



BRILL

Marxist Analysis of Alienation (1973)

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Abstract

Lucien Sève (1926–2020) was one of the foremost Marxist theoreticians of the Parti Communiste Français. An indomitable opponent of both structural and humanist Marxism, his 1973 article reprinted below represents the core of his conception of alienation. For Sève, whilst the mature Marxism of *Das Kapital* is fundamentally distinct from the speculative humanism of the 1844 *Manuscripts* in placing capital, not abstract labour, at the heart of alienation, this reinforces, rather than replaces, the role of alienation at the centre of Marx's mature thought, and hence of Marxism itself.

Keywords

psychology – alienation – Marxism – Lucien Sève

Religion and Political Economy

Everyone knows the famous formulae summarising the Marxist conception of religion: religion is 'the opium of the people', it is the 'fantastic realisation of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality', is 'the expression of real distress', but also to some extent the 'protest against real distress', or still, 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man',¹ 'the earthly family is the secret of the holy family',² etc. We repeat these famous formulae³ but have we reflected sufficiently on the fact that they all belong to the early works of Marx,

1 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 176.

2 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 4.

3 In the Preface to *For Marx* (Althusser 1969, p. 27), Althusser refers to the 'famous quotations' to which a certain Marxism was once reduced.

including the Introduction he wrote in 1844 for his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*? This poses a considerable problem: are the famous formulae that are supposed to summarise the Marxist conception of religion valid in terms of mature Marxism, a Marxism that in many respects has surpassed the point of view of his early works? To clarify the question: at the heart of the famous formulae is found, if only implicitly, a notion whose role is crucial in this respect, that of *alienation*. Often his intervention is explicit. Thus, immediately after the formulae mentioned above in the Introduction of 1844, we read: 'The task of history, therefore, once the truth of the world beyond has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the holy form of human self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*] has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its secular forms.'⁴ Similarly, in *On The Jewish Question*, written at the same time, we encounter aphorisms like this: Christianity has 'completed theoretically the estrangement of man from himself [*Selbstentfremdung*] and from nature.'⁵ It is unnecessary to multiply these citations in order to establish the well-known fact: at the centre of all of Marx's conceptions in this early period (he was little more than twenty-five years old), including of course his conception of religion, we find the notion of alienation. This, obviously, gives rise to a major difficulty: if it is true, as is often claimed today, that the concept of alienation was purely and simply abandoned by Marx when he came to the theoretical views of his maturity, what becomes of a conception of religion that holds this idea at its centre?

The difficulty is even more serious than the thesis of the abandonment of alienation in mature Marxism, and more precisely after the great transition of 1845–6, which appears to be founded on solid argument, and even some irrefutable texts. So when in *The German Ideology*, after a series of analyses of the meaning and effects of the division of labour, Marx adds: 'This "estrangement [*Entfremdung*]" – to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers ...',⁶ does this not suggest that from now on this alienation is for him no more than an obsolete philosophical concept, pertaining to a reality whose effective analysis should be on a completely different terrain, that of the history of social relations?

But we find a clearer and firmer repudiation of the phraseology of alienation in the *Manifesto* regarding 'true socialists':

4 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 176.

5 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 173.

6 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 48.

It is well known how the monks wrote silly lives of Catholic saints over the manuscripts on which the classical works of ancient heathendom had been written. The German literati reversed this process with profane French literature. They wrote their philosophical nonsense beneath the French original. For instance, beneath the French criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote 'Alienation [*Entäusserung*] of Humanity', and beneath the French criticism of the bourgeois state they wrote 'Dethronement of the Category of the General' and so forth. [...] The French Socialist and Communist literature was thus completely emasculated.⁷

When we read such texts, we come to believe that indeed something decisive changed in the thought of Marx and Engels between the years 1843–4, where the theory of alienation of the human essence is the centre of reference, and the years 1846–8, where it was denounced as a betrayal of class positions. But then how to understand how a theory of religion, summed up in these famous formulae, clearly haunted by the notion of alienation, can be adopted unproblematically by Marx and Engels in all their mature work – and even Lenin, who does not hesitate to offer the Marx's aphorism of 1843–4 – 'Religion is the opium of the people' – as 'the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion'?⁸ That is the question I would like to elucidate here.

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To see this clearly, we must first have in mind the theory of alienation in the works of the young Marx, whose main text is undoubtedly the *1844 Manuscripts*. And as these works deal largely with the critique of Feuerbach's philosophy, it is worth recalling Feuerbach's theses on religion and alienation.

At the heart of Feuerbach's philosophy is a materialist critique of Hegel, which proposes to establish two things: that speculative philosophy, in particular, that of Hegel, when it is summed up in its entirety, is an ultimate avatar of theology, and that the truth harboured within theology is humanism. Feuerbach did not deny the problematic of alienation (mainly designated by Hegel – we shall return later to these terminological issues –, by the word *Entäusserung*), which in its most general sense consists of grasping opposed realities as moments of the life of a single subject, going out from itself to

7 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 511.

8 Lenin 1973, LCW 5, pp. 402–3.

objectify in external forms which it then re-appropriates. But for Feuerbach, instead of essential truth being found in this process itself, that is, in thought, as it is in Hegel, it resides in *man* who is the concrete subject of the whole process of alienation of essence. The alienated essence as such was for Feuerbach only an illusion. In other words, while man alienates his essence in religion, offering a fantastic expression of himself in religion, this does not mean at all to Feuerbach that religion is the truth of man, but rather that man is the truth of religion. There is therefore there – the same term which is used by Feuerbach – a *materialist inversion of Hegel*, which is the basis of his texts of 1839–43, the same that Marx and Engels devoured with enthusiasm. In the *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy* (1842), we find the thesis:

We have to reverse [*umkehren*] speculative philosophy to have the truth revealed, the pure and naked truth.⁹

To reverse, in a materialistic sense, the Hegelian conception of the relation between the process and the product (the '*predicate*', we read in thesis 7) of alienation, of idealist externalisation, and the concrete *subject* of this externalisation, of this alienation, such is, literally, the task undertaken by Feuerbach.

A Feuerbachian Theory of Alienation?¹⁰

At the same time, he introduces this fundamentally new idea that the alienation of the human essence is a bad thing that should be done away with, and not at all a historical process with its own rationale and necessity (as it is in Hegel). What is religion for Feuerbach? An illusion of consciousness. Let us beware of attributing to him anachronistically an historical-materialist conception of ideology! For Feuerbach, if human consciousness is religious it is because quite simply it does not recognise its own essence in the objectified form it takes, through the life of the senses, of reason, of morality, etc. And why this failure of recognition? Feuerbach has an interesting hypothesis, which is also far from foreign to the thinking of the young Marx: if man does not recognise his own essence in the objectified form it has taken, through the life of the senses, reason, morality, etc. in which he encounters it, this stems from the

⁹ Feuerbach 1960, p. 106. The German text appears in Feuerbach 1970, p. 244.

¹⁰ I add here the section titles that were not included in the publication in 1973. [Note added in 2012.]

fact that the individual is bounded, strictly limited, as opposed to the infinite nature of the human essence, i.e. it has to do with the existing opposition between the individual and the human race.

How could the infinite human essence appear to me as my essence, when the essential characteristic of my individuality is to be limited? It is therefore necessary, to escape religious illusion, to bring the human essence in its reality, in its truth, not merely to the limited individual, taken separately (here we have the kernel of the *negative* aspect of Marx's 'sixth thesis on Feuerbach', although we are still far from its *affirmative*), but to the relations between individuals. These, for Feuerbach, are still grasped through the relation of you and me, the interpersonal relationship, that is to say, ultimately, love. This is where we find, for Feuerbach, the concrete truth of the human essence:

The essence of man is contained in the community, in the unity of man with man, unity is based on the distinction between me and you [...]. Man with man, the unity of self and you, this is God.¹¹

Moreover, he cites with enthusiasm the words of Goethe:

It is only the sum of humans which knows nature, it is only the sum of humans which is genuinely human.

A sentence characteristic of an interpersonal humanism, but which precisely does not discover, behind subjective interpersonal relations, the objective social relation in its universality. And that is why the actively materialist intention of Feuerbach, who wants radically to critique religious alienation, leads ultimately to another religion,¹² secular, concrete-humanist, no doubt, but religion just the same.¹³ We should read in this context the masterful

11 Feuerbach 1960, p. 198. I retain Louis Althusser's translation, but, as we are aware, the German language, as distinct from the French (and many others) distinguishes *der Mensch*, the human being of either sex, and *der Mann*, the human male. It is the human in the first sense, human beings in general, *Mensch*, that is referred to here, i.e. *the woman* as well as 'man'. [Note by LS.]

12 Cf. the 1843 Preface to the *Essence of Christianity*: '(My book is negative) with regard to the *superhuman* essence only and not with regard to the human essence of religion' (Feuerbach 1960, p. 210). Cf. also in *Necessity of a Reform of Philosophy*: 'To replace religion, philosophy must become religion as philosophy ...' (Feuerbach 1960, p. 99).

13 TN: Note that there is an additional sentence here in brackets, added in 2012: 'All religion is nothing other than the absolutisation of interpersonal relations, of the relation between what is close, detached from the wider and deeper base of social relations.'

and decisive analysis Engels gives in Chapter III of his *Ludwig Feuerbach* of this Feuerbachian religion of love, showing how it leaves us far from the ability to establish a science of history, without which any attempt at human de-alienation is doomed to remain a dream.

So it is mainly on this point that early Marx and Engels, despite their Feuerbachian enthusiasm, find themselves in disagreement with the author of *The Essence of Christianity*. For them, the drama of Feuerbach is that, in his rural isolation, he was hardly in a position to understand that if 'man is the world of man', according to a formula which, taken in itself, is held in common between the Marx of 1843–4 and Feuerbach, then ultimately it is the state and with it civil society that constitute the objective reality of the human essence.¹⁴ Already, in his letter to Ruge of 13 March 1843, Marx said:

Feuerbach's aphorisms seem to me incorrect only in one respect, that he refers too much to nature and too little to politics. That, however, is the only alliance by which present-day philosophy can become truth.¹⁵

So, while still in many ways Feuerbachian, Marx at that time is clear that the materialist inversion of Hegel in Feuerbach only leads to a very poor and speculative result, lacking a sufficiently concrete understanding of the 'world of man' that constitutes the reality of the human essence. Under the influence of Engels, who was more advanced than Marx in his recognition of the fundamental role of political economy as the explanatory basis of human history, Marx began seriously to study English and French economists,¹⁶ discovering quickly in this study the secret to a reversal of the Hegelian concept of alienation, far more materialist and revolutionary than Feuerbach's. It is this world of reflections, and especially the richest of them, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, that we take as the basis of our analysis.¹⁷

14 Cf. Karl Marx, 'Introduction' of 1844 (in Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3), and Ludwig Feuerbach, *Provisional Theses for the Reform of Philosophy*, point 67 (in Feuerbach 1960, p. 125), where the idea, very rarely expressed by him, that 'the state is the realised totality of the human essence', remains purely embryonic.

15 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 1, p. 400.

16 On the role of Engels, especially his *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy* (written late in 1843, published in February 1844 [in MECW 3]), as well as economic studies of Marx at this time, cf. Cornu 1962, pp. 89ff. Notes taken by Marx on his economic readings of this time are included in the MEGA, Section I, Volume 2.

17 In a more detailed study, one should also analyse other important texts, particularly the extracts annotated by Marx of the *Elements of Political Economy* by James Mill, and of course *The Holy Family*.

What the *1844 Manuscripts* present is what can be called the *first 'Marxist' theory of alienation*, the quotation marks serving to draw attention to the fact that this theory is not yet exactly Marxist, although it played a significant role in the genesis of conceptions which Marx and Engels came to on this issue in their mature work.¹⁸ And the first question before us is to elaborate the meaning of the concept of alienation that has an openly central position in these extraordinarily rich texts.

1. What is immediately striking is that, unlike Feuerbach, for whom the problem of alienation is identified with the problem of religious consciousness, Marx is no longer concerned with alienated consciousness, but rather alienated labour, so that the terrain of his critique is longer religion, but political economy, understood in a very broad sense. The *1844 Manuscripts* start with the economy. The first half of the first manuscript is almost like a series of economic lectures, and when Marx's own reflections begin, he focuses on alienated labour; it is not philosophical arguments but economic facts that function as premises: 'We begin with the presuppositions of the national economy', 'We proceed from an *actual* economic fact.'¹⁹

2. Transported from the terrain of religious criticism to that of the critique of political economy, alienation no longer refers to a simple misunderstanding, a process of consciousness, but to a practical enslavement that also includes forms of alienation of consciousness, but only as a corollary. The alienation of the human essence is no longer understood as the ideal objectification of human qualities in a celestial god, but as the divestiture for the worker of his own life in worldly things. We see here how the materialist inversion of Hegel's theory of alienation is more radical, that is, more materialist than it is in Feuerbach. An example: at the beginning of the text on alienated labour, Marx poses an economic fact: 'The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces...'; and he says:

18 Republishing this 1973 study in its original version, as I point out in the preface, I retained the formulations of a phrase such as this, very unsatisfactory to my understanding of 2012, in that they implicitly identify the positions to which Marx had arrived when he wrote *Capital* to 'Marxism' as a 'theoretically correct' Marxism. This is a mode of thinking still part of a political-historical culture that went bankrupt, and for profound reasons. In place of this dated sentence, today I would simply say: in the *1844 Manuscripts* is the first Marxian understanding of alienation; a substantially different understanding, but with the same vocabulary, is found in *Capital*, and I think there are strong reasons to see this as better founded and more relevant.

19 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 271.

This fact expresses merely that the object that labour produces – Labour's product – comes to confront it as something alien [*fremdes Wesen*], as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour [*Vergegenständlichung der Arbeit*]. Labour's realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement* [*Entfremdung*], as *alienation* [*Entäusserung*].²⁰

And this divestiture of self in a dominant and overwhelming practical power is manifest not only externally, in the process of becoming-foreign of the product of labour, but within the worker himself, in the process of becoming-foreign of labour to the worker, of transformation of labour into *forced labour*.²¹

From Religious Alienation to Alienation of Labour

3. There is more. The alienation of labour is expressed not only in the transformation of labour and its product into an alien, enslaving thing, but also in this domination of the thing taking the form of a dominating *person*, the private owner. Objectification of people, and personification of things: this dialectic plays a key role in Marx's conception of alienation. Here on this point, among many others, is a characteristic section of the *1844 Manuscripts*:

Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason, religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc., since we are here dealing with the intellectual world. In the real, practical world, self-estrangement can only become manifest through the real, practical relationship to other men. The

20 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 272. Let us note now that what in France is conventionally called *the* category of alienation, corresponds actually in Marx to quite a complex system of categories, based not on a single term but on two families of terms: *ausser* (a preposition meaning 'out of ...'): *entäussern*, *Entäusserung*, *veräussern*, *Veräusserung*; and *fremd* (an adjective meaning 'foreign'): *entfremden*, *Entfremdung*, *Fremdheit* ... – not to mention the related vocabulary of objectification and of reification [literally, thing-ification – CS]. We will return later to this linguistic problem.

21 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 274.

medium through which estrangement takes place is itself practical. Thus through estranged labour, man not only creates his relationship to the object and to the act of production as to powers that are alien and hostile to him; he also creates the relationship in which other men stand to his production and to his product, and the relationship in which he stands to these other men [...] Through *estranged, alienated labour*, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labour of a man alien to labour and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labour creates the relation to it of the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour). Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.²²

Thus the notion of alienation of labour not only allows us to think an ensemble of anthropological effects of the capitalist economic system, but also reveals the source of this system, to the point of rendering conceivable this extraordinary enterprise of deducing from the analysis of alienated labour what constitutes social classes – although the term is virtually absent in the *1844 Manuscripts*.²³

4. In becoming an economic-philosophical, historical-anthropological notion, has alienation, as Marx conceived it at the time, ceased to be what it was for Feuerbach, that is, the central materialist category for the interpretation of religion? Not at all, as we have seen in the passage in the *1844 Manuscripts* on the capitalist relation as a result of the alienation of labour. Far from being exceptional, the move from economic analysis to the analysis of religion is a frequent approach for Marx, every time he touches on the problem of alienation. To give some examples:

[I]t is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and above himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.²⁴

22 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 279.

23 In the *1844 Manuscripts* we find only *once* the term *Arbeiterklasse* (working class) (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 289), in an instance which does not bestow it any theoretical importance. While Engels in 1844 was working on a book on the English working class, the first developed work of Marx where the concept of class plays an important role is *The German Ideology* (1845–6), a work written in collaboration with Engels.

24 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 273.

Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independent of him – that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is a loss of his self.²⁵

Alienation is therefore, at this point in Marx's thinking, a polyvalent category, pertaining to economy and religion. But on the one hand there is no longer any common measure between these two uses, the religious from then on, and only from far away, only *à propos* of economics, which occupies all the attention. On the other hand, religious issues are always introduced in the course of economic analysis, as mutually clarifying *comparisons*, and nothing more. We do not have a historical-materialist theory of religion as a specific ideological reflection of economic and social alienation, but at least already the idea of a homology between economic alienation, which is conceived as fundamental, and religious alienation; a homology that occurs in the text as a trace of the passage from Feuerbach's analysis of alienation, centred on religion, to a new analysis focused on labour, on economic policy, economy. We see at the same time that Marx did not abandon giving to the new category a universal theoretical scope, that of a matrix of all forms of alienation.

5. Since alienation is considered no longer by reference to a simple attitude of consciousness but to a socio-economic system, it no longer appears only as a bad thing that *should* be eliminated, but as a phase of history that necessarily has an end in history, and this not by any appeal to the spontaneity of consciousness but by the development of practical activity: activity realising communism, which is both

the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man. [...] Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property, as the appropriation of human life, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement [Entfremdung] – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social existence. Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of consciousness, of man's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of real life; its transcendence therefore

25 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 274.

embraces both aspects. [...] [A]theism is at first far from being *communism*; indeed, that atheism is still mostly an abstraction. The philanthropy of atheism is therefore at first only *philosophical*, abstract philanthropy, and that of communism is at once *real* and directly bent on *action*.²⁶

We see already the basic Marxist idea that religion is not ‘the enemy’ for communism, and that the necessary disappearance of this form of human alienation cannot be the result of an anti-religious struggle, but arises rather from struggles on other terrains, against a completely different alienation, whose disappearance will result in that of religious alienation that is rooted in it. In *The Holy Family*, atheism is itself defined as ‘the last stage of theism, a negative recognition of God’,²⁷ a still-alienated attitude.

Thus, for Feuerbach’s materialist inversion of the Hegelian concept of alienation, a reversal that despite its profound novelty *kept the terms* of the man/religion relationship and thus remained within speculative thought, Marx substituted in 1844 a far more materialist reversal, which requires a materialist rethinking of the terms of the relationship itself. If it is *man* who is alienated in religion, then alienation is itself a *human* process, real, concrete, historical, practical; its centre can no longer be religion but concrete human activity *par excellence*, i.e. labour. De-alienation, then, cannot be accomplished through simple ‘weapons of criticism’ but rather through the ‘critical weapons’ of revolutionary practice. This does not obviate the achievements of Feuerbach’s conception of religion as alienation, but paves the way for its materialist reversal within a materialist theory of ideology, including comparisons between the sphere of the economy and that of religious consciousness that contributes to it. In this sense, the *1844 Manuscripts* appear as the fulfilment of Feuerbach’s reversal of Hegel, beyond the limitations and inconsistencies of Feuerbach himself. And no doubt the depth, the extreme fertility of this new conception allows us to understand the extraordinary and sustained appeal exercised by this text to this day, so that those who desire to understand Marxism in its authenticity should carefully analyse the situation, not at all an imaginary one, if they want to combat the distortions of Marxism that occur with such frequency.

26 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, pp. 296–7.

27 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 4, p. 110.

A Richly Suggestive Analysis

1. It is impossible, when we read or re-read the *Manuscripts of 1844* (and other texts of the same period), to remain indifferent to the exceptional descriptive fertility of this theory of alienation, to its universal richness and the lively analyses of the forms it takes and the effects it produces, whether relations of labour or of money, needs or aesthetic sense, love or liberty. We know, for example, this passage where Marx establishes the deeply moral character of the bourgeois economy:

Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis. The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence etc., the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither rust nor moths will devour – your capital. The less you *are*, the less you express your own life, the more you *have*, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged [*entfremdeten*] being.²⁸

The *1844 Manuscripts* contain many analyses in which this extraordinarily forceful revelation remains intact, and whose disregard ‘in the name of science’ lessens the scope of revolutionary Marxism. On a slightly different plane, we find in *The Holy Family* a passage like this:

Precisely the *slavery of civil society* is in appearance the greatest *freedom* because it is in appearance the fully developed independence of the individual, the uncurbed movement, no longer bound by a common bond or by man, of the estranged [*entfremdeten*] elements of his life, such as property, industry, religion, etc. whereas actually this is his fully developed slavery and inhumanity. Law has here taken the place of privilege.²⁹

How can we not recognise here also the fecundity of the analysis in terms of alienation that grasps, behind the bourgeois illusions of freedom, the very form of enslavement of bourgeois society?

2. But in reality there is much more than the richness of a phenomenology: the precision of a scientific approach is being born. For what this theory of alienation involves are by no means the simple effects of bourgeois economic

²⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 309.

²⁹ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 116.

relations, they are the relations themselves, which it reveals to be historically transitory. Bourgeois political economy does not challenge the alienated forms of human productive activity, it accepts uncritically wage labour, profit, private property, i.e. it provides scientific support to the illusion that it takes for natural fact, that these are eternal forms of productive activity. Marx immediately calls into question this pseudo-naturalness, he reveals the not only inhuman, but transient nature of these social forms, and here he lays the foundations of a genuinely scientific critique of political economy. How does *man*, he asks at a nodal point of the analysis developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*,

come to alienate [*entfremden*], to estrange his labour [*Arbeit zu enttäusern*]? How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development? We have already gone a long way toward the solution of this problem by *transforming* the question of the *origin of private property* into the question of the relation of *alienated labour* to the course of humanity's development. For when one speaks of *private property*, one thinks of dealing with something external to man. When one speaks of labour, one is directly dealing with man himself. This new formulation of the question already includes its solution.³⁰

Here we see how the point of view of alienation, pushing to find behind apparently indisputable 'states of fact' the internal meaning of the human process that is externalised in them, transforms what bourgeois political economy posits dogmatically as givens into problems relevant to a radical historical critique.

3. That is not all: a fertile principle of descriptive analysis, and of the radical critique of bourgeois society, provides the seed, therefore, not only for a phenomenology of alienated life but also for a real economic science. This theory of alienation leads even more generally to a decisive coming to terms with Hegelian philosophy and thus, for the first time, to the surpassing of the speculative attitude altogether. Here again, the *1844 Manuscripts* go far beyond Feuerbach, although it is true that Feuerbach had already begun an insightful critique of Hegel's dialectic; because while having the goal of a materialist critique of Hegel, Marx can also glimpse the rational core of his approach and the contours of a truly de-alienated dialectic. It is notable that the Hegelian categories of the negation of the negation and supersession (*Aufhebung*) are objects of an extraordinarily penetrating critique, which exposes 'the uncritical positivism and equally uncritical idealism'³¹ of Hegel, and that shows by

³⁰ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 281.

³¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 332.

contrast, outside the circle of abstract thought, the dialectical movement of the establishment of communism as the concrete historical basis for thinking about the corresponding categories in a wholly different way. From a conception of contradiction as movement of the Idea, and which finds its solution in the movement of the Idea, the transition is at least initiated toward a very different conception in which contradiction is a concrete relation between material realities, and can only find its solution in the effective suppression of its material bases.

In order to abolish the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is quite sufficient. It takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property.³²

Thus, the theory of alienation and de-alienation developed in the 1844 *Manuscripts* prefigures the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, which marked the end of speculative philosophy:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to transform it.

4. In order to close this brief survey, let us return to the question of religion: here again it is easy to understand the status of such a conception. The great enigma, which was the stumbling block for pre-Marxist atheism, including Feuerbach's, is the vitality of religion, the wealth of its diverse manifestations. How could a simple illusion of consciousness exercise such historical positivity, if in essence it is only negative? But in showing economic alienation as the historical matrix of human alienation in general, including religious alienation, Marx shows not only how to think of the origin, source, the basis of religion, but also its concrete content, its human 'truth': real alienation, the alienated protest against real alienation. The theory of alienation not only helps us to understand the content of religion, but at the same time the *alienated form* taken by its content.

The essence of economic alienation is indeed to render opaque the relations between people as well as their relationship with nature, and that is why it appears to people enmeshed in these relations in the form of an alienated, fantastic reflection. Thus takes shape a conception of humanity and the world even more radically emancipated from religion; it does not polemically oppose its sense to the 'non-sense' of religion, thereby admitting what it doesn't

³² Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 313.

understand, but is actually able to reveal the meaning of religion, in its content and in its form. And in the same way, it is able to account for the very fact that at this point in history there arises such a radically de-alienated conception of alienation, based on a general theory of ideology: if consciousness is able to see through the secret of alienation, this is because it is the consciousness of a real, material historical force: the proletariat, which in its very existence is the daily experience of real alienation fantastically reflected in consciousness, and which by its very existence announces the dissolution of a world that needs illusion.

And that is why, in their writings of this period, whether the *1844 Manuscripts* or *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Marx and Engels attach visible importance to the fact that the proletariat developing in England, in France and even Germany has largely adopted atheism: it detaches from religion to the extent that it moves toward radical revolution, to communism. In so doing, it does not pose as the gravedigger of religion, a practical attitude that corresponds to a still-alienated bourgeois atheism, but rather it gives a de-alienated form to the real content of religion, transforming the illusory protest against real distress into the practical struggle against this distress, in effective emancipation. That is why, for proletarians

the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.³³

Yet just at the point where this theory of alienation reached a first set of formulations of a whole series of apparently promising developments, Marx abandoned it – the *Manuscripts of 1844* remain as manuscripts. This same notion of alienation, in *The German Ideology* and in the *Manifesto*, had been subjected to the decisive judgments that we mentioned above. And that, we suspect, is not without reasons, which appear when we turn our attention to the limitations and contradictions of this theory.

A Concept Still Trapped by Speculative Abstraction

1. Let us return first to the descriptive richness, the phenomenological value offered by the analysis of alienated labour. Is not this *universal* descriptive fertility – what cannot be described in terms of alienation? – one side of a

33 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 313.

category whose reverse side would be the convenient *abstraction* through which it grasps reality? Does not its *phenomenological* richness entail the cost that it still traps us, at least in part, in *phenomena*, in the immediate forms of the lived? We can understand its fascination, but is it not ultimately a theoretical will-o'-the-wisp? Let us take a simple example.

Developing the idea that the objectification of the worker's labour is a disenfranchisement, that the realisation of the object is the loss of reality for the subject, Marx wrote in the *1844 Manuscripts*: 'So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death.'³⁴ The remark is biting, but from a theoretical point of view, is it anything more than a jab? For what is the concrete reason for low wages, unemployment, economic crisis, etc., to which the worker owed his mortality? Not only does the invocation of the 'loss of realisation', the extreme form of alienation of the worker, tell us nothing on this subject, but we can say, it puts off the concrete economic analysis of these issues, since it is presented as their ultimate answer *directly derived* from the concept of alienated labour.

Here is the trap contained in the *1844 Manuscripts*: they encourage us to mistake simple *abstractions* for analyses. In the face of facts as diverse as the exploitation of wage labour, prostitution, the avarice of the hoarder, or religious belief, we can clearly pronounce the formula of formulae: alienation of the human essence, and with that we designate the deep kinship of all aspects of bourgeois society grasped from what is effectively their common basis, the relations of production. But we grasp them in this way; instead of undertaking a concrete scientific analysis, we just need to formulate them confidently in the language of alienation to 'account' for them and even to 'deduce' them: have we really left behind speculative construction?

2. This leads us to take another look at this uncontested merit of the theory of alienation developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*: the refusal to consider, as does bourgeois political economy, the system of private property as a natural and eternal given. It is true that this, on the one hand, is the starting point for a radical critique of the ideological in bourgeois economics, the first step towards a true science of economics. But at the same time, this refusal leads not to overcoming all the partially mystified contents of the bourgeois economy and to surpassing it on the terrain of science, but to setting it aside, ignoring its scientific core. Thus, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx did not deal with the labour theory of value, a basic precept of English classical economics. He is not yet on the path that will lead him in the early 1850s to the discovery of surplus value.

34 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 272.

In this regard, it is not enough to point out that the analysis of labour in terms of alienation remains abstract, still far removed from real scientific analysis: the most serious issue is that, taking the point of view of alienation as essential, Marx, in 1844 takes a short cut around the critical accounting of the full richness of economic data and concepts, when it is only through this that there can be a scientific elucidation of the problem.³⁵ This opposition between a philosophy of alienation and a scientific critique of political economy, corresponds, on the terrain of practice, to the lack of interest paid to the struggles and concrete demands of workers if not to the negation, in principle, of their legitimacy. In the final pages of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in 1847, Marx will be fighting both bourgeois economists and socialists who each in their own way reject workers' 'coalitions', and will be illuminating, in a famous passage, the historical significance of union struggles as a necessary step toward class struggle.³⁶ The contrast with this characteristic passage of the *1844 Manuscripts*, representing a still purely abstract view of the conditions of class struggle, is striking:

An enforced increase of wages [...] would be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity.³⁷

We would say that today, this apparent radicalism (one solution, revolution...) is less relevant than ever and in fact obscures ignorance of the necessary conditions of workers' struggles and, from the theoretical point of view, ignorance of the necessary conditions for scientific analysis.

3. From here, it is not very difficult to grasp the philosophical limitations of this theory of alienation, and the overall coming-to-terms with Hegel's philosophy. It is undeniable that in the *1844 Manuscripts* there is an extremely penetrating materialist critique of Hegel's speculative dialectic, one that points the way to a fundamentally new dialectic, where contradiction is no longer contained within the realm of ideas, but in material reality. But it is clearly not enough to effect a materialist reversal of the *conception* of the dialectic; we must transform its whole *categorical content* from speculative to scientific. The *1844 Manuscripts* proposed that the truth of dialectical movement is real

35 Cf. the analysis of Jesús Ibarrola, 'Aliénation, théorie de la valeur-travail et fétichisme' (Ibarrola 1965), which showed how the surpassing of classical political economy by means of this theory of alienated labour has 'as ransom a complete abandonment of its objective core'.

36 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, pp. 210–11.

37 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 280.

historical movement – a crucial point of lasting value –, but it still sees this real historical movement as the movement of an abstract generality, the human essence, which alienates itself in the regime of private property, then recovers itself in communist society.

Thus the dialectic is understood as pertaining to the concrete, but it is a still an abstract dialectic, which is represented as immanent movement of the concrete. Therefore, although the *1844 Manuscripts* assign history a central theoretical place, what it actually tells us about history remains extraordinarily limited. How could Marx grasp concrete historical development while he still has almost none of the essential concepts of historical materialism, not even that of social class? History can be nothing other than the logical, a-temporal succession of major avatars of the human essence, and even the real action for the establishment of communism, a pistol shot at the speculative concept, retains the abstract tone of a Hegelian supersession (*Aufhebung*).

In sum, we are fully justified in saying that the philosophy of alienation, of which the *1844 Manuscripts* are the clearest and most systematic expression, is based on a *humanist* conception, in the theoretical sense of the term, that is, that its focal point is *man*. To be precise: to speak of *man*, seeing in this singular the general subject of history, is to believe that the human individual ‘carries in himself the form of the human condition’, as Montaigne said, so that there is no essential difference between the individual and the human race, and that the individual is the essential form of the race. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, this idea is expressed by the notion of generic man.

The whole character of a species – its species-character – is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character.³⁸

Thus, man is characterised by an essential nature, a generic form of activity whose purpose is the free unfolding, through practical production, of an objective world, an externalisation that at the same time detaches from man, escapes him, and, in the era of alienated labour and private property, enslaves him. The alienation of the human essence is a historical fact in that it is a moment within man’s development, affecting the concrete life of individuals, and that is why a phenomenology of alienated existence is presented to us as the riddle of history solved: for humanism, history is read directly in psychological terms.

38 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 276.

Moreover, communism is understood essentially as re-appropriation by man of his essence, as a finally free realisation of his generic activity, as a form of life reconciled with itself, and as such, as the higher phase of history. It is this speculative identification of abstract man and concrete man, of the human essence and the living individual, thus of history and psychology, that allows us to make *man* the subject of history, and which defines philosophical humanism.

However, as we have seen, the theory of alienation that is the basis of Marx's early works, despite its immense merits, and all that is radically new that it foreshadows, remains prisoner to this humanist illusion, and thus powerless actually to complete the programme it sets out, whether the critique of political economy, the development of the science of history and the concrete dialectic, or the transition in general from thought-solutions to real solutions. Worse still, it fails to answer the central question posed by the *1844 Manuscripts*: 'How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development?';³⁹ that is, the question of why human history has had to go through class societies before communism could become possible. This colossal historical detour the 1844 theory of alienation *states*, but is unable to *explain*. In this sense, we can say that the *1844 Manuscripts* are an excellent entry to an impasse.

And that is why, pushed deeper into his thinking by the powerful historical movement which led to the revolutions of 1848, Marx, increasingly linked to Engels, had to get out of this impasse, to surpass this conception of his youth. The early stages of his thinking had led him to take up in his own way the materialist inversion of Hegel accomplished by Feuerbach, but now with increased pressure, he had to take it much further. Thus the materialist reversal of the man/religion relation led him to a materialist rethinking of the very terms of the relation, that is, to consider the man/labour relation as more fundamental. But to actually be truly materialist, this new relation could not continue as one between abstract essences, a relation still incompletely emancipated from the traps of speculation. Forced even further by historical requirements, the materialist critique is thus led to dissolve its own framework, that of abstract relations, to dissolve the very form of the categories of theoretical thought within which it developed, to make itself practically revolutionary.

39 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 281.

Toward a Historical Materialism

It is this truly decisive transition that is specified in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and developed at length in the *German Ideology*,⁴⁰ less than two years after the *1844 Manuscripts*. This time, we have definitely left philosophy, it seems, to move onto the terrain of pure science – the science of history, of economics – and of concrete political struggles. We have rejected alienation, in its anthropologically abstract form, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, notably the sixth,⁴¹ where it states that the human essence ‘is not an abstraction inherent in the individual taken separately’ but that ‘in its reality it is the ensemble of societal relations’. There can be no question from now on of representing history as the odyssey of a human essence identified with a species where the individual is the parent form in some natural way. To understand human affairs, we must abandon all discourse of *man* in favour of the concrete scientific study of the only reality that can replace the philosophical category of human essence: *societal relations*. We must renounce starting from a phenomenology of alienated labour, that is, from the life processes of a subject, to resolutely place ourselves outside ‘man’, in the objective processes of history.

This transition, where what can only be called Marxism without quotation marks is born, is seen most clearly in the centrality of a new category: while the *1844 Manuscripts* understand history on the basis of alienated labour, in *The German Ideology* it is the *division of labour*. That is, we always begin with labour (this materialist supersession of Hegel by Feuerbach is not in question), but now with labour as a *social relation*, and not as a *manifestation of self*. Thus the division of labour replaces the alienation of labour at the centre of the analysis, as we see in many passages of *The German Ideology*. From the beginning of the first part, the division of labour is presented as the source of all conflicts between ‘productive forces, the state of society and consciousness’, therefore as the true source of private property. ‘Division of labour and private property are, after all, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity.’⁴²

40 Recall that if *The German Ideology* remained in manuscript form throughout Marx and Engels’s lifetimes, it is only because they could not find a publisher. It therefore cannot be confused with a text that remained in manuscript form of the author’s own choice, as with the *1844 Manuscripts*.

41 Lenin had clearly seen its central importance, since he calls it, in ‘Karl Marx’, one of the fundamental traits that distinguishes Marxist materialism from all others (cf. Lenin 1973, LCW 21, p. 53).

42 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 46.

In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, the alienation of labour was the source of private property; now it is the division of labour. It could not be more clear that the division of labour, in *The German Ideology*, is the ‘transformed’ alienation of labour. And certainly this transformation still resembles an abstract category, an all-purpose explicative, of which Engels, re-reading the old manuscript forty years later, will say it ‘proves only how incomplete our knowledge of economic history still was at that time.’⁴³ We know how the rich categorical structure of developed historical materialism replaced the simple division of labour of 1845–6. Nevertheless, the decisive break lies in the transition from the alienation of labour to the division of labour, even if formally the second still resembles an abstract philosophical category such as the first, more than a broad categorical structure of the scientific type such as that of developed historical materialism. The alienation of labour keeps us prisoners of speculative humanism, while the division of labour places us on the terrain of concrete historical-social processes. The era of philosophy in itself is closed, that of science begins.

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One might think, then –, and today it is commonly believed among Marxists themselves – that in mature Marxism, especially in the huge mass of many thousands of pages that make up the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Capital* and the preparatory manuscripts, starting with the *Grundrisse*, the problematic and even the vocabulary of alienation have disappeared, while other problematics and vocabularies appear, notably those of *commodity fetishism*, which cannot fail to have major effects on the corresponding conception of religion, the starting point and ultimate goal of our study. However, as I propose to establish here, a careful reading of all these texts, without blinkers on, reveals to the contrary a major and stubborn fact: the problematic and vocabulary of alienation, without a shadow of doubt, occupy a considerable place in mature Marxism. Ignorance or denial of this fact is possible only on the basis of a deliberately selective or negligent reading of the texts. To describe, analyse, and try to understand what is meant by this vocabulary and this problematic of alienation in mature Marxism, is the problem that we must address now, and which no Marxist can avoid.

Of course, the accomplishment of this task is possible only under certain conditions. We must study and cite numerous texts, at the obvious risk of being accused of Talmudism, especially by those for whom the economy of citations

43 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 520.

is favourable for maintaining an interpretation of Marxism contrary to the facts. We must study the whole corpus, without neglecting any important text, such as the *Grundrisse*, book IV of *Capital* or even the so-called ‘unpublished’ chapter VI. This was scarcely possible until recently, and remains partly impossible for those who do not read German,⁴⁴ so that much of what has been written in French on the subject through the end of the sixties is now quite obsolete. We must ultimately refer systematically to the original text, most often the German, on the one hand, because many translations are unreliable, and secondly because, as noted above, the sole French term, *aliénation*, corresponds, for Marx’s pen, to a complex family of terms whose exact semantic terrains are yet to be defined, so that a certain problematic or absence of a French problematic of *aliénation*, including a psychiatric connotation of the term that does not exist at all in German,⁴⁵ is actually an artefact of translation.

Does Alienation Disappear from *Capital*?

With these strictly necessary conditions, let us proceed. For the mature Marx, what is the starting point of any analysis, whether in the *Contribution* or *Capital*? The answer is clear: it is no longer alienated labour but the *commodity*. We are not beginning with an anthropological question, but an economic one. But beware: from the first analysis of the commodity, which reveals its

44 Here appeared in the 1973 edition of the present text a prescient note that the *Grundrisse* was only available in French after 1967–8 in the Anthropos edition ‘under the disputed title of “Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy” and in a “very casual translation” by Roger Dangeville; that Book IV of *Capital* was published by Costes in 1924–5 in eight volumes long exhausted “under the unjustified title *History of Economic Doctrines* and in a translation devoid of all rigor”; that chapter VI was meanwhile “available in French since 1971” in 10/18, without mentioning that Roger Dangeville’s translation was no more reliable than that of the *Grundrisse*. A distressing bibliographic situation which forced me throughout the following pages to retranslate for myself from the original many of the passages cited. Things certainly are incomparably better today: since 1980 a good translation of the *Grundrisse* by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre has been available (two volumes; Paris: Éditions sociales, 1980), reprinted in a single volume (*Manuscrits de 1857–1858 dits «Grundrisse»*); a good translation of Book IV of *Capital* published under the responsibility of Gilbert Badia (*Théories sur la plus-value*, three volumes; Paris: Éditions sociales, 1974–6); a good translation also of chapter VI (*Le chapitre VI. Manuscrits de 1863–1867*; Paris: Éditions sociales, Collection GEME, 2010). But I am nevertheless led in many cases to modify somewhat the translation cited to respect Marx’s conceptualisation more fully in my opinion than was still the case in the seventies, when Book IV of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* were published by Éditions sociales.’ [Note by LS.]

45 While basically accurate, this assertion may call today for some nuance. [Note of 2012].

dual character, exchange-value, use-value, we are led to another, rigorously connected analysis, the *equally double character of labour*: concrete labour, abstract labour. And this double nature of labour in commodity production is, in Marx's opinion, the cornerstone for constructing a critical and scientific political economy. Writing to Engels on 24 August 1867, a few days after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, he said:

The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to *all* understanding of the FACTS) *the two-fold character* of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very *First Chapter*; 2. the treatment of *surplus-value*...⁴⁶

And he returned a few months later, as if, by taking a step back, he could outline even more clearly the overall meaning of his work:

the economists, without exception, have missed the simple fact that, if the commodity has the double character of use value and exchange value, then the labour represented in the commodity must also have a double character; thus the bare analysis of labour *sans phrase*, as in Smith, Ricardo, etc., is bound to come up against the inexplicable everywhere. This is, in fact, the whole secret of the critical conception.⁴⁷

Thus, the purely economic analysis of the commodity implies from the start an analysis of *labour*, labour that manifests a *division*, no longer in the sense of an all-purpose and still-abstract historical process, as in *The German Ideology*, but in that of a concrete duality intimately present within each commodity-producing activity; labour which finds itself *split* in its very unity into two opposites, of which one, abstract labour, the expression of market relations in the process of productive activity, imposes its law and domination on the other, concrete labour. And this split in labour, according to Marx, is what bourgeois political economy did not understand, although it is the entire secret of a critical conception.

How could we not see in these basic assertions the scientific response to the admittedly speculative and poorly posed questions at the heart of the *1844 Manuscripts*? We must start by analysing labour if we want to radically surpass the limits of a bourgeois political economy that takes capitalist relations as natural and eternal givens. And to do this, we must grasp the movement

46 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 42, p. 407.

47 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 42, p. 514.

of what comes to oppose labour as a concrete manifestation of itself, labour that has become abstractly foreign to itself in the form of capital, of private property. To these questions, the *1844 Manuscripts* respond with a still partly speculative and anthropological theory of alienation. There is nothing like this in the economic works of the fifties and sixties. Here, labour, even the preliminary analysis of which goes beyond the limitations of Ricardo himself, is no longer seen as the *self-manifestation of a subject* but as a *social productive activity*. The opposition between concrete labour and abstract labour does not lead us to follow the life of the worker in its own logic and its non-economic dimensions – that would be the object of a *psychology* – but the development of production and its relations, the sole object of political economy.

All this is true and essential. But at the same time, the fact remains that *Capital* ‘pivots’, in the words of Marx himself,⁴⁸ around an analysis of *labour*, which, through the effect of relations foreign to the activity of the subject taken by himself – market relations, capitalist relations – splits and becomes *opposed to itself*. This analysis is the key to the transition from a political economy locked within bourgeois limitations, toward a radically emancipated political economy that contributes to this emancipation. To claim that this concern to analyse labour fundamentally, central to Marx in 1844, no longer appears in *Capital*, would be to deny the obvious. The truth is rather that in twenty years of efforts, Marx fully grasped how the question addressed in 1844 was ill-defined and therefore posed in an insoluble form, and how to pose it correctly in order to resolve it. Let us not anticipate what becomes of the problematic of alienation; in any case, the continuity of purpose, through its displacements and qualitative transformations, is clear.

Let us follow some of the principal axes along which the original analysis of the contradictions of the commodity and of labour develops.

1. The essence of commodity production – and of capitalism, the full development of this form of production – is that from the use-value of the products of labour, value that is specific to their physical properties, exchange-value splits off. This is value dependent on the social-human labour-time the products require, and that comes to be crystallised in them and which is borne by

48 Marx 1976, p. 132. Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, book I, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1983, p. 47 (republished by PUF, Collection ‘Quadrige’, in 1993 with the same pagination). I retain here, for once, the translation of Joseph Roy, reviewed by Marx, and not followed by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. Marx uses the word *Springpunkt*, which lends itself to a strong image and that seems to me well rendered by ‘pivoté’. [Note by LS.]

them as commodities. Thus, an exchange between *things* actually involves an exchange of labour, thus, an invisible relation between persons:⁴⁹

The determination of the magnitude of value by labour time is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities.⁵⁰

[...] The commodity-form, and the relation of value of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely with no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁵¹

This analysis of commodity fetishism, informed by a religious analogy, Marx obviously did not place at the very beginning of *Capital* by accident, but because it is an essential condition for the intelligibility of all that follows. It has been taken up numerous times throughout the economic works of the 1850s and 1860s, whether in the vocabulary of *fetishism* (*Fetischismus*) or in the synonymous vocabulary of *reification* (*Versachlichung*)⁵² or the 'becoming a thing' of social relations.

49 *Persons* (*Personen*) of which Marx speaks in such a context are not of course the 'subjects' of personalism or the individuals of psychology, but the *agents* of given social functions, general representatives of social classes.

50 Marx 1976, p. 168.

51 Marx 1976, p. 165.

52 According to my principle – I have *not rewritten* my text of 1973 – I retain here and elsewhere the word *reification* as the French equivalent of *Versachlichung*. But I think it is now appropriate to take account of the classic choice made by Kostas Axelos and Jacqueline Bois in their translation of Lukács (Lukács 1960, p. 110, note), reserving the word 'reification' to render *Verdinglichung* and translating *Versachlichung* by 'objectification'. Since I cannot here retain in their expired status of 1973 the translations of numerous texts of Marx cited here, it is *in the citations*, the term objectification (*chosification*) that I adopt to render *Versachlichung*. [TN: This is an example of the ability of the German language to express philosophical ideas not easily accessible in other languages. *Ding* and *Sache* both mean 'thing', but in different senses.]

We read, for example, dozens of times in the *Grundrisse* analyses like this:

In one of the forms of money – in so far as it is *medium* of exchange (not *measure* of exchange value) – it is clear to the economists that the existence of money presupposes the objectification [*Versachlichung*] of the social bond; in so far, that is, as money appears in the form of *collateral* which one individual must leave with another in order to obtain a commodity from him. Here the economists themselves say that people place in a thing (money) the faith which they do not place in each other. But why do they have faith in the thing? Obviously only because that thing is an *objectified relation* between persons; because it is objectified exchange value, and exchange value is nothing more than a mutual relation between people's productive activities. Every other collateral may serve the holder directly in that function: money serves him only as the 'dead pledge of society,' but it serves as such only because of its social (symbolic) property; and it can have a social property only because individuals have alienated [*sich entfremdet haben*] their own social relationship from themselves so that it takes the form of a thing. In the *lists of current prices*, where all values are measured in money, it seems as though this independence from persons of the social character of things is, by the activity of commerce, on this basis of alienation [*Fremdartigkeit*] where the relations of production and distribution stand opposed to the individual, to all individuals, at the same time subordinated to the individual again.⁵³

What is particularly instructive here for our purposes is that, repeated over twenty years in this text, the fetishism inherent in market relations, the importance of which in mature Marxism no-one contests, is naturally thought and expressed by Marx not only in the vocabulary of reification (the becoming-a-thing of relations between people), but in that of alienation: the relations between people become *foreign to them* in the form of the thing. How can we then argue that in *Capital* fetishism is substituted for alienation?

53 Marx 1973, p. 160.

When Human Activity Becomes a 'Foreign Power'

But perhaps we believe that the equivalence we just saw figures only in the *Grundrisse*, in a manuscript that Marx never published? It would be a very bad reading of *Capital* to imagine that. In truth, the vocabulary of alienation is used a hundred times to express the major and multiform fact of the reification of social relations in the world of commodity production in capitalist society. Some examples: Chapter XXIV of Book III is entitled 'Alienation [*Veräusserlichung*] of capitalist relations in interest-bearing capital'.⁵⁴ This chapter begins:

In interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most externalised [*äusserlichste*] and most fetishised [*fetischartigste*] form.⁵⁵

Moreover, dealing with capitalist profit, Marx writes that

this state, separated from its inner essence by a mass of invisible intermediate links, reaches an even more externalised [*veräusserlichste*] form, or rather the form of absolute externalisation [*Veräusserlichung*], in interest-bearing capital [...] the form in which capital is antecedent to its own reproduction process...⁵⁶

Elsewhere, in the short but very important chapter of Book III of *Capital* entitled, 'The Trinitarian formula', in which he analyses the income (rent, profit, wages) and its source, he notes:

The division of profit into profit of enterprise and interest [...] completes the autonomisation of the form of surplus-value, the ossification of its form as against its substance, its essence.⁵⁷

Then, turning to the case of ground-rent, he adds:

54 In Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, book III, Volume 2, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1970, p. 55. This title is translated less faithfully with respect to the text.

55 Marx 1981, p. 515.

56 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 487.

57 Marx 1981, p. 968.

Since, in this case, one part of the surplus-value seems directly bound up not with social relations but rather with a natural element, the earth, the form of mutual alienation and ossification is complete [*der Entfremdung und Verknöcherung ... gegeneinander*]. [...] It is the great merit of classical economics to have dissolved this false appearance and deception, this autonomisation and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production, this religion of everyday life.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, he continues, even the best bourgeois economists 'remain more or less trapped in the world of illusion their criticism had dissolved' of 'estranged [*entfremdeten*] and irrational forms'⁵⁹ in which the agents of capitalist production move every day. Thus, without a doubt, the theme of *commodity fetishism*, central to the thought of the most mature Marx, is inseparable from the idea of an *alienation* understood, from this point of view, both as a separation and a sclerosis of social forms in relation to their content, and more particularly as a reification of relations between people. In addition, and quite remarkably, this fetishised–reified–alienated form of social relations constantly tends, as in 1844, although the starting point is quite different, to evoke the *religious analogy*.

2. But there is much more. This ensemble of processes by which reified social forms become autonomised and sclerotised, whose essence becomes unrecognisable, is not only a movement of alienation in the sense of an externalisation (*Veräußerlichung*): these *externalised* forms become a *foreign power* (*fremde Macht*) which *in turn* dominates, enslaving individuals, and thus alienates them in another sense of the term. With the notion of social relations having become a foreign power, we are at the very heart of *Capital*. Moreover, here is the 'secret of originary [*ursprünglich*] accumulation': for capitalism to be established, it is necessary that a wage worker

has nothing but his personal strength, labour in the state of power, while all external conditions required to give substance to this power, and material and instruments necessary for the effective performance of labour, the power to dispose of substances indispensable to maintain the labour force and its conversion into productive motion, all this is on the other side. At the basis of the capitalist system is the complete separation of the producer from the means of production. This separation reproduces

58 Marx 1981, pp. 968–9.

59 Marx 1981, p. 969.

on a progressive scale what the capitalist system has once established; but like that form the basis of this, it cannot be established without it.⁶⁰

This type of analysis finds noteworthy expressions in the *Grundrisse*, for example this passage:

The fact that in the development of the productive powers of labour the objective conditions of labour, objectified labour, must grow relative to living labour – this is actually a tautological statement, for what else does the growing productive power of labour mean than that less immediate labour is required to create a greater product, and that therefore social wealth expresses itself more and more in the conditions of labour created by labour itself? – this fact appears from the standpoint of capital not in such a way that one of the moments of social activity – objective labour – becomes the ever more powerful body of the other moment, of subjective, living labour, but rather – and this is important for wage labour – that the objective conditions of labour assume an ever more colossal independence, represented by its very extent, opposite living labour, and that social wealth confronts labour in more powerful portions as an alien and dominant power [*als fremde und beherrschende Macht*]. The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being *objectified*, but on the state of being *alienated*, dispossessed, sold [*Entfremdet-, Entäussert-, Veräussertsein*]; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker [*das Nicht-dem-Arbeiter-gehören*], but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity – that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession [*Prozess der Entäusserrung*] from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital – to that extent, this twisting and inversion [*Verdrehung und Verkehrung*] is a *real* [phenomenon], not a merely *supposed one* existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists.⁶¹

60 Karl Marx, *Capital*, book 1, translated by Joseph Roy, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1950, Volume 3, pp. 154 and 155. Reviewed by Marx, this text differs significantly from the one in the fourth German edition, the basis of the edition of the book in a volume cited earlier.

61 Marx 1973, p. 831.

‘This universal objectification’, we read in another passage of the *Grundrisse*, ‘appears as total alienation [*als total Entfremdung*].’⁶²

These are crucial texts, we must surely agree, for those hoping to achieve an objective view of the problem of alienation in mature Marxism. For what is confirmed here is not only the undisputed and frequent presence of the vocabulary of alienation (*Entäußerung*, *Entfremdung*, etc.) in the Marx of *Capital*, which we could still deny or at least ignore here or there. But it is much more than a matter of vocabulary: far from referring solely to commodity fetishism and sclerotic social forms, it refers to the historical-social processes of despoliation *of people themselves*; that we are no longer dealing with a residual vocabulary still linked to the narrowly economic use of the term (the ‘alienation’ of a product, *Veräußerung*), but a conception of alienation as the profound essence of a crucial phase of history, that is, as the *life of human individuals*. And here again, it is easy to show that this does not appear only in the *Grundrisse*, but also in *Capital*, and what’s more, in the most basic chapters of *Capital*. Take, for example, at the culmination of Book I, the exposition of the general law of capitalist accumulation, original text in hand. We read

that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man [*einen Teilmenschen*], they degrade him to the level of an appendage [*Anhängsel*] of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment [*Qual*]; they alienate from him [*ihm entfremden*] the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power ...⁶³

62 Marx 1973, p. 488.

63 Marx 1976, p. 799. In 1973, I quoted this text in the Roy translation, where the key verb *entfremden ihm*, as I noted in a footnote, disappears under the banalising term ‘opposing them’. Today, I can no longer follow the excellent translation by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, who in turn avoids the concept of alienation by writing: ‘it deprives him by transferring to another the intellectual potentialities of the labour process’. Thus, an interpretative reading of Marx, clearly contradicted by the facts, according to which the concept of alienation was no longer registered by Marx at the time when he worked on *Capital*, gets the help of translations where its occurrences are more or less often erased. It is in opposition to this retraction that the present study was written, while at the time the Althusserian thesis that alienation ‘disappears’ in *Capital* was the law (cf. especially Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, Paris: François Maspero, 1965, p. 204; *Réponse à John Lewis*, Paris: François Maspero, 1973, p. 54). I added that to my knowledge no translation of a major passage just quoted is at the level of his exceptional *vehemence*.

Thus at the heart of the general law of capitalist accumulation, one of the summits of Marx's *scientific* work, we find the category of alienation (*Entfremdung*) which refers directly to the *life* of the worker, in his *despoliation as a human being* (*Teilmensch*). Similarly, in Book III, Marx wrote that the capitalist relation

actually does conceal the inner connection in the state of complete indifference, externality and alienation [*Äusserlichkeit und Entfremdung*] in which it places the worker vis-à-vis the conditions of realisation of his own labour.

And he adds that to the general system of social labour, the worker can only behave as to a 'power that is alien to him [*fremde Macht*]', 'something totally foreign [*etwas durchaus fremdes*]'.⁶⁴ Even in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI, he writes that what imprints on money and the commodity,

what stamps money or commodities as *capital* from the outset, even before they have been really transformed into *capital*, is neither their money nature nor their commodity nature, nor the material use value of these commodities as means of production of subsistence, but the circumstance that this money and this commodity, these means of production and these means of subsistence confront *labour-power*, stripped of all material wealth, as autonomous powers, personified in their owners. The objective conditions essential to the realization of labour are *alienated* from the worker and become manifest as *fetishes* endowed with a will and a soul of their own. *Commodities*, in short, appear as the purchasers of *persons*.⁶⁵

A 'Necessary Transition'

Thus the circle closes: reification, the becoming-a-thing of relations between people, creates a personification of these alienated things, because capital implies the capitalist, and the domination of people by reified foreign powers takes the form of the domination by one class of people, the capitalist class, over the workers, who are in turn converted into mere things. This is a *double alienation* that capitalism reproduces on an ever-increasing scale.

3. Let us go further still. Since scientific analysis itself establishes and reveals the nature of the processes of what we can rightly call *capitalist alienation*, can

64 Marx 1981, p. 178.

65 Marx 1976, p. 1003.

we not also expect an equally scientific answer to the question that remained unanswered in 1844, and was then put in these terms: 'How is this alienation based in the essence of human development?' Formulated and thought in terms of a speculative humanism, starting from a still abstract-philosophical, timeless human essence, how could this *historical* question find a *historical* answer? On the other hand, since the human essence is no longer understood as an abstraction inherent in each individual, albeit 'generic', but as the *ensemble of social relations*, thus as a purely historical and concrete reality, it is not hard to see why the (fundamental) question of 1844 would not admit of a 'transformed' scientific expression such as: what internal necessity (if it exists), in the vast process of human history, does the phase of capitalist alienation serve? Not only is this transformed question not rejected by Marx in his work of the 1850s and 1860s, but in addressing it he wrote some of the most profound pages one could hope to read, and which unfortunately do not seem to have been appreciated for their immense value.

First let us mention some remarkable texts of the *Grundrisse*. At the end of his long analysis of pre-capitalist forms, Marx rises to a broader view:

It will be shown later that the *most extreme form of alienation* [*die Form der äusserste Entfremdung*], wherein labour appears in the relation of capital and wage labour, and labour, productive activity appears in relation to its own conditions and its own product, is a necessary point of transition – and therefore already contains in *itself*, in a still only inverted form, turned on its head, the dissolution of all *limited presuppositions of production*, and moreover creates and produces the unconditional presuppositions of production, and therewith the full material conditions for the total, universal development of the productive forces of the individual.⁶⁶

After the passage quoted above on the inversion and reversal of objectification in alienation in capitalist relations, Marx adds:

But obviously this process of inversion is a merely *historical* necessity, a necessity for the development of the forces of production solely from a specific historic point of departure, or basis, but in no way an *absolute* necessity of production; rather, a vanishing one, and the result and the inherent purpose of this process is to suspend this basis itself, together with this form of the process. The bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic

66 Marx 1973, p. 514.

stage of social development that the necessity of the *objectification* [*Vergegenständlichung*] of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their *alienation* [*Entfremdung*] vis-à-vis living labour. But with the suspension [*Aufhebung*] of the *immediate* character of living labour, as merely *individual* [*einzelner*], or as general merely internally or merely externally, with the positing of the activity of individuals as immediately general or *social* activity, the objective moments of production are stripped of this form of alienation [*Entfremdung*]; they are thereby posited as property, as the organic social body within which the individuals reproduce themselves as individuals, but as social individuals. The conditions which allow them to exist in this way in the reproduction of their life, in their productive life's process, have been posited only by the historic economic process itself; both the objective and the subjective conditions, which are only the two distinct forms of the same conditions.⁶⁷

Still elsewhere we find these synthetic views on the place and role of capitalist alienation in the historical process as a whole:

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third.⁶⁸

Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal relations, are hence also subordinated to their communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible presupposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation [*Entfremdung*] of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness,

67 Marx 1973, pp. 831–2.

68 Marx 1973, p. 158.

or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill.⁶⁹

These texts, which still appear new and deeply suggestive, contain a clear answer to the question posed earlier, an answer we can summarise as follows: in the early stages of historical development, individuals and social relations still form a concrete unity on the basis of natural conditions which have been only slightly transformed, so that the narrowness of the development of individuals and the narrowness of their relations are mutually reinforcing, maintaining in the history of humanity certain traits of natural history, notably slowness, but not prohibiting to individuals a certain plenitude within the strict natural and social limits. However, the development of trade, and therefore of commodity production, gradually causes the direct relationship to break up by introducing, in the form of money, an element of abstract universality that dissolves the concrete relations, and whose reproduction, on an increasing scale in capitalism, becomes an end in itself. This universality plays a doubly revolutionary historic role: first, it separates from individuals the conditions of their production and development, their social relations, transforming them into an increasingly colossal foreign power that crushes them, but on the other hand, it drives the unlimited development of productive forces, of relations and of all forms of social wealth, and through the complete alienation of the mass of individuals, it creates in the proletariat a universal form of individuality.

This inherently antagonistic phase of history is reproduced on an ever larger scale to the point where the anachronism of the two sides of alienation bursts: the private appropriation of reified social wealth on the one hand, the total dispossession of individuals on the other – and where therefore the necessity has matured on a *social*, no longer natural, basis, for the re-unification of the separated elements that have only been able to develop freely in their separation.

69 Marx 1973, p. 162. In the 1973 version of this study, all quotes from the *Grundrisse* were retranslated by me from the original text, and I had to point out repeatedly in notes that the translation available, by Roger Dangeville, published in *Anthropos* in 1967–8, was ‘full of nonsense’. [note by LS.]

Alienation and the Movement of History as a Whole

How could we not see it? What appears as the deepest and most general dialectic of the historical development of humanity is an *immense movement of the negation of the negation*, where the still embryonic natural unity must be *temporarily dissolved* for each of its elements to go through a universal development,⁷⁰ a development which in turn creates the necessary conditions for the *return to the unity on a higher plane*. It is not at all by accident that Marx, in the conclusion to Book I of *Capital*, expressly refers to the dialectical category of the negation of the negation, not of course in the Hegelian sense of a return to a speculative unity in the Idea, but in the entirely materialist sense of the suppression of social antagonisms in history. This category grasps the most general sense of the necessary movement, which, through the phase of capitalist alienation, leads to the expropriation of the expropriators, to communism.⁷¹ And once again, we see that the analyses of alienation and de-alienation are found not only in the *Grundrisse*, but in *Capital* itself.⁷² In Book IV, there are many developments that repeat exactly the analyses we have just discussed. For example:

The original unity between the worker and the conditions of labour //abstracting from slavery, where the labourer himself belongs to the objective conditions of labour// has two main forms: the Asiatic communal system (primitive communism) and small-scale agriculture based on the family (and linked with domestic industry) IN ONE OR THE OTHER FORM. Both are embryonic forms and both are equally unfitted to develop labour as social labour and the productive power of social labour. Hence the necessity for the separation, for the rupture, for the antithesis of labour and property (by which property in the conditions of production is to be understood). The most extreme form of this rupture, and the one in which the PRODUCTIVE FORCES OF SOCIAL LABOUR

70 That capitalism as a whole has thus responded to a need for historical development and even ripening conditions for the transition to socialism does not mean, naturally, that *now* a non-capitalist path of development could advantageously fill the same role for poorly-developed countries.

71 Marx 1976, p. 929.

72 The fact that in Book I of *Capital*, and even more so in the *Contribution* of 1859, due to the strict boundaries of his scientific object, Marx prohibits much more than in his drafts addressing tangentially issues of a more general nature has undoubtedly contributed – wrongly – to our failure to recognise many dimensions of the thought of the most mature Marx. All the more reason to restore them, beginning with a comprehensive, and not arbitrarily selective, consideration of the texts.

ARE also MOST POWERFULLY DEVELOPED, is capital. The original unity can be re-established only on the material foundation which capital creates and by means of the revolutions which, in the process of this creation, the working class and THE WHOLE SOCIETY UNDERGO.⁷³

Elsewhere, defending Ricardo, partisan of production for production, against the sentimental critiques of Sismondi, for whom production must be subordinated to the good of the individual, Marx demonstrates that the historical justification of capitalism is precisely this universal development of productive forces taken as an end in itself, and that what economists such as Sismondi did not understand is that:

although at first the development of the capacities of the human species [*der Gattung Mensch*] takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed...⁷⁴

This text clearly shows also that the overall conception of historical development at which Marx arrived in *Capital* includes a concept of alienation not only as a necessary moment in the immense process of the negation of the negation, but also as the fundamental unity of social *and individual aspects* of this process; the first constitutes the real basis of the second. No error would be more impoverishing, and more contrary to Marx's visible efforts, than to separate and oppose the dialectic of forces and relations of production, considered as the legitimate scientific object, and the dialectic of individual life, rejected as a philosophico-humanist chimera. Marx's entire analysis opposes this discriminatory reading, and is in line with the affirmation, given in a letter to Annenkov of December 1846, of the quintessence of the theses of *The German Ideology*: 'the social history of man is never anything else than the history of his individual development...';⁷⁵ an affirmation which Engels echoed forty years later in his *Ludwig Feuerbach* by writing that for 'The cult of abstract man, which formed the kernel of Feuerbach's new religion', historical materialism substituted 'the science of real men and of their historical development'.⁷⁶

73 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 33, p. 340.

74 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 31, p. 348.

75 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 38, p. 96.

76 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 381.

All this is fully coherent in light of the sixth thesis on Feuerbach: if the reality of the human essence is constituted by the ensemble of social relations, alienation can be a reality only as a process that affects social relations, but precisely for this reason it also affects the objective conditions of production and reproduction of individuals, of the historico-social forms of individuality that determine the basis of their existence. And that is why *Capital* finds, on a strictly scientific basis, whenever the analysis is raised to a general point of view, the problematic of alienation in the lives of individuals inextricably linked with that of the contradictions between the forces and relations of production.

Looking Back on Religious Alienation

4. This is also why the reference to religion remains *constant* in the economic works of maturity, demonstrating that the problematic of alienation has not been lost from sight. Of course, this is first of all the analysis of the inherent fetishism of commodity production, the analysis of the reification of the relationship between persons that finds its basis in the analysis of religion, and above all in the famous pages of the first chapter of Book I of *Capital*:

For a society of commodity producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material [*sachlich*] form bring their individual, private labour into relation with each other as homogenous human labour, Christianity, with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly, in its bourgeois development, i.e. in Protestantism, Deism etc., is the most fitting form of religion. [...] The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Marx 1976, pp. 172–3. I retain here, for once, the Roy translation, in order to keep some formulations presumably due to corrections added by Marx. [Note by L.S.]

This is a theme frequently repeated throughout *Capital*, even by brief allusions, but nevertheless far from lacking in interest, such as the following:

Thus the nature of surplus value, the essence of capital and the character of capitalist production are not only completely obliterated in these two forms of surplus value, they are turned into their opposites. But even in so far as the character and form of capital are complete [it is] nonsensical [if] presented without any intermediate links and expressed as the subjectification of objects, the objectification of subjects, as the reversal of cause and effect, the religious quid pro quo, the pure form of capital expressed in the formula $M-M'$. The ossification of relations, their presentation as the relation of men to things having a definite social character is here likewise brought out in quite a different manner from that of the simple mystification of commodities and the more complicated mystification of money. The transubstantiation, the fetishism, is complete.⁷⁸

Elsewhere are explicit analogies like this:

Whereas the classical, and consequently the critical, economists are exercised by the form of alienation [*Entfremdung*] and seek to eliminate it by analysis, the vulgar economists, on the other hand, feel completely at home precisely with the alienated form in which the different parts of value confront one another; just as a scholastic is familiar with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, so are the vulgar economists with land–rent, capital–interest, and labour–wages.⁷⁹

But, most noteworthy, and already perceptible in the texts we have just read, the analysis or religious analogy is not only addressed by commodity fetishism, but by *all* aspects of the analysis of alienation, which were surveyed above, including those concerning alienation of individuals and the vast movement of the negation of the negation in the history of humanity. In other words, religion was in no way conceived by Marx, when he wrote *Capital*, as a simple effect of the structure of commodity fetishism – the objective opacification of social relations – but at the same time as the ideological reflection of the historical movement of alienation that stands before individuals with the products of their social activity in the form of dominating foreign powers. Again,

78 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 494.

79 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 502.

many texts could be cited, among which we will mention only two. Analysing once more in the *Grundrisse* the historical tendency of capitalism, Marx writes:

The barrier to *capital* [*Schranke*] is that this entire development proceeds in a contradictory [*gegensätzlich*] way, and that the working-out of the productive forces, of general wealth etc., knowledge etc., appears in such a way that the working individual *alienates* himself [*sich selbst entäusert*]; relates to the conditions brought out of him by his labour as those not of his *own* but of an *alien wealth* and of his own poverty. But this antithetical form is itself fleeting, and produces the real conditions of its own suspension [*Aufhebung*]. The result is: the tendentially and potentially general development of the forces of production – of wealth as such – as a basis; likewise, the universality of intercourse, hence the world market as a basis. The basis as the possibility of the universal development of the individual, and the real development of the individuals from this basis as a constant suspension of its *barrier*, which is recognised as a barrier, not taken for a *sacred limit*. Not an ideal or imagined universality of the individual, but the universality of his real and ideal relations. Hence also the grasping of his own history as a *process*, and the recognition of nature (equally present as practical power over nature) as his real body. The process of development itself posited and known as the presupposition of the same.⁸⁰

In this text, a remarkable development of the eighth thesis on Feuerbach ('All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory toward mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.'),⁸¹ we see quite clearly that for Marx the basis of religion does not at all boil down to commodity fetishism, but is identified with all the barriers which individuals confront in their relations with each other and with nature. Capitalist alienation ossifies, so that only the collective conquest by individuals of control over these natural and social relations will transcend these 'sacred boundaries'.

In a passage in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI of *Capital*, Marx develops the analysis of religion even further in relation to the movement of the negation of the negation that affects humanity's historical development:

80 Marx 1973, pp. 541–2.

81 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 5.

Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living labour, of the product over the producer. For the commodities that become the instruments of rule over the workers (merely as the instruments of the rule of *capital* itself) are mere consequences of the process of production; they are its products. Thus at the level of material, of the life-process in the realm of the social – for that is what the process of production is – we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*. Viewed *historically* this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone can form the material base of a free human society, could not possibly be created by force at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid the stage in which his spiritual energies are given a religious definition as powers independent of himself. What we are confronted with here is the *alienation* [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour.⁸²

What Marx boldly suggests here is not only the idea of the historically transitory necessity of religion, logically linked to that of the historically transitory necessity of economic alienation, but still more the idea that religion has played in part a positive ideological role in developing the autonomy of human spiritual forces. It has pushed us to conceive these forces, in an inverted and mystified form, in their objective universality. It is an extremely fruitful view – also in line with the first thesis on Feuerbach, and with his remark on the partially positive role of philosophical idealism – which helps to counter the naively unilateral understanding of the opposition between materialism and religion seen through three centuries of bourgeois thought.

It is certainly not a question of minimising the great importance of the major achievements of materialistic thought, such as Darwinism, or to forget the struggles against stupidity it has led. But it is possible to think, from the point of view of historical materialism, that in the exceptionally tenacious reluctance of religious thought to accept biologism or psychologism, i.e. bourgeois materialism as a satisfactory conception of humanity, all was not unreasonable, in that the affirmation of a *transcendent human essence* reflected, in mystifying form, the *social exteriority* of the real human essence in relation to individuals, first identified in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach. The alienated reflection of real alienation, and precisely for this reason historically

82 Marx 1976, p. 990.

inevitable – this is ultimately the conception of religion that Marx proposes in his maturity, on the basis of his conceptions of economics.

A Central Category for Thinking History

What conclusions have we arrived at?

1. Contrary to a widespread assertion, the vocabulary of alienation is massively present in the mature works of Marx, not marginally, but in a central position. We need merely count the hundreds of occurrences of the most characteristic terms: *entäussert*, *Entäusserung*; *entfremdet*, *Entfremdung*. As for the specific meaning of each of the terms that make up the vocabulary of alienation, I believe it is possible to propose, with caution because it has to do with the most complex of questions, the following general hypothesis. The words of the lexical family *ausser* ('outside'), characterised by this basic meaning, are most often used by Marx to designate the simple divestiture of a good by the act of sale (as a general rule: *Veräusserung*) or to note the most fundamental process of *becoming external*, as a process separating, even opposing, *things*, or relations and forms as they take on the appearance of things. This is one aspect of the mature conception of alienation: with the vocabulary of *Entäusserung*, we are essentially on the terrain of reification, the autonomisation and sclerosis of forms in relation to their essence, of fetishism. It is typical in this regard that in the *Contribution* where there is still no question of the movement of goods and money, we find only the vocabulary of *Ver-* and *Entäusserung*.

The words of the lexical family *fremd* ('foreign'), marked also by this basic meaning, or by the presence in the immediate context of the word *fremd* itself (for example in the constant expression *fremde Arbeit*, 'work of others') introduce another dimension of alienation: that of the relationship between *persons*, social individuals, that covers also the relations between *classes*. With the vocabulary of *Entfremdung* we are on the terrain of divestiture, disenfranchisement, the enslavement of people by the products of their activity that has become a foreign power, and taken the form of the domination of an exploiting class. We capture alive the link, both semantic and theoretical, between *fremd* and *Entfremdung*, which characterises the process of alienation as it affects people, in typical sentences such as this:

[...] objectified [*objektivierte*] labour, become independent as value appeared on all sides as the *product of alien labour* [*Produkt fremder Arbeit*], the *alienated product* [*das Produkt entfremdete*] of labour itself.⁸³

83 Marx 1973, p. 638.

or even in formulae that acquire the value of definitions, as in this passage from Book IV of *Capital* where capital is posited ‘as forces – personified in the capitalist – which are alienated from labour [*der Arbeit entfremdete*] and dominate it’.⁸⁴

Certainly, the vocabulary of alienation in Marx is neither very rigorous nor always clear. Its variability may simply be an index of a desire for varying frequently repeated terminology. But for those who know the texts, there is no possible doubt about the general tendency: alienation, in the mature Marx, is both the reifying externalisation of *Entäusserung*, and the personifying externalisation of *Entfremdung*. What is more, while the dominant term in Hegel is *Entäusserung*,⁸⁵ in Marx *Entfremdung* becomes the main term, by its frequency, and its scope, to the point that, when we note an exception to the respective use of the two terms that we need to explain, it is most often in favour of *Entfremdung*. For example in the following case when it comes to the mystifying trinity, ground-rent, interest-capital, wage-labour:

precisely in the estranged form of appearance [*entfremdete Erscheinungsform*] of economic relations ... vulgar economics feels completely at home.⁸⁶

We expect rather *entäußerte* here, but this seems to be the same idea, expressed two pages earlier, of the personification of the alienated products of labour. Is not this displacement of vocabulary from Hegel to Marx a reflection of the transition from an idealist concept of alienation as autonomisation of moments of the Idea, to a materialist conception of alienation as antagonism in history between *persons*, and through them between *classes*? In any case, we see how distorted is the belief that the idea of alienated labour in the 1844 *Manuscripts* becomes only commodity fetishism in *Capital*.

In truth, the reification of relations between people is inseparable from the personification of the relations between things, and fetishism is only one aspect of the multifaceted process of alienation. That is why also the diversity of German vocabulary encountered, that defies exact French [or indeed English – cs] translation, does not prevent us from speaking about *a* category of alienation in mature Marxism, as long as this single word is not taken in a narrow and abstract way. At its core, alienation is the transitory historical

84 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 406.

85 As already noted by Jean Hyppolite; cf. his translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1941, p. 316).

86 Marx 1981, p. 956.

movement by which the objective products of human social activity attain universal development at the price of a split (*Ent-äusserung, Ent-fremdung, Ent-leerung*, etc.) from the individuals who are the source, a split that confers on these social products, conditions, relations, etc., the character not only of unrecognisable things, but even more, of dominant and overwhelming powers. The theoretical elaboration of this category of alienation on a proven historical basis is one of the central achievements of the mature Marx.

2. Between the conception of alienation that we find in the 1844 *Manuscripts* and that in *Capital*, there is both continuity and rupture. The continuity is obvious, and it is hardly necessary to dwell upon it. It manifests itself even on points where the schema of 1844 was undoubtedly equivocal, if not confusing. Thus, in 1844, Marx frequently relates the analysis of this or that aspect of alienation to *man*, so both to the capitalist and the worker. He even remarks that, 'everything which appears in the worker as an activity of alienation, of estrangement, appears in the non-worker as a state of alienation, of estrangement'.⁸⁷ It is an undeniable truth that the illusions inherent in commodity fetishism tend to mystify all classes. But how can we not see the danger of sliding toward an anthropological idealism, if not an ethical socialism 'above classes'? This is what Engels indicates in a self-critical way in his preface to the 1892 German edition of his 1845 book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

Thus great stress is laid on the dictum that Communism is not a mere party doctrine of the working class, but a theory compassing the emancipation of society at large, including the capitalist class, from its present narrow conditions. This is true enough in the abstract, but absolutely useless, and sometimes worse, in practice. [...] And to-day, the very people who, from the 'impartiality' of their superior standpoint, preach to the workers a Socialism soaring high above their class interests and class struggles, and tending to reconcile in a higher humanity the interests of both the contending classes – these people are either neophytes, who have still to learn a great deal, or they are the worst enemies of the workers – wolves in sheep's clothing.⁸⁸

While Marx had already expressed this idea with Engels in the *Manifesto*, the fact remains that in the 'unpublished' Chapter VI of Book I of *Capital*, Marx develops the 1844 analysis further:

87 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 282.

88 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 27, pp. 261–2. (This is actually from the 1892 Preface.)

What we are confronted by here is the *Alienation* [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour. To that extent the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist from the outset, since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it whereas right from the start the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as a process of enslavement.⁸⁹

And further, he speaks of the self-valorisation of capital in which

the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in quite a different manner.⁹⁰

But if there is continuity in the concern, thematic and terminological, there is much more discontinuity in the deep theoretical content of the two concepts of alienation. At the time of the *1844 Manuscripts*, alienation signified a rejection of the limits of political economy; at the time of *Capital*, it is based entirely on economic analysis. In the first case, it was presented as an explication of class antagonism and the dialectic of history; in the second it is class antagonism and the dialectic of history fully realised. In the first case, it was fundamentally a process of the generic activity of individuals externalising themselves in social relations; in the second, it is a process of social relations extending to the interior of the life of individuals. In short, in 1844, the individual psychological form of alienation was taken as the general matrix of all its historico-social forms; at the time of *Capital*, it is the historical and social forms that allow us to understand, if we pursue the analysis onto this terrain, individual psychological forms.

In other words, between these two periods of Marx's thought there has been a fundamental *reversal*, the same as pronounced by the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, between a human essence still represented as belonging to individuality ('generic activity'), thus anthropological in the abstract sense ('man'), and a 'human essence' whose entire reality is constituted by social relations, which is studied, therefore, in terms of historical science. In this second point of view, to speak of alienation is not to say that 'man' has lost 'his' 'essence' – as others would say he lost 'his' 'soul' – but that people have lost their immediate relationship with the objective conditions of their activity and their individual development, *thus* creating their alienation within their individual existence.

89 Marx 1976, p. 990.

90 Marx 1976, p. 990.

Therefore, many assertions and analyses of 1844 *preserve their meaning* in this new perspective, but it is in a *transformed sense*, that we can grasp correctly (without relapsing into speculative mystifications) *only* by the detour of economic and more broadly, historical science. The anthropological scope of mature Marxism is no less than in 1844, but it is now based entirely on historical materialism.

The Great Meaning of the Idea of Alienation in Marx

This is why any underestimation of the rupture that intervened between 1844 and the time of *Capital*, any tendency to ‘economise’ the detour it establishes, leads us back to before Marxism. This is typically the approach initiated by Garaudy in the early sixties, and very significantly, initiated *on this point*.⁹¹ To imagine that when Marx brilliantly develops, in the *1844 Manuscripts*, the idea that the more wealth the worker creates, the more he is impoverished, ‘the first formulations of the law of absolute impoverishment derived from his analysis of alienation’ (when on the contrary, Marx expressly posited this impoverishment as a fact from which we should *begin*),⁹² to imagine that the law of impoverishment in *Capital* ‘is the expression of the Marxist conception of man, of his humanism’,⁹³ is to undo the decisive reversal of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, to subordinate the new scientific analyses to philosophical abstraction, therefore to the class point of view of an abstract man through which bourgeois ideology rushes back in. A valuable lesson for Marxists.

But this lesson has nothing to do with the rejection of the category of alienation, a rejection that would require great liberties taken with the text, and therefore, an unacceptable distortion of Marxism. And above all, a deformation of the very way Marx and Engels, in 1845–6, critiqued their ‘earlier philosophical consciousness’,⁹⁴ according to Engels’s formula in the foreword to his *Ludwig Feuerbach*. I mentioned earlier the harsh judgments in *The German Ideology* and the *Manifesto* regarding theoretical and political mystification that accompanies the speculative notion of alienation. These judgments remain, and they forbid us from confusing the *1844 Manuscripts* with the

91 Cf. his article in the January 1961 issue of *Cahiers du Communisme* devoted to research on poverty.

92 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, pp. 271–2.

93 Garaudy 1961, p. 13.

94 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 26, p. 519.

theses of mature Marxism. But what exactly do they propose? Let us re-read *The German Ideology*:

[...] the division of labour offers us the first example of the fact that, as long as man remains in naturally evolved society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him [*ihm zu einer fremden gegenüberstehenden Macht*], which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. [...] This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into a material power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now. [...] This 'estrangement [*Entfremdung*]' (to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers) can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises...⁹⁵

What does this say? That alienation is a false concept that we have to discard? Completely to the contrary, it shows that it concerns 'a central moment of historical development to this day'. What is in question here is not the *practical historical reality* of alienation, but the opposite – the obscuring of this reality in a philosophico-speculative category of alienation that returns us to 'self-consciousness' and other idealistic nonsense. *Thus, at this crucial point of the formation of Marxism, we are witnessing, not the rejection of the rational kernel of alienation, but the completion of its materialist reversal.* This is not an 'interpretation': it appears much later in *The German Ideology* in a passage (apparently little noticed) that states it positively:

[...] We see already here that his [Max Stirner's] only concern is to present all actual relations, [and also] actual individuals, [as alienated] (to retain this philosophical [expression] for the time being), to [transform] them into the wholly [abstract] phrase of alienation. Thus [instead] of the task of describing [actual] individuals in their [actual] alienation and in the empirical relations of this alienation, [purely empirical] relations, the same happens here – the setting forth is replaced by the [mere idea] of alienation, of [the Alien], of the Holy.⁹⁶

95 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, pp. 47–8.

96 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 282.

To progress from the idealist philosophical language of alienation to the concrete historical study of real alienation and its empirical conditions: this is the path that *The German Ideology* sets out unambiguously. And it is precisely on this path that the *Manifesto* advances: Marx and Engels unceremoniously unmask the bourgeois basis of the 'socialist' language of alienation, but at the same time they write:

In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.

In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.

And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at.⁹⁷

This is precisely the outline of all the analyses of capitalist alienation developed in the economic works of the 1850s and 1860s.

What is this notion of alienation found at the centre of mature Marxism? It is not an economic concept – although it functions on the terrain of economic analysis –, or a concept of social psychology – although it directly concerns the forms of individuality –, nor even a concept of historical science – although it refers to a fundamental historical process. More generally, it is not a concept pertaining to a science or even several sciences –, which is not to say it lacks scientific consistency. It is a concept that grasps the *profound unity* of the most diverse processes operating on the terrain of the most varied human sciences. It is a *fundamental category of historical materialism*, that is, of the most general theoretical basis of the sciences whose object is constituted by one or another aspect of human activity and its historical development. In other words, it is a *philosophical category*, in the fundamentally new sense that mature Marxism has conferred on philosophy.

What does this mean? First, that without being a scientific concept in the sense that it indicates adherence to the conceptual apparatus of a particular science (alienation is not a concept of the same *nature* as exchange value, surplus value or rate of profit), it is a concept of *scientific consistency*, based solely

97 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 499.

on scientific evidence and returning there. But it is a concept of another *order of generality*, more advanced than that where one or another particular science is established on the terrain that alienation reflects. This extreme generality corresponds to an abstraction that is itself extreme: alienation is ultimately nothing but the *most general form of human history* and of the development of individuals in the epoch of commodity production and, specifically, of capitalism. It is a *fundamental figure of the dialectic*: the development of the antagonistic contradiction through the negation of the negation, as manifested *in history*; it is the *antagonistic form* temporarily taken by the constant cyclical process of objectification – subjective re-appropriation, that forms the basis of all human activity. This *philosophical generality*, in the sense that philosophy includes the *theoretical basis* of the scientific conception of the natural and social world, presupposes, in order to be understood, the concrete scientific knowledge that constitutes its real content. Hence the profound mistake of trying to make it work as a directly scientific concept, for example, economic: this is the confusion that still taints the *1844 Manuscripts*.

On the Way Towards De-alienation

But if the philosophical, historical-materialist category of alienation is not functioning, as such, on the terrain of any one particular science, it is, however, primarily on the terrain of the synthesis of the theoretical teachings of these sciences. As a philosophical category, it is inadequate to respond concretely to concrete economic, psycho-social or historical questions, just as the philosophical category of ‘matter’ is inadequate to respond concretely to concrete problems of physics or chemistry. But it is fully relevant and operative in relation to philosophical questions, questions of the general theory of historical materialism, such as this: is there an objective *unity* of all aspects of capitalist society and if so, how to think it? What overall historical *necessity* does capitalism meet? Does the thesis that socialism is a higher phase of human history have *scientific coherence*?

Because it is operative in relation to such questions, the category of alienation, like any philosophical category, has not only an ontological significance, but also, and inseparably, one that is gnoseological.⁹⁸ One cannot go without

98 TN: In his *Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, Sève maintains that the distinction between gnoseology and epistemology has particular meaning for a Marxist. He defines gnoseology as ‘the historical study and critique of the overall movement of thought as reflection of matter, or of matter as reflected by thought’ (Sève 1980, p. 680).

the other for a materialist. That is, it grasps the essence of its object – the historical development of people – and thereby provides *strategic guidance for the knowledge of this object*. Reciprocally, as strategic guidance for knowledge, it helps us to understand *critically* what it tells us about the essence of its object. Considered in terms of gnoseology, the category of alienation means that the error of errors, for those studying human activity and its historical development from whatever angle, would be to consider *structures and individuals* separately, as things without an intimate relationship. This separation leads this study to decompose into an antihumanist structuralism and extra-scientific personalism, without seeing the unity of processes behind the exteriority of moments. Alienation means that behind all aspects of the most diverse reality we must re-grasp the transiently necessary opposition between dead and living labour, and therefore also the class antagonism that is its basis; it means that the most demanding scientific approach not only grants, but assigns meaning to the idea of the necessary transition to a *higher* historical stage, emancipated from the antagonistic limits of the previous stage.

Thus we see how the unfounded identification of the idea of alienation with the still partly speculative views of 1844, and then, its rejection in the name of science, is an extraordinary impoverishment and uncontestable distortion of Marxism. To arbitrarily subtract from Marxism the great conception of the necessary movement of alienation and de-alienation, is to diminish the importance of historical materialism for all human sciences, to render suspect the very notion of a meaning of history and to make it impossible to understand class struggle as well as the historical role of the proletariat, which is universally emancipatory because it bears within itself, in its radical alienation, the ‘dissolution of all classes’.⁹⁹ The category of alienation forbids us from abandoning Marxism in a speculative humanism or letting it slide into a sociological positivism. Mature Marxism is neither of these things.

3. All this finally allows us to respond to the question posed at the beginning: if the famous formulae by which the young Marx expressed his conception of religion can rightly be taken as still valid in light of mature Marxism, it is simply that the idea of alienation that is its basis did not at all disappear without a trace, but rather survived through its materialist reversal. In mature Marxism, religion is understood in direct relation to the analyses of alienation discussed above. If in doubt, we re-read the famous pages of *Anti-Dühring* in

99 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 5, p. 52. See also Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 6, p. 495. Recall that *Anti-Dühring* was written by Engels in 1877–8, nearly thirty-five or so years after the famous formulations of the young Marx on religion.

which Engels theoretically annihilates Dühring's idea that socialism implies the prohibition of religion:

All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces [*äussern Mächte*] which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.¹⁰⁰

These powers, Engels continues, are at first those of nature, and then are added social powers that are 'equally foreign [*ebenso fremd*]', especially in capitalism.

It is still true that man proposes and God (that is, the alien domination [*die Fremdherrschaft*] of the capitalist mode of production) disposes. Mere knowledge, even if it went much further and deeper than that of bourgeois economic science, is not enough to bring social forces under the domination of society. What is above all necessary for this, is a social act. And when this act has been accomplished, when society, by taking possession of all means of production and using them on a planned basis, has freed itself and all its members from the bondage in which they are now held by these means of production which they themselves have produced but which confront them as an irresistible alien force [*Macht als überwaltige fremde*]; when therefore man no longer merely proposes, but also disposes – only then will the last alien force which is still reflected in religion vanish; and with it will also vanish the religious reflection itself, for the simple reason that then there will be nothing left to reflect.¹⁰¹

There is no need for exceptional insight to recognise here, certainly condensed, the whole theme and even part of the vocabulary of alienation, and especially its nodal point: the metamorphosis of the products of people's activity into foreign powers that dominate them. And it is still the same theme we find in Lenin at the centre of a text such as 'On the attitude of the workers' party with regard to religion'. That is why Marx's formulae of 1843–4 can still be offered in 1909 by Lenin as cornerstones of the Marxist conception of religion.

And they have not lost their fertility today. For example with regard to the so-called 'crisis of the priests', the questioning by a number of them of their

100 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 25, p. 300.

101 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 25, pp. 301–2.

status as priests.¹⁰² Regarding a problem like this, is not the analysis of religion in terms of alienation profoundly illuminating? In the *1844 Manuscripts* we find this indication:

Every self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*] of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc., since we are here dealing with the intellectual world.¹⁰³

Twenty years later, the mode of thought and expression has changed, but the idea remains, and Marx takes it up in Book IV of *Capital*:

If man attributes an independent existence, clothed in a religious form, to his relationship to his own nature, to external nature and to other men so that he is dominated by these notions, then he requires priests and their labour. With the disappearance of *the religious form* of consciousness and of these relationships, the labour of the *priests* will likewise cease to enter into the social process of production. The labour of priests will end with the existence of the priests themselves and, in the same way, the labour which the capitalist performs qua capitalist, or causes to be performed by someone else, will end together with the existence of the capitalists.¹⁰⁴

If we bear in mind this analysis, that of the personification of the alienation relation, both as a symptom and as a repetition of this relation, is not the current refusal of many priests to be ‘men apart’ a significant indication of the process of the decline of religious alienation as such, that is, the dissolution of its bases, i.e. of the maturity of the objective conditions of the transition to socialism in a country like ours?

Translated by Carl Shames (2013)

102 This ‘crisis of the priests’ defrayed the crisis when I pronounced on this discourse in 1973. [Note of 2012.]

103 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 3, p. 279.

104 Marx and Engels 1975–2004, MECW 32, p. 496.

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