

What is alienation? The development and legacy of Marx's early theory – Liberation School

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Editor's note: A Spanish translation of this article is available [here](#).

Introduction

Offering a brief introduction to Marx's theory of alienation is not a straightforward task. This is due, in part, to conflicting interpretations of key aspects of Marx's project directly related to alienation, the timing of the publication of Marx's early manuscripts where the theory is articulated, and the political contexts in which it was taken up. Central to any theory of alienation are questions of the nature of existence, which are often posed this way: Is there a natural or timeless essence from which the human could be alienated? While this question has preoccupied many academics, our most important task is to consider the impact of debates around alienation on our practical, day-to-day organizing.

In this article, we introduce Marx's writing on alienation as they appear in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, before discussing the historical context of their publication. We then chart the development of Marx's thought from the manuscripts to his later work that is grounded in dialectical and historical materialism. Marx's early works conceive "human nature" as an essential and ahistorical condition from which capital alienates workers, while, as we show, his later work focuses on capital's process of *abstraction* and conceives of the human as a *process of production*, and therefore as dynamic and contingent on the mode of production.

Alienation (or estrangement)

Marx's writing on alienation appears most explicitly in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, also known as the Paris Manuscripts, which were written a few years after his doctoral thesis. The German word Marx uses in these manuscripts is *entfremden*, which is translated as "to estrange" or "to alienate."

In the manuscripts, Marx was engaging with the recently deceased Hegel and his followers, the Young Hegelians. As the earliest part of Marx's critical evaluation of Hegel, he wrote that within Hegel's work there "lie concealed in it all the elements of criticism, already prepared and elaborated" [1]. What Marx finds in Hegel in this early state is "the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle" [2].

One of the errors Marx finds in Hegel early on is “when, for instance, wealth, state-power, etc., are understood by Hegel as entities estranged from the *human* being” it “only happens in their form as thoughts” [3]. For Hegel, humans are alienated from pure, abstract philosophical thinking. Hegel conceptualized this alienation and the transcendence of this alienation as a process that leads to *absolute knowledge* and the unity of humanity with a universal truth.

For Hegel, humanity has an original essence, which he conceptualizes as the logical, thinking, speculative mind. In this schema, thought precedes and is independent from action and history. Marx’s later “famous Feuerbachian inversion” demonstrates that it is not the idea of the human essence or nature that produces its concrete existence, but its concrete existence that produces the idea.

Central to Marx’s theory of alienation is a semi-biological or partially-given conception of human nature. Humans, as a part of nature, have certain powers/abilities/faculties that produce certain potentials and needs. Needs refer to that which one feels a desire for, usually for things not immediately obtainable. The feeling of desire for an unmet need, such as the need for food, safety, companionship, play, and “variety” is the mechanism through which one becomes aware of and develops one’s powers [4].

At the same time, *man*, as a species being, possesses qualities or characteristics that distinguish them from all other species. In other words, we know we are distinct from all other species in the way we smell, sound, taste, feel, and, most importantly for Marx, the way our *activity* is carried out. Marx wrote that the development of capitalist production alienates the working class from our species being on an extending scale.

In the end of the first manuscript, Marx argues that capitalism alienates “man” or “workers” in four related ways. First, “the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object” [5]. In other words, the result of production belongs to the capitalist (or landlord) rather than to the worker. Second, the worker is alienated “within the *producing activity* itself” in that the worker’s own relationship to the work being done is “an alien activity not belonging to him” [6]. If the worker is estranged from the object of labor and the labor process, then “estranged labour estranges the *species* from man” [7]. Finally, “the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life-activity, from his species being is the *estrangement of man* from *man*” [8].

The political context of the release of and debates around the manuscripts

Marx’s manuscripts are focused on capitalism, class society, and even communism—although they bear little resemblance to Marx’s later writings, as Marx often uses bourgeois political and economic categories without substantive critique and deploys Hegelian philosophy rather uncritically (it wasn’t

until *The German Ideology* that Marx and Engels broke from Hegel). The manuscripts contain no analysis of class struggle or one of Marx's first unique discoveries, that class struggle leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Marx never tried to publish his manuscripts. Soviet researchers first edited and published them in the early 1930s, although their real impact emerged after they were more widely translated during the 1950s-60s. Early 20th century Marxist revolutionaries like Lenin, therefore, had no knowledge of them.

Debates around the manuscripts and the concept of alienation they contain emerged between Khrushchev's famous "secret" speech at the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's 20th Congress in 1956 (which was released by the CIA) and the CPSU's 22nd Congress in 1961.

The timing of the manuscripts' dissemination, in other words, coincided with—and to some extent justified—a rightward shift in the Soviet Union and some of the primarily Western socialist states. One can see evidence of Marx's theory of alienation in Khrushchev's 1956 speech, which called for a "return to... the most important theses of Marxist-Leninist science about the people... as the creator of all material and spiritual good of humanity" [9]. The 22nd Congress identified the Soviet Union not as a dictatorship of the proletariat but as a "state of the whole people."

Those who seized on the publication of manuscripts became known as "Marxist humanists." They claimed to have found in them a way out of what they perceived as the Soviet Union's "stale orthodoxies," particularly dialectical materialism. Their theories ultimately enacted and justified as a turn away from class struggle.

Indeed, humanism obscures the fundamental class antagonism that runs throughout society by omitting the category of class. We can see the dangerous political openings humanism provided throughout the last decades of the Soviet Union. In Sam Marcy's analysis of Perestroika, for instance, he cites a 1988 speech given by Mikhail Gorbachev to the United Nations General Assembly, in which he did not speak once about workers or classes, but about "universal human values" and "universal ideas." Marcy correctly notes that there "never has been any consensus on what universal human interests are. Each class and each social grouping evaluates human interests from its own point of view" [10].

Among the many critics of the rightward shift represented by Marxist humanism was Louis Althusser, a Marxist philosopher and member of the French Communist Party. Central to this concern amongst revolutionary socialists was the tendency within humanism to sneak Hegelian idealism back into Marxist theory and practice [11].

What remained in the absence of an essentialized notion of human nature was a human history as a *process*—a dialectical process—without a predetermined subject, and therefore, without a

predetermined non-alienated existence to which to return. The basic argument here is that rather than being alienated from the absolute or original essence or spirit, capitalism violently changes workers and alienates them from the process of social production. Any notion of a natural essence to the human, or even nature, was anathema to Marx's developed theory. He would later critique bourgeois economists for taking the human as an ahistorical given and would instead demonstrate that particular modes of production produce particular kinds of human subjects and social relations.

In other words, Marx would come to place less emphasis on the human as given category, and more on the historically-determined economic, social, and political structures that produce humanity. There cannot be a predetermined Subject or essence because subjects—or *people*—are produced differently in different modes of production. The only thing *given* under capitalism is the class struggle. The goal is therefore not to *return* to some pre-existing state of human nature but rather to produce a new set of social relations, a new world, and a new kind of being.

Historically-determined being

As concrete conditions differ from region to region, so too must the practice of the class struggle. If there is an alienated human essence to return to, then there is a predetermined destination to work toward. If human nature is historical, instead, then there can be no predetermined destination, but an open future endowed with boundless potential. Lenin's emphasis on creativity and unleashing the potential of the masses in the constantly fluctuating balance of class forces represents this Marxist dialectic, as does the Cuban communist project for a new socialist humanity [12].

For Marx, reality is a totality in perpetual motion and consisting of a series of internally-related parts. The basic premise of internal relations is not only that things are more than they appear to our senses, but that the elements literally *contain* their relations with other elements. When Marx writes that capital is a *relation*, it means that it *contains* the relation to labor and, therefore, class struggle. Things are more than the sum of their qualities but, through their connections to the larger totality, they are also expressions of the whole. Marx's method was intended to keep the totality or whole in view and while distinguishing and delineating its different parts. The theory of internal relations keeps in view a historically-contingent human character always mediated by the concreteness of actually existing society or social formations.

The same is true for any "essence" of humanity. As Marx said in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, "human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" that comprise the human subject [13]. New understandings of the human are possible if we do not take capitalism or human nature as eternal givens.

Marx's final take: Abstraction

In his most developed work, *Capital*, Marx doesn't articulate his theory or methodology of dialectical or historical materialism but rather *utilizes* it. However, in the afterword to the second German edition, Marx makes a concise statement about his dialectical method. The Marxist dialectic "is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom... because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up," which is why it "is in essence critical and revolutionary" [14]. Although an analysis of the transition of the dialectical method from Hegel to Marx is outside the scope of this article, suffice it to say that it takes on a radically different form.

The practical side of Marx's dialectical practice is the class struggle. It is the theory intended to correspond to the object of actually existing capitalist relations. The Marxist process of knowledge production, in other words, is intended to be inextricably linked to the practice class struggle.

Marx explores the innermost workings and development of what the capitalist, by definition, alienates from the worker: surplus-value. The source of newly-created surplus value is surplus labor. The dual nature of the source of surplus labor, the difference between the use and exchange value of labor-power, make our alienation from production possible. As a commodity labor power and the surplus it produces exists as such in an alienated form [15].

Marx doesn't write of alienation in *Capital*, but of *abstraction*. Labor is abstracted by capital through the equivalency of distinct concrete forms of labor. Abstract labor is a conceptual abstraction. The concept of the capitalist mode of production is itself an abstraction because no one can "touch" or point to it, although it nonetheless structures our world.

Yet it's also a *real abstraction*. The passage from handicraft and manufacture to industrial capitalism takes place through machinery, which transfers the skills and knowledges of workers to capital. "The worker's activity," Marx notes, "reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite" [16]. Capitalism couldn't fully emerge without "sweep[ing] away the craftsman's work as the regulating principle of social production" [17].

Conclusion

It is testament to the practical relevance for organizers that the debates around alienation emerged during a historical turning point in the international communist movement. There is much more at stake than academic squabbles removed from the broadest masses of workers. Without an inspiring, hopeful, and correct revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary organization, and certainly no revolutionary movement. Emphasizing the open potentiality of human nature encourages an alluring, attractive, creative, collective imagining of an unrealized future. The resulting revolutionary optimism is fundamental for fostering the motivation necessary to build a mass movement capable of winning. Rather than emphasizing a recovery or a return, focusing on reaching toward an unrealized

and largely unknown potential encourages innovation and flexibility in tactics and strategy.

The application of such flexibility for communist organizers has always been critically important, from Lenin and the Bolsheviks to the communist organizers in Alabama in the 1930s [18]. In each instance, practice was informed by the specifics of the local contexts. No predetermined “human essence” factors into the Marxist project.

Through class struggle, and ultimately the dictatorship of the proletariat, the needs and forms of human nature produced by capitalism can begin to wither away and, in their place, can step new needs and new forms of human nature unfettered by the abstraction of value production.

References

- [1] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988) 149.
- [2] Ibid. 151.
- [3] Ibid., 148.
- [4] Ibid., 77.
- [5] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Dover, 1956/2007), 70.
- [6] Ibid., 72, 73.
- [7] Ibid., 74.
- [8] Ibid., 76-77.
- [9] Nikita S. Khrushchev, *The Crimes of the Stalin Era, Special Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York: The New Leader, 1956/1962).
- [10] Sam Marcy, *Perestroika: A Marxist Critique* (New York: WW Publishers, 1990), 31.
- [11] See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Verso, 1965/2005).
- [12] Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971/1990).
- [13] Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: Dover, 1845/1970), 122.
- [14] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Vol. 1): The Process of Capitalist Production*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1867/1967), 29.
- [15] Derek Ford and Mazda Majidi, “Surplus Value is the Class Struggle: An Introduction,” *Liberation School*, 30 March 2021. Available [here](#).
- [16] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. M. Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1939/1991), 693.
- [17] See Richard Becker, “A Handbook of Tactics: Some Historical Context for Studying ‘Left-Wing’ Communism,” *Liberation School*, 22 August 2018. Available [here](#); and Curry Malott, “Reading Kelley’s ‘Hammer and Hoe’ as Organizers Today,” *Liberation School*, 30 August 2021. Available [here](#).

[18] Marx, *Capital*, 347.