrict these relations, narrowing them down to considerations of ownership and utility. ‘Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc, in short, when we *use* it’ (Marx 1975b, 351). For example, ‘the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value, and not the beauty and peculiar nature of the minerals, he has no mineralogical sense’ (Marx 1975b, 353).<sup>22</sup> Such limitation is a form of alienation. The ‘true appropriation’ involved in its overcoming goes beyond a mere change in ownership. It will lead to ‘the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes’ (Marx 1975b, 352). It will liberate the senses and allow them to function in a fully human way.

(2) Overcoming alienation from the activity of work will transform it into a self-realizing activity. Work will become ‘life’s prime want’, as Marx (1978a, 531) later puts it. A change from private property to common ownership will not bring this about by itself. Much work is intrinsically unsatisfying, it is *inherently* limiting and stultifying. A mere change in the form of ownership may well increase the motivation to work, but it will not fundamentally alter the intrinsic nature of the activity itself. Deeper changes are needed that will transform the present form of work and the division of labour. The changes that Marx envisages can be achieved only on the basis of the advanced industrial economy created by the alienated labour of capitalism. These thoughts are central to Marx’s discussions of future forms of work in *German Ideology* and *Capital*. However, there is little mention of them in the *1844 Manuscripts*. I will not pursue this topic further here, except to note that this is a major limitation of his account in this work (see Sayers 2011, chapter 9, for further discussion).

(3) In work, as we have seen, we produce not only goods but also social relations, and indeed we produce and transform human nature itself. ‘The whole of what is called world history is nothing more than the creation of man through human labour’ (Marx 1975b, 357). This process involves passage through a stage of alienation, as I have stressed. Its outcome is not only wealth in the form of property and goods, wealth in the narrow economic sense, but also ultimately the fully developed social individual (Marx 1975b, 356), the truly wealthy individual ‘rich in needs’. This is the realization of our ‘species being’.

The *rich* man and the wealth of human need take the place of the wealth and poverty of political economy. The rich man is simultaneously the man *in need* of a totality of vital human expression; he is the man in whom his own realization exists as inner necessity, as need. (Marx 1975b, 356)

These developments are predicated on the fullest growth of human productive and creative powers.

Communism is the *positive* supersession of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and hence the true *appropriation* of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e. human, being. (Marx 1975b, 348)

<sup>22</sup> I doubt this is always the case.

(4) The elimination of the alienation of ‘man from man’ means ending economic fetishism, bringing our social and economic relations back under conscious social control. Again this entails a radical transformation that eliminates not only private property in the means of production, but commodity production and the market altogether. And this is to be achieved, not by a return to precapitalist conditions where production is centred around the immediate locality and dictated by the imperatives of natural needs, but in a fully communal and social fashion.

Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings. In that event . . . in the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the immediate expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my authentic nature, my *human, communal* nature. Our productions would be as many mirrors from which our natures would shine forth. (Marx 1975c, 277–8)

The idea that the overcoming of alienation means regaining control over our own productive activity and social and economic lives is not an explicit theme in the *1844 Manuscripts*,<sup>23</sup> but it is implicit in the notion of alienated labour and its overcoming as a ‘true appropriation’ of human powers. It is spelled out in a number of Marx’s later works.<sup>24</sup> These themes, I have been arguing, have a historically specific critical content which cannot be comprehended when alienation is interpreted as an abstract and universal moral concept. They become visible only when Marx’s account of alienated labour is interpreted against the background of the Hegelian ideas in which it was developed. That is what I have tried to show.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is a slightly amended version of Chapter 6 of Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. It is reproduced with the permission of Palgrave Macmillan. I am grateful to Christopher Arthur, Andrew Chitty and Meade McGloughan for their detailed and helpful comments on an earlier draft. These have contributed to major improvements in this paper.

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<sup>23</sup> This idea is made explicit in Engels 1964. Engels’ article was already published when Marx was writing the *1844 Manuscripts* and is referred to in them by Marx (1975b, 281).

<sup>24</sup> ‘The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan’ (Marx 1961a, 80; cf. 1971a, 819; 1973, 159, 611–12; etc.).

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