

Sean Sayers

Creative Activity and Alienation in Hegel and Marx

For Marx, work is the fundamental and central activity in human life and, potentially at least, a fulfilling and liberating activity. Although this view is implicit throughout Marx's work, there is little explicit explanation or defence of it. The fullest treatment is in the account of 'estranged labour' [*entfremdete Arbeit*] in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*;¹ but, even there, Marx does not set out his philosophical assumptions at length. For an understanding of these, one must turn to Hegel. Marx is quite explicit about his debt to Hegel in this respect.

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; that he therefore grasps the nature of *labour* and conceives objective man – true, because real man – as the result of his *own labour*.²

¹ Marx 1975. See also Marx and Engels 1970a; Marx 1973.

² Marx 1975, pp. 385–6.

Much of the discussion of this remark has concentrated on the ‘master-servant’ section of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel explicitly considers the role of work in human life.³ This focus is arbitrary and limiting. As Arthur argues, there is no explicit reference to the ‘master-servant’ section here or elsewhere in Marx, nor are there any good grounds to believe that it had any special influence on or significance for Marx.⁴ Moreover, although many of the main themes of Hegel’s account of work are present in it, it is a somewhat idiosyncratic passage in which the role of labour is by no means the central topic.

However, work *is* a major theme in Hegel’s philosophy. It figures prominently in all his main writings, from the early Jena lectures on Philosophy of Spirit which preceded the *Phenomenology*, right up to the final lecture series on the Philosophy of Religion and Aesthetics. I shall focus particularly on the lectures on Aesthetics. These are very helpful in understanding Hegel’s account of work, and highly illuminating on Marx’s views, but they have not so far been given the attention they deserve in this respect.⁵

One more preliminary point: for both Hegel and Marx, work has both a social and a material aspect. Through work, the worker relates not only to the object of work and hence to the natural world, but also – and through it – to other human beings.⁶ In this article, however, I will focus on the labour process as such and on the relation of the worker to the object of labour.⁷

³ Hegel 1977, Chapter B.IV.A. See discussion in Arthur 1986; Mészáros 1970; Lukács 1975; also the pieces collected in O’Neill (ed.) 1996.

⁴ Arthur 1983. As Arthur points out, the passage from which this quotation is taken is focused specifically on the final chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.

⁵ In what follows, I do not address the question of what actual influence Hegel’s lectures on *Aesthetics* had on Marx. However, it is worth noting that Hegel’s lectures were first published in 1835 (edited by H.G. Hotho). There is strong evidence that Marx studied them, probably in Summer 1837 in Berlin (Lifshitz 1973, p. 12; Rose 1984, pp. 57–70) and that, initially at least, he was strongly influenced by them (Praver 1978, p. 22). In 1842, Marx planned to collaborate with Bruno Bauer on a ‘left Hegelian’ critique of Hegel’s views on art and religion, and he drafted a lengthy manuscript on Hegel’s ‘hatred’ of Christian art (Rose 1984, p. 60). I also make reference to Hegel’s Jena lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit of 1805–6 (Hegel 1983). These came to light and were published only in 1931–2 and could not have been known to Marx.

⁶ This is Marx’s main focus in the account of alienation in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*; whereas in *The German Ideology* his main topic is the social organisation and division of labour.

⁷ I hope to deal with the topic of work as a social phenomenon in a later article.

I. Work as an essential human activity

In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx describes work as man's 'vital activity', his 'species activity', 'man's spiritual essence, his human essence'. It is not clear how these phrases are to be taken. They seem to imply that labour can serve as a criterion by which human beings can be distinguished from other animals; but that is clearly untrue. As Marx acknowledges, animals such as bees, beavers and ants produce, in that they build nests and dwellings (though they do not produce 'universally', 'freely', or 'in accordance with the laws of beauty').⁸ Moreover, hunter-gatherer peoples do not produce their means of subsistence (although they make tools). Perhaps the point that Marx is making is that being human is a matter of degree, and that labour is the main means by which human beings develop and become fully human. As he says in *The German Ideology*, 'Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence'.⁹

Hegel on work

These ideas are also fundamental to Hegel's philosophy. According to Hegel, work plays an essential role in distinguishing human beings from other animals.¹⁰ The animal has a purely immediate relation to nature, both to the objects around it in its natural environment and to its own nature, its own appetites and instincts. Hegel calls this immediate relationship to nature 'desire'.¹¹ The animal is driven by its desires and appetites to consume objects which are directly present to it in its natural environment. Furthermore, this consumption involves the immediate negation, the annihilation of the object.¹²

The human being, by contrast, is not a purely natural being but rather a conscious, a self-conscious being, with 'being-for-self'.

⁸ Marx 1975, pp. 328, 329. Hegel and Marx both use 'man' in its general, species, sense to include also women. For stylistic reasons I shall follow them in this here.

⁹ Marx and Engels 1970a, p. 42.

¹⁰ Hegel makes an absolute distinction between men and other animals. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx appears to do so too, though *The German Ideology* is more ambiguous. For a post-Darwinian Marxist account, see Engels 1958. Marx's views on the distinction of human beings from other animals raise issues which require further discussion, but this is beyond my scope here.

¹¹ Hegel 1977, §167ff, pp. 105ff.

¹² This point is made most clearly in the Jena lectures, Hegel 1983, §174, p. 109. See also Avineri 1996.

Man is a thinking consciousness. . . . Things in nature are only *immediate* and *single*, while man . . . *duplicates* [*verdoppelt*] himself, in that (i) he is as things in nature are, but (ii) he is just as much for himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks.¹³

The human being's ability to 'duplicate himself' and 'represent himself to himself' is most evident in thought, in self-consciousness. But it also takes a practical form. Work is a mode of this practical being-for-self and a means by which it develops. Work involves a break with the animal, immediate, natural relationship to nature. In work, the object is not immediately consumed and annihilated. Gratification is deferred. The object is preserved, worked upon, formed and transformed. And, in this way, a distinctively human relationship to nature is established.

These ideas are also used by Marx. They are at the basis of his notion of work as man's 'species activity'. Like Hegel, Marx contrasts the relationship to nature established through work with the immediacy of the animal's relation to nature.

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity; it *is* that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species being.¹⁴

The development of being-for-self

Thus, by working on the world, by shaping and forming it, human beings become separated from the natural world and established as self-conscious subjects, as beings-for-self, over against an objective world. This breach with nature is the negative aspect of work. At the same time, however, it is through work that human beings overcome this division from nature. This is the positive aspect. By shaping and forming the object, man transforms his environment and his relationship to it, and in the process he transforms himself.

¹³ Hegel 1975, p. 31; Hegel 1971, p. 76.

¹⁴ Marx 1975, p. 328.

Through work, says Hegel, the human being

impregnates the external world with his will. Thereby he humanises his environment, by showing how it is capable of satisfying him and how it cannot preserve any power of independence against him. Only by means of this effectual activity is he no longer merely in general, but also in particular and in detail, actually aware of himself and at home in his environment.¹⁵

In the language Marx uses in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, this is the process of 'objectification' [*Vergegenständlichung*].¹⁶ There are two aspects to this process. In the first place, by objectifying ourselves in our products, we come to recognise our powers and capacities as real and objective. Thus we develop a consciousness of ourselves. Second, by humanising the world, we cease to feel that we are confronted by a foreign and hostile world. We overcome our alienation from the natural world and gradually, through a long process of social and economic development, come to feel at home in the world and in harmony with it. Hegel makes these points as follows.

Man brings himself before himself by *practical* activity, since he has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognise himself. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realisation of himself.¹⁷

Again, these ideas are taken up by Marx, who repeats them almost exactly, even to the point of echoing Hegel's distinctive language of spirit's 'doubling' of itself.¹⁸

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 appear as *his* work and his reality. The object of labour is the

¹⁵ Hegel 1975, p. 256.

¹⁶ 'The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labour. The realisation of labour is its objectification.' Marx 1975, p. 324.

¹⁷ Hegel 1975, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Sich verdoppelt*. This is not apparent in the English translations I am using.

*objectification of the species-life of man: for man reproduces himself [Sich verdoppelt] not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created.*¹⁹

The story of the Fall

In this way, work involves both the separation, the alienation, of self from nature, but also the drive to overcome this separation and make ourselves at home in the world. For Hegel, this is a fundamental drive of human beings as 'spiritual' (self-conscious) as contrasted with merely natural beings, and a basic human need.

Hegel makes these points in a graphic and illuminating way through his distinctive interpretation of the Biblical story of the Fall of Man, which he interprets as a metaphysical parable of the human condition.²⁰ Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were placed in a garden where God had forbidden them to eat the fruit of tree of knowledge of good and evil. But they eat the fruit and are expelled from the garden. Adam is condemned to 'labour in the sweat of his brow' and Eve to 'bring forth in sorrow'.

In the story, it is because of temptation by the serpent that we are led to eat the fruit and forced to leave the harmonious conditions of the garden. 'But the truth is that the step into opposition, the awakening of consciousness, follows from the very nature of man: and the same history repeats itself in every son Adam'.²¹ In other words, we are all 'fallen', torn away from the natural state – that is our condition as self-conscious beings. However, for Hegel, that is not the end of the matter.

The story seems to imply that the first instinctive and natural state of life is the ideal. It appears to suggest the romantic view that our loss of 'innocence and harmony with nature', our exclusion from the garden, is a misfortune, and hence also that the human condition of self-consciousness is a misfortune. But Hegel questions that interpretation. The human condition is one of division from nature and of self-division – a state of contradiction, a restless state,

¹⁹ Marx 1975, p. 329; Marx and Engels 1970b, p. 89.

²⁰ Genesis 3. Hegel 1892, §24Z, pp. 53ff; Hegel 1895, Vol. 3, pp. 51ff. See also Kant 1963 in which many of these themes are introduced into the philosophical discussion of this period.

²¹ Hegel 1892, §24Z, p. 55.

which creates its own drive to overcome it.²² As a result of our breach from nature, we are condemned to labour. But 'if it [labour] is the result of disunion it is also the victory over it'. For through working on the world we also come to objectify ourselves, to transform ourselves, to humanise our world and make ourselves at home in it.

II. The realm of freedom

Hence, work is not only a means to satisfy material needs, it is also the expression of a fundamental human (or as Hegel says 'spiritual') drive for self-development and self-realisation. This drive is present not only in economic labour but in all forms of practical activity through which we deliberately make changes in the world, even in play. Its highest expression is in the free creative activity of art.

Even a child's first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an intuition of something that is his own doing. This need runs through the most diversiform phenomena up to that mode of self-production in external things which is present in the work of art.²³

According to Hegel, these different forms of activity involve different degrees of freedom. At one pole, there is consumption directly under the impulse of desire. This is the form taken by the activity of animals, who desire and immediately consume the objects around them. They are not free. They are determined by their desires and dominated by the object. Human beings can also act in this way, in which case they are not acting freely.

The person . . . caught up in the individual, restricted and nugatory interests of his desire, is neither free in himself, since he is not determined by the essential universality and rationality of his will, nor free in respect of the external world, for desire remains essentially determined by external things and related to them.²⁴

²² In the theoretical sphere, this drive manifests itself as the need to know and to understand. In the practical sphere, it takes the form of the need for creative work.

²³ Hegel 1975, p. 31.

²⁴ Hegel 1975, p. 36.

In working on the object, rather than immediately consuming it, gratification of desire is postponed, the object is preserved. People thus detach themselves from their desires and achieve a relative freedom with respect to them. At the same time, they allow a degree of freedom to the object.

However, in deferring his desires, the producer achieves only a limited autonomy with respect to them, he does not transcend them altogether. The product likewise is granted only a limited freedom, it is destined ultimately to be consumed. Economic work continues to be dominated by material desires; it is still in what Marx calls 'the realm of necessity'.²⁵

Artistic activity, by contrast, is truly free activity, free creation.²⁶ It is free, first of all, in the negative sense that it is not determined by natural desire. Artistic creation is not an instrumental activity to satisfy physical needs. Moreover, the product, the work of art, is not made to be consumed. With art, determination by material desire is altogether transcended. 'From the practical interest of desire, the interest of art is distinguished by the fact that it lets its object persist freely and on its own account, while desire converts it to its own use by destroying it.'²⁷

Free artistic activity

For Marx, too, art is the highest form of creative activity, free creative activity, the highest form of work. Animals are not capable of such activity, they are not free. In so far as they produce, they

produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need . . . hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.²⁸

These passages are from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, but the same thought recurs later in Marx's work. In the *Grundrisse*, he describes

²⁵ Marx 1971, p. 820.

²⁶ It should be noted that this view of art abstracts it from the social conditions in which it is produced. In concrete conditions, art is often a commodity, produced to earn a living. Only when it is freed from these constraints can it be the 'truly free' activity that Marx envisages. This point is not a new one. Plato, in *Republic*, Book I, argues that 'money making' perverts the proper aims of artistic activities (Sayers 1999, 13–15).

²⁷ Hegel 1975, p. 38.

²⁸ Marx 1975, p. 329.

composing music as ‘really free labour’, which can constitute ‘attractive work, the individual’s self-realisation’.²⁹ In the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ he envisages a time when work will become an end in itself, ‘life’s prime want’.³⁰

These ideas are also at the basis of Marx’s almost universally misunderstood distinction between the ‘realms’ of ‘necessity’ and ‘freedom’ in *Capital*, Volume 3.

The realm of freedom . . . begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases. . . . Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants . . . so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. . . . Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature. . . . But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom.³¹

Despite numerous accounts to the contrary, it is quite clear that Marx is not saying that work in the realm of necessity is *unfree*.³² He spells out, quite explicitly, what freedom in ‘the realm of necessity’ involves.³³ For Marx as for Hegel, it is only purely immediate consumption, dominated by immediate desire, that is unfree. Economic work has a degree of freedom in comparison with this. Human beings are for-themselves, they can stand back from desire and the activity to gratify it and subject this to rational control. There is freedom in this realm, which consists in the exercise of rational control over production and consumption.

Nevertheless, such economic activity is ultimately in the service of natural needs, it is instrumental activity to meet these needs. To that extent, it is not completely free. A fuller and higher form of freedom is realised when we produce, not to meet material needs, but purely as an end in itself. This is the truly free creation of art. It is not determined by material needs or by

²⁹ Marx 1973, p. 611.

³⁰ Marx 1958, p. 25.

³¹ Marx 1971, p. 820.

³² For example, Arendt 1958, pp. 105–15, Gorz 1982, pp. 95–6. For further discussion see Sayers 1998, Chapter 4.

³³ ‘Freedom in this field can only consist . . .’ etc.

the object. In its turn, it leaves the object free to exist as it is and does not consume it.

A note on Arendt

In criticising Marx, Hannah Arendt makes a sharp distinction between 'labour' and 'work'. Her use of these terms is, as she admits, peculiarly her own.³⁴ 'Labour', for her, is what we do to satisfy our physical, bodily needs. It is a natural activity in the sphere of necessity, an animal-like function carried out by what she calls '*animal laborans*'. It involves the repetitive and cyclical process of maintaining natural life by continually satisfying needs which constantly re-arise. Such labour 'is primarily concerned with the means of its own reproduction'.³⁵ Either it creates no product at all, or its products are consumed almost as soon as they are created.³⁶ 'Work', by contrast, creates enduring objects, objects for 'use' and not mere consumption. Work thereby creates a 'world'. It is the distinctively human activity of '*homo faber*'.

Marx, according to Arendt, fails to make this distinction. He talks of 'labour' in terms which are applicable only to 'work'.³⁷ He looks upon 'all labor as work and [speaks] of the *animal laborans* in terms much more fitting for *homo faber*'.³⁸ Specifically, he maintains that labour can lead to fulfilment and freedom, whereas Arendt maintains that they can be attained only through work.

These arguments are confused and untenable. In the first place, it is impossible to detach 'labour' and 'work' as Arendt suggests: the two are necessarily and inextricably combined in human productive activity. The 'labour' which meets consumption needs also creates a product, it is thus at the same time a form of 'work' in Arendt's sense. For such labour does not simply vanish in consumption: it creates something beyond the satisfaction of material need and the reproduction of 'life'. In its human form at least, it always takes place in a context of social relations; and it produces and reproduces those relations and with them the social world. According to Marx, 'M. Proudhon the economist understands very well that men make

³⁴ Arendt 1958, pp. 79–80.

³⁵ Arendt 1958, p. 88.

³⁶ Arendt is aware of the Hegelian point that 'unlike other animals, which consume what they find without transforming it, human beings "labour" to produce what they consume' (Canovan 1992, p. 123), but this awareness is limited as I shall argue presently.

³⁷ Though, at times, and in contradiction to this, Arendt argues, Marx also hopes to eliminate labour and necessity altogether (Arendt 1958, pp. 104–5).

³⁸ Arendt 1958, p. 87, cf. p. 102.

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.³⁹ Arendt has not understood this either.

Arendt's account of labour is often claimed to apply particularly to domestic labour, to the tasks of tending, cooking, cleaning, mending, etc., usually performed by women. Such labour may seem endlessly repetitive and cyclical: it appears to vanish as soon as it is done and to create nothing enduring, just as Arendt describes. This is not the case, however. Such labour not only sustains life, it also produces and reproduces a home, a family, a social world.

Conversely, 'work' in Arendt's sense, the creation of enduring objects of use and a human world, cannot be separated from the activity of production to meet consumer needs. The human and social world always and necessarily arises out of and exists on the basis of productive activity to meet material needs. This is the materialist theory, at any rate, and Arendt gives no good reasons to question it.

Seyla Benhabib maintains that Arendt's distinction should be understood as an attempt to construct 'ideal types'.⁴⁰ Arendt's categories should be treated as mere 'conceptual' abstractions which are useful for theoretical understanding even if they do not exist as distinct forms in reality. If the problems so far discussed were the only ones for Arendt's account, it might be possible to defend it in these terms, but there are deeper and more serious flaws in it.⁴¹

Arendt's concept of labour muddles and misconstrues the distinction between animal and human activity. It reduces human labour to a sort of animal activity and treats it as something almost sub-human. Likewise, she tends to treat those who perform it as in effect a sub-human species, *animal laborans*. In a corresponding way, she elevates 'work' (and what she calls 'action')⁴² above the material realm. She thus transcendentalises 'work' and gives it an exaggerated and false human significance.

Such views were prevalent among the ruling class in the ancient world who relied on slave labour to provide them with the necessities of life, as Arendt well describes.⁴³ They looked with disdain and contempt at the slave,

³⁹ Marx 1978, p. 103.

⁴⁰ Benhabib 1996, p. 131.

⁴¹ See Sayers 1990, p. 154 for criticisms of the method of approach that Benhabib recommends here.

⁴² Arendt 1958, Part V.

⁴³ Arendt 1958, pp. 80–5.

the *animal laborans*, who performed such labour. Although Arendt dissociates herself from such views, she criticises modern society as a mass ‘consumer’ society in which the needs and interests of the *animal laborans* have become dominant. She treats with disdain and contempt the labour which meets consumer needs and those who do it. Such élitist attitudes may have been tenable in the ancient world, where they corresponded to the prevailing social conditions. They are inappropriate and unacceptable in the modern world where such conditions have long passed. It is one of the great achievements of the Hegelian and Marxist theories that I am describing that they have criticised views such as these and replaced them with an account of the place of labour in human life more fitting for modern conditions.

III. Alienation and its overcoming

As I have shown, Marx, like Hegel, conceives of economic work as on a continuum with free artistic creation, with the implication that such work, although it is always a means to meeting material needs, is also potentially a self-realising activity and an end in itself.

Marx’s account of alienation is a critical and radical version of the Hegelian ideas that I have been describing. Under conditions of alienation, ‘labour, life activity, productive life itself’ is perverted so that it is,

external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. . . . His labour is therefore not voluntary but forced.⁴⁴

It is often said that such a critical notion of alienation is absent from Hegel and distinctive to Marx. Marx himself seems to make this claim. For example, he says, ‘the only labour Hegel knows and recognises is abstract mental labour’.⁴⁵ This is a puzzling remark. At face value, it is quite evidently false, as Marx is certainly aware. Hegel is notable in giving labour, in the sense of material productive activity, a central place within his philosophical system. In the *Phenomenology*, the specific subject of Marx’s discussion, it plays a key role in the ‘master-servant’ section.

⁴⁴ Marx 1975, p. 326.

⁴⁵ Marx 1975, p. 386.

Perhaps, as Arthur suggests, 'the "abstract mental labour" to which Marx refers is the "labour of spirit".'

The *Phenomenology* is a spiritual odyssey, or, perhaps, a *Bildungsroman* of spirit, in which spirit discovers that the objective shapes given to it in consciousness and self-consciousness are nothing but its own self-determination. Spirit comes to know itself through *producing* itself, in the first instance as something which stands over against it. . . . [S]pirit can come to itself only through setting up opposition and then negating it.⁴⁶

For Hegel, it should be noted, (finite) 'spirit' is not something abstractly mental but, rather, human being; and material labour is a 'spiritual' activity in that it leads to human development. Nevertheless, Arthur is right to stress the way in which, for Hegel, this is ultimately a process which takes place primarily within consciousness and self-consciousness. Marx, by contrast, insists upon the primacy of the material and economic factors in human development.

Marx's target appears to be Hegel's idealism; but he has not got this clearly in his sights. It is true that, for Hegel, economic labour is not the highest stage of spirit's development. This continues further through art, religion and philosophy. These higher activities do not supersede labour, they supplement it. However, Marx is in no position to criticise these ideas, since he holds similar views himself. For Marx, too, believes that art and philosophy (if not religion) constitute a higher 'realm of freedom' and a higher sphere of human development. This is a direct descendent of the Hegelian view, as I have been arguing.

Objectification and alienation

Marx also accuses Hegel of presenting an uncritical and idealised picture of actual economic conditions. 'Hegel adopts the standpoint of modern political economy. He sees *labour* as the *essence*, the self-confirming essence, of man; he sees only the positive and not the negative side of labour. Labour is *man's coming to be for himself* within *alienation* or as *alienated man*.'⁴⁷

Lukács's account of this has been particularly influential. I shall deal with it before going on to discuss the more general issues raised by Marx's criticisms.

⁴⁶ Arthur 1983, p. 71.

⁴⁷ Marx 1975, p. 386.

In Marx, objectification is a feature of all work (indeed of all human activity which has an effect in the world); whereas alienation, Lukács maintains, is a specific feature of work under capitalism. Hegel, by contrast, makes no such distinction, he treats alienation as a universal, ontological, characteristic of self-conscious spirit. Thus the Marxist concept of alienation is capable of serving as a critical concept in a way that Hegel's is not.⁴⁸

As we have seen, Hegel does indeed regard alienation from nature as a characteristic feature of spirit. And yet, for Hegel, it is equally a part of the essence of self-conscious spirit to strive to overcome its alienation, its separation, from nature. This sets for it a historical task which is also a characteristic feature of human spirit. It strives to heal its breach with nature and be at home in the world.

In other words, and paradoxical as this may sound, for Hegel, spirit is essentially – ontologically – historical in character. Alienation can and will be overcome when spirit has completed its development and come to be at home in the world. This is a historical process; and, *pace* Lukács, this way of thinking provides a framework with which Hegel can criticise the society of his day, as we shall see in due course. Lukács is therefore wrong to attribute a non-historical view of alienation to Hegel in contrast to Marx. For such a view, one must turn rather to an 'existentialist' such as Heidegger.⁴⁹

Conversely, as regards Marx, the very idea that he has a single and clear-cut 'theory of alienation' is questionable.⁵⁰ In particular, Marx does not always apply the concept of alienation only to capitalism, as Lukács maintains. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, it is true, the term is central to Marx's critique of capitalism, as Lukács suggests; but, later, his account of capitalism is developed in more specific economic terms. Throughout, however, Marx also uses the term 'alienation' to describe aspects of work which are not specific to capitalism, such as that it is stultifying, externally imposed, that it is merely a means to the end of satisfying material needs, that it takes place within an oppressive division of labour, etc. These are features of work in all class-divided societies.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx is already beginning to develop the terms of his later account of capitalism. The language of 'alienation' plays a much less prominent role in his thought. He is even ironical about its Hegelian philo-

⁴⁸ Lukács 1975, p. 549. See also Mészáros 1970.

⁴⁹ Heidegger 1962, p. 220. Cf. Kierkegaard 1962.

⁵⁰ Contrast Mészáros 1970, p. 233.

sophical associations.⁵¹ What, in 1844, he calls ‘alienated labour’, is now referred to simply as ‘labour’ which has ‘lost all semblance of self-activity and only sustains . . . life by stunting it.’⁵² He envisages the ‘abolition’ of such ‘labour’ and of ‘the division of labour’.⁵³ Arguably, ‘labour’ and the ‘division of labour’ in this sense are present not only in capitalism but in all class societies. In the *Grundrisse*, he is explicit that the features attributed to alienated labour in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are characteristic of such societies: ‘in its historic forms as slave-labour, serf-labour, and wage-labour, labour always appears as repulsive, always as *external forced labour*’: however, labour can become ‘real freedom’, ‘attractive work, the individual’s self-realisation’ – life’s ‘prime want’ as he says in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’.⁵⁴

As with Hegel, that is to say, there are aspects of alienation which are not specific to capitalism but apply to all historical societies. Equally, moreover, the overcoming of alienation is a fundamental human drive: a historical task, achievable historically. Thus, for Marx, as well as for Hegel, alienation is both an ontological and a historical characteristic.

Hegel as social critic

Let us now return to the view that Hegel’s philosophy is inherently uncritical and that it gives an idealised picture of the society of his time. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of Hegel’s philosophy about which this charge is fully justified. For Hegel, the overcoming of alienation is not an unattainable or even a distant ideal; it can be, and is being, achieved in the present. Work is an essential part of the process of spiritual self-development: it is a process of objectification – of alienation and its overcoming – leading to self-realisation. The central theme of the Hegelian system is the story of human self-development, culminating in the spiritual achievements – the art, religion and philosophy – of his own age. Thus, in Hegel’s system, labour is often presented in positive and uncritical terms, as playing an essential role in a story of spiritual development and progress.

However, there are other strands of Hegel’s philosophy which are in contradiction to this. When Hegel focuses on the actual conditions of labour

⁵¹ Mészáros 1970, p. 218.

⁵² Marx and Engels 1970a, p. 92, cf. p. 85.

⁵³ Marx and Engels 1970a, p. 93, cf. p. 109.

⁵⁴ Marx 1973, p. 611; Marx 1958, p. 25.

in the society of his day, he is too perceptive and honest to blind himself to the very unideal conditions which prevailed. As Lukács himself observes, ‘he does not close his eyes to the destructive effects of the capitalist division of labour and of the introduction of machinery into human labour’.⁵⁵ In these contexts, Hegel does employ the concept of alienation in a critical fashion. Indeed, he uses it to pose many of the issues which Marx addresses. Equally, however, Hegel’s approach to these issues is significantly different. A discussion of Hegel’s observations will help to clarify these differences.

To repeat, Hegel’s philosophy revolves around a story of progress. This implies that alienation can be overcome only through a process of historical development. Hegel has no shred of romantic attachment to a ‘simple’ or ‘natural’ form of life. This may initially seem idyllic, in that our needs would be few and easily satisfied directly from nature but, Hegel argues, ‘such a life will soon bore us’.

A restricted mode of life of this kind presupposes an insufficient development of spirit. . . . A full and entire human life requires higher urgings, and this closest association with nature and its immediate products cannot satisfy it any longer. Man may not pass his life in such an idyllic poverty of spirit; he must work. What he has an urge for, he must struggle to obtain by his own activity.⁵⁶

All this suggests that Hegel would be favourably disposed towards the industrialisation which was occurring in his time. However, he regards this as just as unsatisfactory for human development, though in the opposite way. Hegel believes that modern industrial production has developed excessively. In simpler societies, the individual works to satisfy his own needs and those of his household and of others directly connected with him. With the advent of large-scale industry, the individual is caught up in a network of economic relations which he cannot understand or control. The economic system becomes so complex and extensive that the individual can no longer grasp how the product (or part of a product) which he creates relates to the needs of its eventual consumers, whoever they may be.

The long and complicated connection between needs and work, interests and their satisfaction, is completely developed in all its ramifications, and

⁵⁵ Lukács 1975, p. 329.

⁵⁶ Hegel 1975, 259. See Sayers 1998, Chapters 3–4, for a survey of empirical evidence in support of this contention.

every individual, losing his independence, is tied down in an endless series of dependencies on others. His own requirements are either not at all or only to a very small extent, his own work.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the industrial division of labour makes work increasingly mechanical and stultifying for the worker, so that 'every one of his activities proceeds not in an individual living way but more and more purely mechanically according to universal norms'.⁵⁸

Such criticisms of the way in which the worker in industrial society is alienated from his product and from his activity are now more familiar from the descriptions that Marx gives in his early writings. The account of 'Estranged Labour' in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* echoes Hegel's account particularly closely. It is clear from this that Marx believes the non-worker – in the shape of the capitalist – is just as alienated as the worker in capitalist society. Frustratingly, however, Marx's manuscript breaks off just at the point where, having described the alienation of the worker, he is about to consider the way in which the capitalist is also alienated.⁵⁹

Hegel's account does not break off, and it is suggestive of the way in which Marx's ideas might have developed. Just like the workers in modern society, Hegel argues, the 'wealthy' too are caught up in a complex and impenetrable web of economic relationships. Moreover, they are freed from the need to work. But, for this very reason, they are also alienated from the world around them, since they cannot see this as their own creation nor recognise themselves in it.

[Through] wealth . . . individuals . . . are freed from satisfying their needs and can devote themselves to higher interests. . . . In this superfluity, the constant reflection of endless dependence is removed, and man is all the more withdrawn from all the accidents of business as he is no longer stuck in the sordidness of gain. But for this reason the individual is not at home even in his immediate environment, because it does not appear as his work. What he surrounds himself with here has not been brought about by himself; it has been . . . produced by others . . . and acquired by him only through a long chain of efforts and needs foreign to himself.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hegel 1975, p. 260.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ And he does not deal with this topic elsewhere.

⁶⁰ Hegel 1975, p. 260.

Alienation in the modern world

It is quite evident from these passages that it is wrong to suggest that Hegel is uncritical of the society of his day. On the contrary, he sees well enough that people are alienated from the world that capitalism and large-scale industry were creating. The ideal, unalienated condition for him is a middle way between the extremes of simple idyllic circumstances and excessive modern development. As regards work, at least, he looks back to an earlier 'golden age' when production was still on a domestic and local scale; and when producers could relate to their products and feel at home in a world which they could still comprehend as their own creation.

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. In that event of course the activity of collecting and forming his material must not appear as painful drudgery but as easy, satisfying work which puts no hindrance and no failure in his way.⁶¹

His primary example is the 'heroic' society portrayed by Homer.

Agamemnon's sceptre is a family staff, hewn by his ancestor himself, and inherited by his descendants. Odysseus carpentered himself his huge marriage bed . . . [E]verything is domestic, in everything man has present before his eyes the power of his arm, the skill of his hand, the cleverness of his own spirit, or a result of his courage and bravery. In this way alone have the means of satisfaction not been degraded to a purely external matter; we see their living origin itself and the living consciousness of the value which man puts on them because in them he has things not dead or killed by custom, but his own closest productions.⁶²

In other respects, of course, Hegel rejects the ancient Greek model. Such earlier societies lack what for him is the essential feature of the modern world, the sphere of civil society as a realm of individual autonomy and subjectivity. As a modern example of unalienated conditions, Hegel cites Holland in the seventeenth century, as depicted in the 'genre' paintings of everyday life by

⁶¹ Hegel 1975, p. 261.

⁶² *Ibid.*

artists such as Rembrandt and Van Dyck.⁶³ These disclose a people who, as a result of their industry and history, are at home in their world.

The Dutch themselves have made the greatest part of the land on which they dwell and live; it has continually to be defended against the storms of the sea, and it has to be maintained. By resolution, endurance, and courage, townsmen and countrymen alike threw off the Spanish dominion . . . and by fighting won for themselves freedom in political life and in religious life too. . . . This citizenship, this love of enterprise, in small things as in great . . . this joy and exuberance in their own sense that for all this they have their own activity to thank, all this is what constitutes the general content of their pictures.⁶⁴

This is Hegel's vision of unalienated society, and it provides the standard by which he criticises modern industrial conditions. For Hegel, that ideal is now irretrievably past and gone: large-scale industry is an inescapable part of modern life. Ultimately, Hegel has no wish to renounce the modernity which has seen the development of individuality and freedom, despite the alienation and other problems it brings with it. These problems are insoluble, he believes: the best that can be hoped is that the state will ameliorate some of their harsher effects.

The overcoming of alienation

Marx's account of alienation grows out of these ideas, but it develops them in a very different way. For Marx maintains that large-scale industry and the division of labour associated with it, far from being a barrier to the overcoming of alienation, is the necessary basis for it. That is Marx's view from first to last; and it is one of the fundamental points on which he diverges from Hegel.

⁶³ As Hegel stresses, these paintings were an innovation of the time. Van Dyck is a curious choice on Hegel's part, he is best known for his court paintings. Vermeer and de Hooch would serve his case better.

⁶⁴ Hegel 1975, p. 169. See also Hegel's glowing appreciation of Goethe's 'masterpiece' *Hermann und Dorothea* and the contrast he draws with J.H. Voss, *Luise* (Hegel 1975, pp. 262–3, cf. pp. 191, 1110). In this work, says Hegel, 'Goethe has been able to find and present out of our modern world today . . . situations and complications which in their own sphere bring alive again what is undyingly attractive in the primitive human circumstances of the Odyssey and the pictures of patriarchal life in the Old Testament' (Hegel 1975, p. 1110), and yet in which at the same time the 'great interests of the age, the battles of the French Revolution, the defence of [the] country' (Hegel 1975, p. 262) play an essential part.

Crucially, therefore, Marx's critique of modern society is aimed at capitalism and not at industry *per se*. Indeed, for Marx, one of the great achievements of capitalism is that it has led to the development of modern industry to the point where it can provide the basis for a new, communist society – a society in which alienation can finally be overcome and in which human beings can at last be at home in world.

Such views are often questioned. Modern industry has unleashed gigantic forces of production. It has led to economic relations which are literally global in scale. It has imposed its stamp on nature in such an inexorable fashion that the natural environment is now in danger of being overwhelmed and extinguished by them. Industry and the economy seem to be hostile forces quite beyond human control.

Nevertheless, they are not mere alien phenomena, Marx insists, they are human powers and human creations. 'Industry . . . is the open book of the essential powers of man'.⁶⁵ Its forces can potentially be experienced, in unalienated fashion, as the expression of human power and creativity in and through which we recognise and affirm ourselves. The great challenge in modern society is to bring them under human control and make them serve our needs (which may, of course, involve limiting and curbing them). There is no reason to believe that this is impossible. If we can subdue nature as we have, then surely we can master our own creations and come to be at home with them. That is Marx's vision of the overcoming of alienation. It lies in the future, not in some golden age which is irretrievably past.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ Marx 1975, p. 354.

⁶⁶ I am grateful to members of the Hegel Reading Group in Canterbury, discussion with who first stimulated many of the ideas in this paper. It was originally given as a talk to the Philosophy Society, Brighton University, and I am indebted to the participants in the ensuing discussion for their comments and criticisms. I would also like to acknowledge the help I have been given in revising and improving this paper by the full and detailed comments of the editorial reviewers for *Historical Materialism*.

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