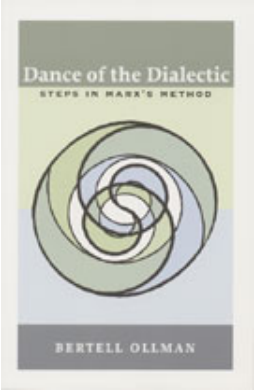
Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

General Introduction

By Bertell Ollman

'Marxism' is essentially Marx's interpretation of capitalism, the unfinished results of his study into how our society works, how it developed, and where it is tending. Men in their relations with each other, their products and activities are the primary subject matter of this study. It is men who fight on both sides of the class struggle, men who sell their labor-power, men who buy it, and so on. Though Marx generally organizes his findings around such non-human factors as the mode of production, class and value, his theory of alienation places the acting and acted upon individual in the center of this account. In this theory, man himself is offered as the vantage point from which to view his own relations, actual and potential, to society and nature; his conditions become an extension of who he is and what he does, rather than the reverse. To expound the analysis of capitalism made from this vantage point, an analysis that remains little known despite the current preoccupation with the term 'alienation,' is the task of this book.

Marx's individual, however, is himself a product of theory. Marx has a conception of how men appear, what they feel and think, what motives influence them and how much, and—on another plane—what they are capable of, both in existing and in new conditions. Without these qualities, they could not or would not respond to events in the manner Marx posits. For even if we accept that material conditions are as he describes them, there is no need for people to react as Marx says they do and will unless they bring to their situation such qualities as make other action impossible or extremely unlikely. Consequently, any account of alienation as an explanatory social theory focusing on the individual must begin by

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

clarifying what is distinctive in Marx's conception of human nature.

Marx seems to have been aware of the significance of other writers' views on man and, to some extent, of man's status in their broader theories, but he was only partially and intermittently aware of his own. He notes, for example, that 'our philosophic consciousness is so arranged that only the image of man that it conceives appears to it as the real man,' but this barb of wisdom is never pointed inward.[1] The 'True Socialists' are condemned because they take the 'German petty philistine' as the typical man, and see his qualities in everybody.[2] Bentham is accused of doing the same thing with his ideal, the English shopkeeper.[3]

However, Marx's chief objection to these writers' views is that they are unhistorical, that they fail to take account of the transformations in human character that follow changes in social conditions. Taking the individual simply for what he appears, as something given, of the same order as the earth and the sky rather than as a product of his time, is declared by Marx to be an illusion characteristic of each epoch in history.[4] For him, variations in human nature are also produced by the diverse conditions of life found inside the same society. For example, the contrasting qualities of capitalists and workers are said to be due to differences in the circumstances in which each class lives. Obviously, a conception of human nature which does not take these factors into account is faulty at its inception, but to take them into account, as Marx does, is not the same as being without a conception of human nature. It merely complicates this conception with the addition of these new factors.

Marx's own conception of human nature was most fully, if not carefully, worked out in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and in *The German Ideology* (1846). Yet, the form of presentation makes coming to grips with this conception an involved and cumbersome task. Relevant material on the subject of man can also be found throughout Marx's writings, but it is not nearly so concentrated as in these early works, neither of which was published. Two questions arise: why did Marx not present his conception of human nature in a more ordered fashion? And why did he not publish the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*? The latter question, which is also asked by critics who would like to dismiss these works as 'immature,' must be taken first.

To begin with, Marx did try to publish The *German Ideology*, and only failed because conditions in Germany did not allow it. He tells us in the aftermath that

neoliberal shift in labor relations

he did not mind abandoning this work 'to the gnawing criticism of the mice' because it had achieved its main purpose—self-clarification.[5] Marx always wrote to obtain specific ends, and, once the philosophies he attacked as pernicious in *The German Ideology* began to decline, the purpose—other than self-clarification—for which he wrote this early work became obsolete. Furthermore, Marx was constantly revising his exposition, and he must have soon realized that the form in which he first presented his positive views was unfathomable to the working class people he most wanted to understand them.[6]

Like *The German Ideology*, but even more so, the *1844 Manuscripts* is an exercise in self-clarification. In much less space it manages to cover much more ground. While *The German Ideology* is essentially an historical and philosophical work, one cannot classify the 1844 Manuscripts, despite the label that has been attached to it, in the same way. History, philosophy, economics, psychology, anthropology, ethics, religion and sociology crisscross each other in an amazingly complex pattern as Marx's intellect ranges across the whole terrain of what he knows. In this work, Marx provided himself with the brave outlines of a new system, but he was surely aware that this first statement of his views would convince no one and that few would even comprehend what he was saying.

In explaining why Marx did not publish *The German Ideology*, I have also accounted in part for why Marx did not present his conception of human nature in a more ordered fashion. Human nature was an important topic when he wanted to put his own house in order, but he hesitated to give it the same prominence when his purpose was to explain his views and to convince others. Proletarian class consciousness could be better affected by emphasizing environmental factors which are open to direct kinds of evidence and which can be developed in discussion. Whereas talk about human nature, as Marx recognized, is too often a means of putting an end to discussion.

Moreover, and this is probably as important, in the years immediately following 1844 Marx was engaged in a series of political and ideological disputes with a number of petty bourgeois and socialist thinkers whose favorite expressions were 'human nature,' 'humanity' and 'man in general.' In combating the 'True Socialists,' Stirner, Feuerbach, Krieg and others, Marx was driven to distinguish his own theories by the relative absence of terms which were their main stock in trade and to formulate the thoughts they contained in another manner.

Yet, despite the fact that anthropology and psychology cease to be major subjects, man continues, of necessity, to occupy a central position in Marx's theories. And the men who act and interact in Marx's later writings are no different from those who appear in his early works. The conception of human nature with which he began was hardly altered. Thus, while the framework and categories used in *Alienation* are barrowed for the most part from the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, their content, as my quotations will amply show, is not so limited.

Before trying to reconstruct Marx's conception of human nature, there are problems concerning his broader philosophy that make an author's peace with Marx's unusual terminology, a preliminary task which is too often shirked, to insure that no more or other is made of his expressions than he intends them to convey. The path from Marx's use of language leads directly to the view of reality which underlies it, and from here to the methods of inquiry and exposition that he felt this view required. These matters are dealt with in the opening Part. I would not devote much space to Marx's general philosophy in a work on alienation if this subject were treated adequately elsewhere. Unfortunately, I do not believe this is the case.

The organization of this book, therefore, is as follows: Part I deals with the philosophical foundations of Marxism, primarily with how Marx views all of reality; Part II deals with Marx's conception of human nature, or the ties Marx sees between man and nature, viewed in the above manner; and Part III with the theory of alienation, or what happens to these ties in capitalism, again viewed in the above manner. In erecting this pyramid of concerns, I have tried to keep necessary repetition, the presentation of familiar relations in new and more complex guises, to a minimum.

My treatment of Marxism also differs from that of most other writers in this field in being 'unhistorical' in three different senses: little attention is given to the development of Marx's ideas; not much time is spent on their genesis; and no attempt is made to set Marxism in the perspective of other ideas before and since. As for the first, I do not emphasize alterations in Marx's thinking because I do not see many there, especially when compared to the essential unity in Marxism from 1844 on. Consequently, to gain an understanding of these views, it is far more important to treat all Marx's writings as expressions of a single theoretical scheme than to give an undeserved emphasis to the relatively few and minor changes that

occur. The latter approach only enhances the difficulty of grasping the interrelations present.

Even the concession which is always made regarding the new terminology Marx adopted after 1844 is overdone. The 'Hegelian' and 'Feuerbachian' language of *1844 Manuscripts* is only partly replaced by another one better suited to presenting Marx's ideas and getting them accepted. As for the rest, Marx's specialization in the field of politics, history and economics did not require a terminology which had been used primarily in discussions of philosophy and anthropology. Even in his later works, however, whenever connections across disciplines had to be made, he frequently resorted to these 'older' terms; though, as we shall see, their meanings may have altered somewhat through the change of context.

The view which holds that Marx's ideas must be partitioned according to the period in which they appear, each period taken as a radical departure from what came before, requires evidence of a kind that has nowhere been offered. First, one must show that Marx was aware of such a break, that he actually and clearly refers to his earlier views as incorrect. Second, one must show that what Marx either approves or disapproves of in his first works is treated in a contrary manner later on. And third, one must show that a significant number of early concepts do not enter into later works at all.

Though we find numerous allusions to developments and minor changes in theories and ways of presenting them, neither Marx nor Engels ever points to a change of mind that qualifies for the term 'break.' On the contrary, it was Marx's habit to return to his earlier notebooks in drafting his later works. Engels informs us, for example, that in writing *Capital* Marx used his notebooks of 1843-5.[7] The *Grundrisse* (1858), which served as Marx's first draft for *Capital*, contains many pages which could have been lifted bodily from the *1844 Manuscripts*.[8] Even in the published version of *Capital*, there is much more of Marx's 'earlier' ideas and concepts than is generally recognized. The chapters on Marx's economic theories in the middle of Part III are my attempt to document this thesis.

But if Marx's theories cannot conveniently be separated into periods, how can the many small changes and developments which did occur be accounted for? Clearly, I do not wish to say that Marx's views were always the same, or that 'true' Marxism is only what appears in the *1844 Manuscripts*, or in *The Communist Manifesto*, or in *Capital*. Instead, my position is that there is an evolution in Marx's

thinking which is already present in the logic of his earliest commitments and knowledge, and that from the moment he began writing seriously about man and society, his views progressed in a direction from which he never turned aside. As we shall see, the new areas he came to study, together with the results of his research are responsible for most of this theoretical development. The writings of 1842, 1844, 1846, and 1848 show the most significant alterations, but the essential unity of all the main ideas advanced must not be lost. In the following pages I treat the developments and changes in Marx's theories and expressions whenever they are relevant to the subject under discussion.

Relatively little time is devoted to the origins of Marx's ideas (hence, too, to their originality), not because this point is unimportant, but because I believe the prior task is to establish what these ideas are. The origins of any theoretical system can only be studied after one grasps it well enough to know what does and does not count as origins. The grasp is not achieved by seeking bits and pieces of Marxism in the works of other thinkers, but only by fitting together the relations of Marxism itself. Only after we know Marx's major theories, which includes their mutual relations as parts of a system, can we know what we are looking for. Otherwise, superficial similarities may be taken for influences, with the result that Marx's ideas are often made more difficult to understand by the very preparations made to understand them.

Finally, I do not set Marxism alongside other theories that have been expounded before and since, first, because until we know what Marxism is it makes little sense to provide it a niche in the history of ideas; and, second, because I admit to having a prejudice against accounts of Marxism which rely on analogies with other theories.

It is the intellectual's disease—a disease from which I am not wholly immune—to treat one thing by discussing everything which bears the slightest resemblance to it. When applied to Marxist exegesis, this means that Aristotle, Locke, Hegel, Feuerbach, Rousseau, the Roman Catholic Church and many more people, ideas and things are used in extended analogies to highlight Marx's meaning. But all analogies have a tendency to be misleading both for the writer and his readers. The writer is tempted to substitute his understanding of the analogy for an understanding of his subject, and to trim the edges of the latter whenever necessary to facilitate comparison. The reader is tempted and often urged to do the same. To assert that Marx, like Aristotle, had a teleology, or that,

like Rousseau, he believed man a social animal, or that, like Locke, he wanted man to be free is to mislead people into thinking that the similarity is more than that of a lowest common denominator. Marxism, understood as Marx's interpretation of capitalism, did not exist before Marx, nor in its pure form does it exist anywhere outside his writings. What Marx said is the raw material to be used in explaining Marxism.

What, then, of Engels? As Marx's intimate collaborator for almost forty years of his life and his literary executor after death, Engels is usually taken as a co-equal spokesman with Marx for the theories of Marxism. For most purposes, this procedure is perfectly justifiable. Certain small differences, however, do exist on the subject of man and alienation so that to deal fully with both men would require many exacting distinctions. Consequently, I have restricted my evidence for Marx's conception of human nature and the theory of alienation to Marx's own words. Yet, the marginal possibility of error in using Engels is not enough for me to ask readers to do the same. Occasionally (the section on philosophical foundations is replete with such instances), the forthrightness of Engel's speech on points where there is complete agreement with Marx supplants all other considerations, and he finds his way into the text as a totally reliable witness. A more detailed defense of Marx's and Engels' unity of views is offered in the forthcoming discussion of the dialectic, which has been the center of most of the controversy surrounding this unity.

Criticism, no matter how penetrating, if it comes at the wrong time is also out of place, and can be as effective a barrier to understanding as the most rigid stupidity. The threads of any argument, especially one so intricate as Marxism, should not be submitted to any definite pronouncements until a substantial piece of the cloth has been woven. Otherwise, one cannot be sure that what is under attack is 'what Marx really meant.' I am only too conscious of the fact that, generally, what is being disputed in the avalanche of exegetic material on Marxism is not what this socialist thinker said—the evidence of his writings particularly today is readily available—but what he was 'trying to say.' Therefore, Marx must be allowed sufficient time unimpeded by constant interruptions to establish his views. For this reason I have delayed my own more important critical comments until the end.

Throughout *Alienation* I have tried not to make Marxism more consistent than it really is, while at the same time stressing its essential unity. Marx is always the

architect, this writer but the archaeologist of his ideas.

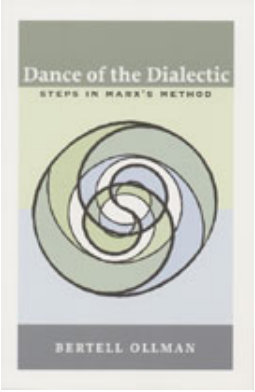
---

1. Karl Marx, Introduction, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago, 1904), p. 294. Though part of the massive manuscript that has recently been published as the *Grundrisse*, this Introduction was originally written for *Marx's Critique of Political Economy*. And though Marx eventually decided not to include this Introduction (indeed, not even to finish it), it has been included in virtually all editions of this work published after 1903. Hence, what many today refer to as the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* is more accurately referred to as the unpublished Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*.
2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Chicago, 1945), p. 52; see also, Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. R. Pascal (London, 1942), pp. 112-13.
3. Marx, *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edvard Aveling, I (Moscow, 1958), 609. Another philosopher who is said to have forged a singular description of man for all times and places is Max Stirner, who takes himself as the ideal. Marx and Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* in Marx and Engels, Werke, III (Berlin, 1959), 104-5.
4. Introduction, *Political Economy*, p. 267.
5. *Ibid*. pp. 13-14.
6. Of their common attitude on this matter Engels says, 'we had no wish to propound these new scientific conclusions in ponderous tomes for the edification of professional wiseacres. Quite otherwise. We had both of us entered bag and baggage into the political movement... In duty bound, we had to place our outlook upon a firm scientific foundation; but it was no less incumbent upon us to win over the proletariat in particular to our conviction. No sooner had we made the matter clear to ourselves than we set to work.' Engels, Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution (London, 1933), p. 127. How little concerned Marx was about his works after they had accomplished their purpose is evidenced by the fact that he never kept a collection of his writings. F. Lessner, 'A Worker's Reminiscences of Karl Marx' *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow, no date), p. 169.
7. *Capital*, I, 27.
8. See, for example, Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik des Politischen Okonomie* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 315, 715-16.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Part I, Philosophical Introduction

By Bertell Ollman

Chapter 1

With words that appear like bats

I.

The most formidable hurdle facing all readers of Marx is his 'peculiar' use of words. Vilfredo Pareto provides us with the classic statement of this problem when he asserts that Marx's words are like bats: one can see in them both birds and mice.[1] No more profound observation has ever been offered on our subject. Thinkers through the years have noticed how hard it is to pin Marx down to particular meanings, and have generally treated their non-comprehension as a criticism. Yet, without a firm knowledge of what Marx is trying to convey with his terms, one cannot properly grasp any of his theories.

How, for example, are we to understand the startling claim that 'Value *is* labor' (my emphasis), or Marx's assertion that the 'identity of consumption and production... appears to be a threefold one,' or his allusion to theory which under certain circumstances becomes a 'material force?'[2] Marx's statements frequently jar us, and instances of obscurity in his work, occasions where two or more interpretations seem equally applicable, are more numerous still.

Engels was well aware of the trouble people had in coming to grips with Marx's terminology. In his Preface to the English edition of *Capital* I, he says, 'there is, however, one difficulty we could not spare the reader: the use of certain

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

terms in a sense different from what they have, not only in common life, but in ordinary political economy.' But, according to Engels,

> this was unavoidable. Every new aspect of a science involves a revolution in the technical terms of that science... Political economy has generally been content to take, just as they were, the terms of commercial and industrial life, and to operate with them, entirely failing to see that by so doing, it confined itself within the narrow circle of ideas expressed by those terms... It is, however, self-evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon that form of production as imperishable and final.[3]

Whether the necessity which forced Marx to adopt his peculiar use of language is 'self-evident,' as Engels claims, is open to question, but to question it now would be to depart from my chosen inquiry. What Engels is saying is that words express the understanding of a period and as this understanding progresses these words and/or their meanings must give way to new ones. To use only terms that are current or only the accepted meanings of such terms is to confine oneself to expressing ideas which are also current. In Marx's case, viewing capitalism as a passing phase is said to demand different concepts from those used by people who consider capitalist to be the eternal mode of production.

Eight years later, in his Introduction to *Capital* III (after a considerable volume of misinterpretation had passed under the bridge), Engels returns to this subject, mentioning yet another difficulty in Marx's use of words. It seems that Marx's terminology, besides being new and unusual, is also inconsistent, the same word meaning different things at different times. Rather than seeing this as a fault, Engels proclaims it a virtue, and says this was necessary to express Marx's understanding of the society he describes. Engels argues that we should not expect to find

> fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works. It is self-evident that where things and their interrelations are conceived, not as fixed, but as changing, their mental images, the ideas, are likewise subject to change and transformation, and they are not encapsulated in rigid definitions, but are developed in their

neoliberal shift in labor relations

historical or logical process of formulation.[4]

According to Engels then, Marx's words are meant to express a conception of 'things and their interrelations... not as fixed, but as changing,' and, consequently, the definitions of these words must also change.

It is tempting at this point to call a halt to the 'jargon,' and declare Engels and Marx with him confused and incapable of full clarification. There is a tradition in the English speaking world going at least as far back as George Bernard Shaw which warns readers of Marx to 'never mind the metaphysics' and blames his slight exaggerations or gaping errors, depending on the critic's political complexion, on his 'animistic philosophy.'[5] Another more difficult path to follow is the one which leads from Marx's terminology to the picture of the world he was trying to convey. Engels' comments have not solved the mystery, but they point the direction in which research must proceed. In Marx's conception of social reality lies the solution to the riddle which some readers have discovered in his terminology.

With few exceptions, Marx's critics have avoided any serious investigation of his conception of social reality. This has not relieved them, however, of the necessity of having a position on this subject, of making an assumption about the way in which Marx views the world and, consequently, of believing (generally without ever making it explicit) that whatever he knows is of a certain character. In so doing, whether aware of it or not, they are prescribing the real limits to what he could be saying; Marx's terms are forced into the mold of what they must mean, given this view of the world. Consequently, to launch directly into a discussion of Marx's theories, in so far as one is not content simply to repeat his expressions, is almost invariably to adopt by default ordinary language criteria for deciding on his meaning. It is to assume that what we take to be 'common sense' is an adequate foundation on which to build an understanding of Marxism, that there is no fundamental difference between his conception of social reality and our own.[6] Engels has already said enough to indicate the dangers in making this assumption, but I should also like to show its influence on at least one standard interpretation of Marx's theories. By this means, too, I hope to justify the amount of time devoted to epistemological inquiry in the coming chapters.

II.

Perhaps nothing Marx ever said has been more frequently echoed than the

claim that 'The mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual life process in general.'[7] This is declared true not only of the present but 'across' time, such that any major development in the mode of production brings about changes in these other sectors as well. So much every student of Marxism knows. The questions which remain to be answered are—what exactly is included in the mode of production, and in what sense is it said to determine these other factors? Or, we may ask, how is Marx using the expressions 'mode of production' and 'determine?'

John Plamenatz offers a concise statement of the most widespread interpretation of Marx's claim which he formulates as a series of 'Fundamentalist' assumptions. According to Plamenatz, Marx's view

> assumes in the first place, that men's activities recorded by the historian have been properly classified, that they have been divided into a number of mutually exclusive classes or 'factors.' It assumes, in the second place, that the activities called fundamental change their character more or less independently of the others. And, lastly, it assumes that changes in the character of the activities called fundamental produce, directly or indirectly, corresponding changes in the characters of all the other activities.[8]

On this interpretation, Marxism offers an easy target for criticism on each of these three counts. To begin with, Marx did not succeed in dividing the social reality with which he was concerned into 'a number of mutually exclusive classes or "factors." ' Thus 'ideology,' for example, refers at times to all ideas, sometimes to normative and other ideas only in so far as they serve the interests of a class. Using a still sharper knife, Georges Gurvitch claims to have found thirteen meanings of 'ideology' in Marx's writings, and is able to provide supporting evidence.[9] Differences of an equal magnitude can be found in Marx's use of 'class' and of many other important concepts.[10]

But if Marx often uses the same expression to refer to different things, he is equally capable of using different expressions to refer to what appears to be the same thing. In the passage in his Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* where he speaks of the mode of production determining 'the social, political and intellectual life process in general,' the same role is attributed to 'relations of production,' 'forces of production,' 'economic structure of society,' 'social

existence' and the 'economic foundation.'[11] Not only do these expressions have different referents (in the case of 'social existence' the contrast would seem to be considerable), but some of them appear to include in their meaning part of the reality which Marx says they 'determine.' Thus, property relations as a system of legal claims comes under the heading of superstructure, but they are also a component of the relations of production which 'determines' this superstructure. The same difficulty arises with class struggle, which constitutes part of the political life of society while also being an element in the economic structure that is said to 'determine' political life. Such inconsistency and sloppy conceptualization (if that is what it is) has come under heavy critical fire.[12]

If we accept that Marx's theory requires a separable determining factor carefully distinguished from what it is supposed to determine, we arrive by a process of elimination at productive technology, not because it satisfies all the conditions but because it does so better than other possible factors. What is popularly known as 'economic determinism' becomes on this interpretation technological determinism, and it is in this manner that Plamenatz, Popper, Bober, Carew-Hunt and Acton—to name some of the more prominent representatives of this school—have understood Marxism.[13] The sustaining model for their interpretation is supplied by Marx's claim that 'The hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist.'[14]

Having reduced 'economic structure' and 'relations of production' to technology, the second basic assumption of Marxism—treated as "Fundamentalism"—can hardly stand careful examination. Can the technology of any society 'change its character more or less independently' of the social, economic and political factors it is supposed to determine? It does not require a profound knowledge of history to see that technological development is invariably a function of the level of science, the laws of a country, the policies of a regime, consumer demand and much else. Thus, technology is obviously dependent in numerous important ways on the character and changes occurring in those areas of life which it is supposed to determine, something that the Fundamentalist model rules out as impossible. In leveling this kind of criticism against Marxism then, the claim is not simply that Marx is wrong but that he is ignorant of the elementary facts of social life. Nothing less—except, perhaps, dishonesty in the service of his political aims—can account for such gross misrepresentation.

The third basic assumption of Marxism, according to this interpretation, that

development in technology produces corresponding changes in all other activities and institutions, is equally open to question. Again it is not necessary to probe very deeply into history to remark that Christianity and Roman Law, to mention only the most obvious instances, have outlasted the productive technology which is said to be responsible for their appearance. Yet, taken together, these three criticisms—that the elements in Marx's system are inconsistently defined, that what is called the economic factor is vitally affected by the factors it is supposed to determine and that changes in the 'superstructure' do not automatically follow upon developments in the 'base'—make up the great bulk of the attacks leveled against Marx's materialist conception of history.

Having made such criticisms, most of the same commentators readily admit that in his concrete political and economic studies Marx is guilty of none of the errors prefigured in the second and third assumptions of his 'Fundamentalist' theory.[15] That is to say, when dealing with real situations, Marx does not offer the development of technology or any other version of the economic factor as self-generating, but as a result of a cluster of factors coming from every walk of life and from every level of social analysis. Likewise, when concerned with actual events, Marx does not treat political and cultural progress as an automatic response to changes in technology; his explanation is invariably complex, and it is not always economic factors playing the leading role. However, the conclusion which is most often reached is that he is inconsistent, or that he does not know how to use his theories—in short, that Marx is a bad Marxist. Popper has even suggested that Marx does not always take his system seriously.[16]

III.

An alternative conclusion is that this interpretation of Marxism as 'Fundamentalism' drawn exclusively from general theoretical statements is erroneous. In order to take this stand, however, it must be compatible with the kind of social interaction that characterizes his description of real events. In other words, when Marx says 'The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual process in general' we must try to understand this claim in a way that allows the latter group of factors to vitally affect the mode of production, and in a way that removes the automatic dependence of the social superstructure on the economic base. We must do this, because this is how Marx used his theories in practise. Engels advised a correspondent who had asked about Marx's materialist conception of history to read *The Eighteenth Brumaire of*

Louis Bonaparte as a practical case of Marx's use of this theory.[17] This elementary suggestion has seldom been followed.

Likewise, numerous statements by the elderly Engels on the role of non-economic factors are generally written off as attempts to extricate himself from an untenable position. For example, he calls it a fatuous notion 'that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them an effect upon history.'[18]

In this light, 'Economic Determinism,' an expression Marx himself never applied to his ideas, appears to be a caricature foisted upon Marxism by readers who misread his general claims. And if 'Economic Determinism' is a caricature, then so are 'Historical Materialism' and 'Dialectical Materialism,' other popular labels for his views that have not originated with Marx. Essentially, these are limiting expressions which tend to foreclose on what Marx is saying before he has said it, restricting before research is done the number of possibilities inherent in any historical situation. As caricatures, they vary widely and always indicate the writer's specific limitations in coming to grips with the complex reality presented in Marx's works. Engels, particularly in correspondence after Marx's death, does mention 'Historical Materialism,' though he usually sets it between quotation marks; it is, after all, someone else's expression.[19] Like Marx, he prefers to speak of 'the materialist conception of history,' a much looser construction or, quite simply, 'our view of history.'[20]

I do not believe that thinkers of stature are never inconsistent or incapable of putting their theories to work. But when such a thinker is shown, practically at every turn, to have strayed from his general conception, there is every likelihood that it is we who have misinterpreted him. In political theory, a case which is too well made is often no case at all against the real views of our opponent. The difficulty in exhibiting such normal caution where Marx is concerned is that it is not immediately apparent what interpretation could be given to his theoretical statements which would also account for his workaday descriptions. If the mode of production is said to determine the character and development of other social factors, each of which is regarded as mutually exclusive, then the self-generation of the former and the automatic response to its changes by the latter follow naturally.

What remains to be shown, however, is that Marx treats the components in

the initial equation as mutually exclusive. This is the unsupported premise on which the entire logical structure of the interpretation of Marxism and Fundamentalism stands. Rather, all the evidence is that Marx manipulates the size of his factors, alters his classificational boundaries, to suit his changing purposes. An extreme instance of this, which starkly sets out the dimensions of our problem, is his claim that 'religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc.' are 'particular modes of production.'[21] What is left of the Fundamentalist interpretation in the wake of this assertion? And though Engels admits that Marx's definitions are never fixed, this practise, as I have indicated, is generally cited in criticism. That Marx had to obtain consistent, mutually exclusive categories is simply taken for granted.

In most cases, this aim is taken for granted because of the philosophical assumption, made explicit by Acton, that if there is no means of separating out social factors which interact there is no way of testing the validity of a theory which holds that one of them is the 'prime causal agency.'[22] But, it is just what is meant by calling one factor 'primary,' or 'basic' or 'determining' that is at question here, and we shall not be able to arrive at a satisfactory answer until we grasp why Marx *did not* clearly separate out his social factors.

Acton has simply turned the real problem around, using what is in effect an ordinary language interpretation of 'primary' to impose upon Marx a common sense conception of social reality. He is saying, 'Given Marx understands "primary" in this way [Acton's way], he must group social phenomena into easily separable units in order that one (or one set of them) can be held to be primary.' If this is Marx's basic conception, then the Fundamentalist interpretation of his theories is correct and all the criticism based on it is valid. However, Marx's 'ambiguous' practise has made an ordinary language interpretation of his key expressions, at the least, highly dubious, and suggests that until we understand this conception of social reality and, consequently, what he could be saying, we should not be able to comprehend clearly what he is, in fact, saying.

The problem is more serious still. For if Marx often uses the same expression to refer to what we would consider different things and, as he often does, different expressions for what we think of as the same thing, how can we grasp what it is he is referring to on *any* occasion without knowing what lies behind this practise? [23] Preferring to interpret Marx's theories in the light of how he used them, the task is to discover how he could take such liberties not only with the generally

accepted classificational boundaries of his subject matter, but with the boundaries he himself seemed to lay down on various occasions. I wish to understand Marx with the aid of his voluminous writings, and not in spite of them. With this declaration of intent, let us return to the original formulation of the problem: Marx's words are like bats. They have meanings, according to Engels, which are not only new and unusual but also inconsistent. This was said to result from viewing 'things and their relations... not as fixed but as changing.' It is this conception which made it impossible for him to operate with mutually exclusive social factors. What, then, is this conception?

---

1. Vilfredo Pareto, *les Systèms socialistes*, II (Paris, 1902), 332.
2. Marx, *Capital*, III (Moscow, 1959), 795; Introduction, *Political Economy*, p. 280; Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung,' *Werke*, I (Berlin, 1961), 385.
3. *Capital*, I, 4-5.
4. Engels, Preface, *Capital*, III, 13-14.
5. George Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx*, ed. R. W. Ellis (New York, 1930), p. 171. The articles of which this book is composed were written in 1887. Max Eastman, *Marx and Lenin: the Science of Revolution* (New York, 1922), p. 82. This fault is not exclusively an Anglo-Saxon one, but its rate of incidence is clearly much higher in England and America than on the Continent where 'Hegelianisms' are accepted if not always better understood.
6. Common sense is all that strikes us as being obviously true, such that to deny any part of it appears, at first sight, to involve us in speaking nonsense. In this work, I shall use 'common sense' as well to refer to that body of generally unquestioned knowledge and the equally unquestioned approach to knowledge which is common to the vast majority of scholars and laymen in Western capitalist societies.
7. *Political Economy*, p. 11.
8. John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London, 1961), p. 83.
9. Georges Gurvitch, *Etudes sur les classes sociales* (Paris, 1966), pp. 54-6.
10. See my article, 'Marx's Use of "Class," ' *American Journal of Sociology*,

LXXIII (March, 1968), 573-80.

11. *Political Economy*, pp. 11-13.
12. Typical of many is H. B. Acton's complaint that law and morals which are supposed to be part of the superstructure are also treated by Marx as part of the base that is said to determine the superstructure. H. B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch* (London, 1962), p. 164.
13. Aside from Plamenatz, see Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. II (London, 1962); Mandel Bober, *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History* (Cambridge, 1950); R. N. Carew-Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism* (London, 1963); and Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch*.
14. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow, no date), p. 122.
15. Plamenatz, for example, claims that Marx's and Engels' 'own accounts of major social revolutions do not accord with their formulations of the basic pattern of social change.' Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, II (London, 1965), 276.
16. Popper. *The Open Society*, II, 331-2. There is also the approach, offered by A. D. Lindsay among others, which declares that Marx greatly exaggerated what he had to say in order to combat the kind of opponents he faced. A. D. Lindsay, *Karl Marx's 'Capital'* (London, 1925), p. 38.
17. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Dona Torr (London, 1941), p. 519.
18. *Ibid*. p. 512; see too, *ibid*. pp. 475, 477. Though not wishing to reprieve any of Marx's deterministic followers and critics, it must be admitted that Engels is generally clearer in stating what Marx's and his view of history is not than in stating what is.
19. *Ibid*. p. 480.
20. I am very sympathetic to the stand, taken in several of Rubel's works, that 'Marxism' itself is a caricature foisted on Marx by those who came after. For a fuller discussion of this position, see M. Rubel, 'la Charte de la Première Internationale,' *le Mouvement social*, no. 51 (April-June, 1965), pp. 4ff. Nevertheless, I consider 'Marxism' too useful an aid in presenting Marx's views to dispense with it along with the other, more misleading labels by which these views are popularly known.
21. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow, 1959), p. 103.
22. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch*, p. 166. In the same vein, Acton declares that the alternatives to the technological interpretation of Marx's views are

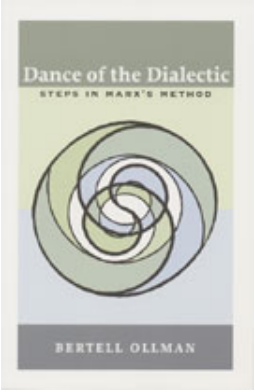
'almost too vague to discuss.' Ibid. p. 137.

23. At the start of this chapter, we saw Marx use 'material force,' an expression generally reserved for economic factors, to refer to theory. We have also just seen him use 'mode of production,' which usually refers to the production of the physical means of life, for such distant sectors as religion, family, state, law, morality, science and art. As for using apparently contrasting expressions to refer to the same thing, an obvious example is his use of 'labor-power' and 'variable capital' to refer to the productive capacity of workers in capitalism. Capital, I, 209. Likewise, when he declares the 'division of labor and private property are... identical expressions,' I take him to mean that essentially the same information is conveyed by each. *The German Ideology*, p. 22. There are many examples of these two practises throughout Marx's writings, early and late.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 2

Social Relations as Subject Matter

I

The only extensive discussion of Marx's concepts (or categories) and the conception of social reality that finds expression in them appears in his unfinished Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*. This seminal work, which was first published by Karl Kautsky in 1903, has been unjustly ignored by most Anglo-Saxon writers on Marxism.[1] Here we learn that "In the study of economic categories, as in the case of every historical and social science, it must be borne in mind that as in reality so in our mind the subject, in this case modern bourgeois society, is given and that the categories are therefore but forms of expression, manifestations of existence, and frequently but one-sided aspects of this subject, this definite society" (Marx, 1904, 302). This distinction between subject and categories is simple recognition of the fact that our knowledge of the real world is mediated through the construction of concepts in which to think about it; our contact with reality, in so far as we become aware of it, is contact with a conceptualized reality.

What is unusual in Marx's statement is the special relation he posits between categories and society. Instead of being simply a means for describing capitalism (neutral vehicles to carry a partial story), these categories are declared to be "forms", "manifestations" and "aspects" of their own subject matter. Or, as he says elsewhere in this Introduction, the categories of bourgeois society "serve as the

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

expression of its conditions and the comprehension of its own organization" (Marx, 1904, 300). That is to say, they express the real conditions necessary for their application, but as meaningful, systematized and understood conditions. This is not merely a matter of categories being limited in what they can be used to describe; the story itself is thought to be somehow part of the very concepts with which it is told. This is evident from Marx's claim that "The simplest economic category, say, exchange-value, implies the existence of population, population that is engaged in production within determined relations; it also implies the existence of certain types of family, class, or state, etc. It can have no other existence except as an abstract one-sided relation of an already *given concrete and living aggregate*" (my emphasis) (Marx, 1904, 294).

One of the more striking results of this approach to language is that not only the content but also the categories are evaluated by Marx in terms of "true" and "false". Thus, in criticizing Proudhon, Marx claims that "political-economic categories" are "abstract expressions of the real, transitory, historic, social relations", and they "*only remain true* while these relations exist" (my emphasis) (Marx/Engels, 1941, 12; Marx, 1904, 301; Marx, n.d., 117-22). By deciding to work with capitalist categories, Proudhon, according to Marx, cannot completely disassociate himself from the "truths" which these categories contain. According to the common sense view, only statements can be true or false, and to use this same measure for evaluating concepts seems unwarranted and confused.

Three conclusions stand out from this discussion: that Marx grasped each political-economic concept as a component of society itself, in his words as an "abstract one-sided relation of an already given concrete and living aggregate"; that it is intimately linked with other social components to form a particular structure; and that this whole, or at least its more significant parts, is expressed in the concept itself, in what it is intended to convey, in its very meaning. If these conclusions are unclear, it is because the kind of structure they take for granted is still vague and imprecise. To properly understand concepts that convey a particular union, we must be at ease with the quality of this unity, that is, with the way its components combine, the properties of such combinations, and the nature of the whole which they constitute. Only by learning how Marx structures the units of his subject matter, only by becoming aware of the quality and range of what is known when he considers he knows anything, will the relations between concepts and reality that have been set out in these conclusions become clear.

neoliberal shift in labor relations

II

What is distinctive in Marx's conception of social reality is best approached through the cluster of qualities he ascribes to particular social factors. Taking capital as the example, we find Marx depicting it as "that kind of property which exploits wage-labor, and which cannot increase except on condition of getting a new supply of wage-labor for fresh exploitation" (Marx and Engels, 1945, 33). What requires emphasis is that the relation between capital and labor is treated here as a function of capital itself, and part of the meaning of "capital". This tie is extended to cover the worker as well, where Marx refers to him as "variable capital" (Marx, 1958, 209). The capitalist is incorporated into the same whole: "capital is necessarily at the same time the capitalist . . . the capitalist is contained in the concept of capital" (Marx, 1973, 512). Elsewhere, Marx asserts that "the means of production monopolized by a certain section of society", "the products of laborers turned into independent powers", "money", "commodities" and even "value that sucks up the value creating powers" are also capital (Marx, 1959b, 794-5; Marx, 1958, 153; Marx, 571). What emerges from these diverse characterizations is a conception of many tied facets, whose sense depends upon the relations Marx believes to exist between its components: property, wage-labor, worker, his product, commodities, means of production, capitalist, money, value (the list can be made longer still).[2]

It is insufficient to accuse Marx of loose and misleading presentation for, as we shall see, all social factors are treated in the same manner. But if it is not incompetent writing, then Marx is offering us a conception of capital in which the factors we generally think of as externally related to it are viewed as co-elements in a single structure.

It is this system-owning quality of capital that he has in mind when he refers to it as a "definite social relationship". This conception is contrasted with Ricardo's where capital "is only distinguishable as 'accumulated labor' from 'immediate labor'". In the latter case, where capital "is something purely material, a mere element in the labor process", Marx claims, "the relation between labor and capital, wages and profit, can never be developed" (Marx, 1968, 400). Marx believes he is only able to trace out these connections because they are already contained in his broad conception of capital. If they were not, he would, like Ricardo, draw a blank. *Every factor which enters into Marx's study of capitalism is a "definite social relationship".*

III

The relation is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx's conception of social reality. This is really the nub of our difficulty in understanding Marxism, whose subject matter is not simply society but society conceived of "relationally". Capital, labor, value, commodity, etc., are all grasped as relations, containing in themselves, as integral elements of what they are, those parts with which we tend to see them externally tied. Essentially, a change of focus has occurred from viewing independent factors which are related to viewing the particular way in which they are related in each factor, to grasping this tie as part of the meaning conveyed by its concept. This view does not rule out the existence of a core notion for each factor, but treats this core notion itself as a cluster of relations.

According to the common sense view, a social factor is taken to be logically independent of other social factors to which it is related. The ties between them are contingent, rather than necessary; they could be something very different without affecting the vital character of the factors involved, a character which adheres to that part which is thought to be independent of the rest. One can logically conceive, so the argument goes, of any social factor existing without its relations to others. In Marx's view, such relations are internal to each factor (they are ontological relations), so that when an important one alters, the factor itself alters; it becomes something else. Its appearance and/or function has changed sufficiently for it to require a new concept. Thus, for example, if wage-labor disappeared, that is, if the workers' connection to capital radically changed, capital would no longer exist. The opposite, naturally, is also true: Marx declares it a "tautology" that "there can no longer be wage-labor when there is no longer any capital" (Marx and Engels, 1945, 36). Max Hirsch is clearly right, therefore, when he points out that if "capital" is defined as a "means of exploitation and subjection of the laborer", a machine used by a farmer who owned it would not be capital, but it would be capital if he hired a man to operate it (Hirsch, 1901, 80-1). Rather than an obvious criticism, which is how Hirsch intends it, this paradox merely illustrates the character of capital as a social relation.

In this study, I shall use the term "relation" in two different senses: first, to refer to a factor itself, as when I call capital a relation, and also as a synonym of "connection", as in speaking of the relation between different factors. Marx and Engels do the same. Besides calling capital a "social production relation" (*Verhältnis*), Marx refers to money as a "relation of production", the mode of

production itself as the "relation in which the productive forces are developed", and the list of such remarks is far from complete (Marx, 1959b, 794; Marx, 1973, 120; Marx, n.d., 137). His use of "relation" as a synonym of "connection" is more extensive still, with the result that *Verhältnis* probably occurs more frequently than any other expression in Marx's writing, confounding critics and translators alike.[3] It is not entirely satisfying to use "relation" to convey both meanings but, rather than introduce a new term, I accede to Marx's practice, with this single change: for the remainder of this book, I shall capitalize "relation" (henceforth "Relation") when it refers to a factor, as opposed to the connection between factors, to aid readers in making this important distinction. Besides, such obvious alternatives to "Relation" as "structure", "unit" and "system" suggest a closed, finished character which is belied by Marx's treatment of real social factors. "Relation" appeals to me, as it must have to him, as the concept which is better adapted to take account of the changes and open-endedness that constitute so large a part of social life.

IV

The outlook presented here must not be confused with the view that has found great favor among sociologists and others, which holds that social factors are *unintelligible* except in terms of relations. It is important to realize that Marx took the additional step indicated in his claim that society is "man himself in his social relations" (Marx, 1973, 712). On one occasion, Marx specifically berates apparent allies who accuse economists of not paying enough attention to the connections between production and distribution. His complaint is that "this accusation is itself based on the economic conception that distribution exists side by side with production as a self-contained sphere" (Marx, 1904, 276). Marx's own version of this relationship is presented in such claims as "Production is . . . at the same time consumption, and consumption is at the same time production" (Marx, 1904, 278).[4]

For the average social scientist—starting with a conception of factors as logically independent of one another—the conjunction of parts in his analysis is mechanical, an intrusion; it exists only where found and disappears once the investigator's back is turned, having to be explained and justified anew. One result is the endless attempts to account for causality and the accompanying need to distinguish between cause and condition. In such studies, one side of the interaction invariably wins out over the other (comes first) leading to "economic determinism" or "existentialism" or other partial positions.

In Marx's case, all conjunction is organic, intrinsic to the social units with which he is concerned and part of the nature of each; that it exists may be taken for granted. On this view, interaction is, properly speaking, *inneraction* (it is "inner connections" which he claims to study) (Marx, 1958, 19). Of production, distribution, consumption and exchange, Marx declares, "mutual interaction takes place between the various elements. Such is the case with every organic body" (Marx, 1904, 292). What Marx calls "mutual interaction" (or "reciprocal effect" or "reciprocal action") is only possible because it occurs within an organic body. This is the case with everything in Marxism, which treats its entire subject matter as "different sides of one unit" (Marx, 1904, 291).[5]

It is in this context that we must place Marx's otherwise confusing and confused use of "cause" and "determine". There are not some elements which are related to the factor or event in question as "causes" (meaning among other things that which does not condition) and others as "conditions" (meaning among other things that which does not cause). Instead, we find as internally related parts of whatever is said to be the cause or determining agent everything that is said to be a condition, and vice versa. It is this conception which permits Engels to say that the whole of nature has "caused" life (Engels, 1954, 267-8).

In practice, however, "cause" and "determine" are generally used to point to the effect produced by any entity in changing one or more of the relations that make up other entities. But as each one develops with the direct and indirect aid of everything else, operating on various levels, to single out any aspect as determining can only be a way of emphasizing a particular link in the problem under consideration. Marx is saying that for *this* factor, in this context, this is the influence most worth noting, the relation which will most aid our comprehension of the relevant characteristics.[6]

V

The whole at rest which I have been examining is but a limiting case of the whole in movement, for, in Paul Lafargue's words, Marx's "highly complicated world" is "in continual motion" (Lafargue, n.d., 78).[7] Change and development are constantly occurring; structure is but a stage in process.

To introduce the temporal dimension into the foregoing analysis, we need only view each social factor as internally related to its own past and future forms, as well as to the past and future forms of surrounding factors. Capital, for Marx, is

what capital is, was and will be. He says of money and commodities, "before the production process they were capital only in intention, in themselves, in their destiny" (Marx, 1971, 399-400).[8] It is in this manner, too, that labor is seen in the product it will soon become and the product in the labor it once was. In short, development—no matter how much facelifting occurs—is taken as an attribute of whatever undergoes development.

The present, according to this relational model, becomes part of a continuum stretching from a definable past to a knowable (if not always predictable) future. Tomorrow is today extended. To speak of such a relation between the present and the future within the context of formal logic would indicate belief in a vitalistic principle, divine will or some other metaphysical device. But, here, all social change is conceived of as a coming to be of what potentially is, as the further unfolding of an already existing process, and hence, discoverable by a study of this process taken as a spatial?temporal Relation. The "destiny" of money is rooted in its existing structure. So is the "destiny" of any society. What will become of it (or, more accurately, what is likely to become of it) is pieced together by an examination of the forces, patterns and trends that constitute the major existing Relations. It is the result of such research into any particular factor or set of factors that is conveyed by Marx's concept "law".[9]

The common sense view recognizes two types of laws: inductive laws, which are generalizations based on the results of empirical research, and deductive laws, which are a priori statements about the nature of the world. For the first, evidence is relevant, and the predictions it occasions are never more than probable. For the second, evidence is irrelevant and the predictions occasioned are necessary. Marx's laws possess characteristics that we associate with both of these types. Like inductive laws, Marx's laws are based on empirical research. Unlike them, however, his laws are not concerned with independent events whose ties with each other and with surrounding circumstances are contingent. Marx says that in political economy "law is chance"; the elements related have no ties other than those actually uncovered by research (Rubel, 1959, 52). Whereas, for Marx, the relations he discovers are considered already present as real possibilities in the relations which preceded them (they exist there as temporally internal relations).

As regards deductive laws, Marx's laws also deal with the nature of the world, but do so on the basis of evidence, and are forever being modified by evidence.

As a result, they cannot be encapsulated in simple formulae which hold true for all time. Still, strictly speaking, all Marx's laws are tautologies: given these are "A's" relations, this is what "A" must become and, in the becoming, "A" may be said to obey the law of its own development. Such laws express no more necessity than that contained in the particular group of relations for which they are standing in. The very uncertainties in the situation are their uncertainties. Yet, by including within the law all possible developments prefigured by the relevant relations, the law itself may be said to be necessary. All that happens to a factor is the necessary working out of its law. Consequently, rather than coloring Marx's findings in any way, it is his findings which lend these laws their entire character.

The relations bound up in any factor generally make one kind of development more probable than others, and Marx often uses "law" to refer to this development alone. "Law" in this sense is the same as "tendency", and on one occasion, Marx goes as far as to say that all economic laws are tendencies (Marx, 1958, 8).[10]

VI

Until this point, the discussion has been limited to social factors which are generally recognized as such—capital, labor, class, etc.—though Marx's interpretation of them was shown to be highly unusual. However, in seeking favorable vantage points from which to analyze capitalism, a system contained relationally in each of its parts, Marx sometimes felt obliged to create new parts. This was simply a matter of mentally carving up the whole in a different manner for a particular purpose. The result is, in effect, a new social factor, a new unit in which to think about and refer to society. Perhaps the most important new social unit created in this way is the "relations of production", the core of which lies in the complex interaction of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Another is "surplus-value". These two Relations occupy a central position in Marx's work.

The novelty of having the relations of production as a subject matter becomes evident when we consider the limited concern of most capitalist economists. The latter are interested in studying (more particularly, in measuring) what goes on in the "economy", a sector of life artificially separated from other sectors, whose necessary links with human beings as regards both pre-conditions and results are seldom investigated.

What *kind* of productive activity goes on in a society where people obtain

what they want through the exchange of value equivalents? What *kind* of political, cultural, religious, and social life fosters such exchange and is, in turn, fostered by it? These questions are beyond the bounds of relevance established by capitalist economics, but they are well within the boundaries set by Marx. He tells us in *Capital* I, for example, that he wants to examine "*Why* is labor represented by the value of its product and labor-time by the magnitude of that value?" (My emphasis) (Marx, 1958, 80). This is really a question about how the particular "economy" that capitalist economists are content to describe came into existence and how it manages to maintain itself. By conceptualizing his subject matter as "relations of production", as a union of the main processes involved (as a factor centering upon this union), Marx facilitates his efforts to deal with this wide ranging problem. The result, *Capital*, is not properly speaking an economic treatise, but—as many readers have noted—a work on social praxis.

VII

Returning to Marx's discourse, the problem of misinterpretation arises from what might be called his practice of making definitions of all his descriptions. Whatever Marx discovers about any factor, particularly if he considers it important, is incorporated into the meaning of its denoting term, becomes a part of its concept. Marx's concepts, then, are meant to convey to us the already structured information they express for him; it is in this way that they acquire a "truth value" distinct from that of the statements in which they are found (Marx and Engels, 1941, 12).

Therefore, whatever Marx understands about his society, including its processes of change and the projections he has made from them, is already contained in each of the major concepts used to explain what it is he understands. Such meaning lies heavy on Marx's terms. It is this which allows Marx to equate "economic categories" with "historic laws", and which makes "logic" a synonym for "law" in Marxism (Marx and Engels, 1941, 12). "Law" refers to relations in the real world; while "logic", as Marx ordinarily uses it, refers to these same relations as reflected in the meanings of their covering concepts.

Marcuse offers the same insight when he claims that Marx's categories are negative and at the same time positive:

> "they present a negative state of affairs in the light of its positive solution, revealing the true situation in existing society as the prelude

to its passing into a new form. All the Marxian concepts extend, as it were, in these two dimensions, the first of which is the complex of given social relations, and the second, the complex of elements inherent in the social reality that make for its transformation into a free social order" (Marcuse, 1964, 295-6).[11]

That readers make any sense of Marx's terminology at all suggests that many of the relations he sees in reality correspond, more or less, to our "common sense" view of the world (which is not much to assume), and that it is these relations which constitute the core meanings of most of his concepts.[12]

Though each of Marx's major concepts has the theoretical capacity to convey the entire analysis made with its help, in practice Marx's current interest governs the degree to which the relations bound together in any social factor (and hence the meaning of its covering concept) are extended. As Marx moves from one problem to the next, whole new areas inside each social Relation become relevant, and some areas which were relevant in the previous context cease being so. In this way, what was formerly assumed is expressed directly and what was expressed is now assumed. Class, for instance, has a vital role in explaining the state, but only a small part in accounting for exchange, and the size of the Relation, class, in Marx's thought (and the meaning of "class" in Marx's writing) varies accordingly.

It is this practice which is responsible for the "manipulation" of classificational boundaries (both those which were generally accepted and those which he himself seemed to lay down earlier) that so many of Marx's readers have found in his work. (See my Introduction) Yet, each such restriction of the social whole is merely practical, a means of allowing Marx to get on with his current task. Should he ever want to extend the size of any factor, and hence the meaning of its concept, to its relational limits, he can do so. Thus, we learn, "Man, much as he may therefore be a particular individual . . . is just as much the totality—the ideal totality—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society present for itself" (Marx, 1959a, 105)

VIII

If each of Marx's concepts has such breadth (actual or potential), and includes much of what is also expressed by other concepts, how does Marx decide on any given occasion which one to use? Why, for example, call interest

(which, for him, is also capital) "interest" and not "capital"? This is really the same problem approached from the other side. Whereas before I accepted Marx's nomenclature and tried to find out what he meant, I am now asking—given his broad meanings—why does he offer the names that he does? The unorthodox answer given to the first question has made this second one of special importance.

It may appear that I have only left Marx a nominalist way out, but this is not so. The opposition between the view that the world gives rise to our conceptions and the view that naming is an arbitrary process is, in any case, a false one. The real problem is to discover the various precise ways in which what actually exists, in nature as well as in society, affects the ways we conceive of and label it; and how the latter, in turn, reacts upon what exists, particularly upon what we take to be "natural" structures. In short, this is a two-way street, and to be content to travel in only one direction is to distort. Marx's own practice in naming takes account of both the real world as it is, and his conceptualization of it which decides (as distinct from determines) what it can be. The former is seen in Marx's acceptance of the core notion of each factor, which is simply what the factor, being what it is, strikes everyone that it is (the idea is of necessity quite vague); and the latter stands out in the decisive importance he attributes to the function of each factor (grasped as any part of its core notion) in the particular subsystem of society which he is examining.

In setting out what can and cannot be called "fixed capital", Marx says "it is not a question here of a definition, which things must be made to fit. We are dealing here with definite functions which must be expressed in definite categories" (Marx, 1957, 226). Thus, capital in a situation where it functioned as interest would be called "interest", and vice versa. However, a change in function only results in a new name (as opposed to a descriptive metaphor) if the original factor is actually conceived to be what it is now functioning as. That is, capital can only *act as* or *appear to be* interest and, hence, never really deserve its name unless we are able to conceive of the two as somehow one. This, of course, is just what Marx's relational conception allows him to do. Through its internal ties to everything else, each factor is everything else viewed from this particular angle, and what applies to them necessarily applies to it, taken in this broad sense. Thus, each factor has—in theory—the potential to take the names of others (of whatever applies to them) when it functions as they do, that is, in ways associated with their core notions.

When Marx calls theory a "material force", or when Engels refers to the state as an "economic factor", they are misusing words only on our standard (Marx, 1970, 137; Marx and Engels, 1941, 484).[13] On the relational view, theory and state are being given the names of their own facets whose core functions they are performing. Thus, Marx says, in the instance quoted, that theory becomes a material force "once it gets a hold of men", that is, once it becomes a driving factor in their lives, strongly influencing character and actions. This role is generally performed by a material force, such as the mode of production, but theory can also perform it, and when it does it is said to become a "material force".

To understand Marx's nomenclature, however, it is not enough to know that naming attaches to function, which in turn is conceived of within a relational whole. The question arises whether the particular function observed is objective (actually present in society) or subjective (there because Marx sees it to be). The answer is that it is both: the functions, according to which Marx ascribes names, exist, but it is also true that they are conceptualized in a manner which allows Marx to take note of them. Other people viewing the same "raw facts" with another conceptual scheme may not even observe the relation he has chosen to emphasize.

For example, when Marx calls the worker's productive activity "variable capital", he is labeling a function that only he sees; in this case, because this is how such activity appears "from the point of view of the process of creating surplus-value", a unit that Marx himself introduced (Marx, 1958, 209). It is only after we finish reading *Capital* and accept the new concept of "surplus-value" that "variable capital" ceases to be an arbitrary name for labor-power. Generally speaking, we understand why Marx has used a particular name to the extent that we are able to grasp the function referred to, which in turn depends on how similar his conception of the relevant factors is to our own.

Marx's concepts, it is clear, have been tailored to fit both his unique vision of capitalism and his unusual conception of social reality. The great lesson to be drawn from all this is that Marx's concepts are not our own, no matter how much they may appear so. In short, the fact that Marx uses the same words as we do should not mislead us into believing that he has the same concepts. Words are the property of language and are common to all who use this language. Concepts, or ideas about the world which find expression in words (or words in so far as they

contain such ideas), are best grasped as the property of individuals or of schools of thought. Expressing what he knows as well as how he knows it, Marx's concepts tell us much more (often), much less (sometimes), and much different (always) than we think they do. In his Preface to the English edition of *Capital* I, Engels says it is "self-evident that a theory which views modern capitalist production as a mere passing stage in the economic history of mankind, must make use of terms different from those habitual to writers who look upon the form of production as imperishable and final" (Marx, 1958, 5). Whether, the need for new terms (concepts) here is "self-evident" is debatable; that Marx felt such a need is not.

Moreover, as if this were not enough, the very sense conveyed by Marx's concepts is unstable. What he understands at any given time of the interrelations which make up social reality is reflected in the meanings of the words he uses. But these interrelations are constantly changing, and, further, Marx is forever learning more about them through his research. Hence, eight years later, in his Introduction to *Capital* III (after a considerable volume of misinterpretation had passed under the bridge), Engels also warns that we should not expect to find any "fixed, cut-to-measure, once and for all applicable definitions in Marx's works" (Marx, 1959b, 13-14).[14]

The lack of definitions (that is, of statements obviously meant as definitions) in Marx's writings has often been belabored, but it should now be clear what difficulty he had in providing them. Viewing the world as undergoing constant change and as devoid of the clear cut classificational boundaries that distinguish the common sense approach, Marx could not keep a definition of one factor from spilling over into everything. For him, any isolating definition is necessarily "one-sided" and probably misleading. There are critics, such as Sartre, who have accepted Engels' dictum.[15] More typical, on the other hand, is the reaction of Carew-Hunt who is so convinced of the impossibility of such an approach to meaning that he claims (against the evidence) that Marx does not manipulate language in this way, though his dialectic, according to Carew-Hunt, requires that he do so (Carew-Hunt, 1963, 50). Basically unaware of Marx's relational conception, most critics simply cannot take the concepts which are entailed by this conception for what they are.[16]

IX

What emerges from this interpretation is that the problem Marx faces in his

analysis is not how to link separate parts but how to individuate instrumental units in a social whole that finds expression everywhere. If I am right, the usual approach to understanding what Marx is getting at must be completely reversed: from trying to see the way in which labor produces value, we must accept at the outset a kind of equation between the two (the two social Relations express the same whole—as Marx says, "Value is labor"), and try instead to see the ways in which they differ (Marx, 1959b, 795). Marx's law of value is concerned with the "metamorphosis of value", with the various forms it takes in the economy, and not with its production by labor. This, and not what Smith and Ricardo had said before, is the economic theory illustrated in the massive volumes of *Capital*.

So, too, instead of seeking a strict causal tie between the mode of production and other institutions and practices of society which precludes complex social interaction, we must begin by accepting the existence of this interaction and then seek out the ways in which Marx believes that the effects proceeding from the mode of production and other economic factors (narrowly understood) are more important. Such interaction, as we have seen, is a necessary part of each social Relation. This, and not technological determinism, is the conception of history illustrated in all Marx's detailed discussions of political and social phenomena. If Marx is at ease with a foot on each side of the fence, it is because for him the fence does not exist. In light of this analysis, most of Marx's opponents are guilty of criticizing him for answers to questions he not only did not ask, but—given his relational conception of reality—could not ask. Marx's real questions have been lost in the process. They must be rehabilitated.

---

1. Quite the reverse is the case in France where Maximilien Rubel, Henri Lefebvre and Louis Althusser—to mention only a few of the better known writers—have all made heavy use of this work.

2. Marx also says, "Capital . . . is nothing without wage-labor, value, money, price, etc." (Marx, 1904, 292).

3. Though generally translated as "relation", "Verhältnis" is sometimes rendered as "condition", "proportion" or "reaction", which should indicate something of its special sense. Maximilien Rubel has mentioned to the author that "*Verhältnis*", coming incessantly into the discussion, was

perhaps the most difficult term he had to deal with in his many translations of Marx's writings into French. As well as using the French equivalents of the words already listed, Rubel also rendered "*Verhältnis*", on occasion, as "*systéme*", "*structure*" and "*probléme*". Another complication arises from the fact that "*Beziehung*", another standard term in Marx's vocabulary, can also be translated into English as "relation", though it is generally translated as "connection". I intend the concept "relation" to contain the same complexities which I take to exist in Marx's concept "*Verhältnis*".

4. Alfred Meyer has ventured close to this formulation by presenting Marxism as among other things a system of "reciprocally interdependent variables" (Meyer, 1963, 24ff). But this still begs all the old questions regarding the quality of their interdependence: if the variables are logically independent, how can they reciprocally affect one another? If they are not, what does this mean? It is my impression that in this manner what is called "functionalism" is generally either inconsistent or incomprehensible. For too many writers on Marxism, friends and foes alike, talk of "interdependence" and "interaction" is simply a matter of papering over the cracks. But once these cracks appear (once we ascribe a logical independence to factors), they cannot begotten rid of so easily; and if we take the further step and dismiss the notion of logical independence, the entire terrain of what is taken for granted has been radically altered.

5. The "totality" of social life which Marx seeks to explain is, as he tells us on another occasion, "the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another" (Marx and Engels, 1964, 50).

6. It is highly significant too that in his political and historical works, as opposed to his more theoretical writings in economics and philosophy, Marx seldom uses "*bestimmen*" ("determine"), preferring to characterize relations in these areas with more flexible sounding expressions. English translators have tended to reinforce whatever "determinist" bias is present in Marx's work by generally translating "*bedingen*" (which can mean "condition" or "determine") as "determine". Compare, for example, the opening chapter of *The German Ideology* with the German original.

7. Lafargue was Marx's son-in-law, and the only person to whom Marx ever

dictated any work. Consequently, Lafargue was in an excellent position to observe the older man's thinking. Of his subject matter, Lafargue says, Marx "did not see a thing singly, in itself and for itself, separate from its surroundings: he saw a highly complicated world in continual motion". Then, quoting Vico who said, "Thing is a body only for God, who knows everything; for man, who knows only the exterior, it is only the surface", Lafargue claims that Marx grasped things in the manner of Vico's God (Reminiscences, n.d., 78).

8. Elsewhere, Marx refers to the "destiny" of man being to develop his powers (Marx and Engels, 1964, 315).

9. Of economic laws and the political economy of his day, Marx says, "it does not comprehend these laws—that is, it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property" (Marx, 1959b, 67-8). The changes occurring in private property (which he inflates here to the size of the economy) are said to be discoverable in its component relations.

10. Marx also speaks of "a general rate of surplus-value—viewed as a tendency, like all other laws" (Marx, 1959b, 172).

11. Unfortunately, Marcuse does not attempt to explain how such a use of terms is possible, what it presupposes in the way of a conceptual scheme, and the problems of communication it necessarily poses. Without the foundations which I try to supply in chapters 2 and 3 of this work, such correct insights—of which there are many in the writings of Marcuse, Korsch, Lukács, Lefebvre, Goldmann, Dunayevskaya, Sartre, Sweezy, Kosik, the early Hook and a few others—are left to hang unsupported, and are in the final analysis unconvincing.

12. Common sense is all that strikes us as being obviously true, such that to deny any part of it appears, at first hearing, to involve us in speaking nonsense. In this work, I also use "common sense" to refer to that body of generally unquestioned knowledge and the equally unquestioned approach to knowledge which is common to the vast majority of scholars and layman in Western capitalist societies.

13. Other striking examples of what most readers must consider a misuse of words are Engels' reference to race as an "economic factor", and Marx's reference to the community as a "force of production" (Marx and Engels, 1941, 517; Marx, 1973, 495).

14. Because the appearance of things is constantly changing, Engels declares, "the unity of concept and appearance manifests itself as essentially an infinite process" (Marx and Engels, 1941, 529).

15. Sartre offers an enlightening comparison between Marx, whose concepts evolve with history and his research into it, and modern Marxists, whose concepts remain unaffected by social change: "The open concepts of Marxism have closed in" (Sartre, 1963, 26-34). On this subject, see too, Henri Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, logique dialectique*, 204-11.

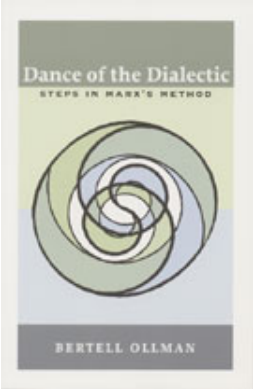
16. The conception of meaning presented here can also be found in Hegel. Hook is one of the few commentators who recognizes their common and unusual approach to meaning, when, referring to the views of Marx and Hegel, he says, "Meanings must develop with the objects of which they are the meanings. Otherwise, they cannot be adequate to their subject matter" (Hook, 1962, 65-6).

    It is interesting to note that one of the major reasons that has led current linguistic philosophy to make a radical distinction between what a term means and what it refers to (between definitions and descriptions) is the alleged instability of the latter. To equate what a term means with what it refers to is, first, to have meanings that change with time and place (sometimes drastically), and, second, to get involved with those conditions in the real world that help make what is being directly referred to what it is. In short, this conception of meaning inclines one toward a conception of internal relations. It is from this exposed position that the currently in vogue question, "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use," marks a total retreat.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 3

The philosophy of internal relations

I

Marx's scholarly concern was with capitalism, and in studying this society he naturally operated with social Relations, his vocabulary reflecting the real social ties which he uncovered. What remains to be explained, however, is how Marx could conceive of social factors as Relations where physical objects are involved. For in his discussions, machines, the real articles produced, the worker's person, etc., are all components of one social Relation or another. We learn, for example, that "capital is, among other things, also an instrument of production, also past personal labor" (Marx, 1904, 270). According to the definition given earlier, every such component is itself a Relation. It follows from this that Marx also conceives of *things* as Relations. Unless this conclusion can be defended, the interpretation I have offered of social Relations will have to be drastically altered. By drawing together the relevant evidence and tracing the history of the broad philosophical position that underlies Marx's practice, I shall try in this chapter to provide such a defense.

Most modern thinkers would maintain that there cannot be relations without things just as there cannot be things without relations. Things, according to this "common sense" view, constitute the basic terms of each relation and cannot themselves be reduced to relations. However, this objection only applies to Marx if what he is doing is caricatured as trying to reduce the terms of a relation to that which is said to stand between them. But his is not an attempt to reify "between"

Conservatives

Featured speech - McCoy Award Acceptance Speech

Video: Marxism and Progress

Marxism (the cartoon version)

From Theory to Practice

Radical Jokes

Photos

Recommended Web Sites

NYU Course Bibliographies

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

Poems

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

Kiki & Bubu explain the

or "together". Instead, as we saw in the previous chapter, the sense of "relation" itself has been extended to cover what is related, so that either term may be taken to express both in their peculiar connection.

No one would deny that things appear and function as they do because of their spatial-temporal ties with other things, including man as a creature with both physical and social characteristics. To conceive of things as Relations is simply to interiorize this interdependence—as we have seen Marx do with social factors—in the thing itself. Thus, the book before me expresses and therefore, on this model, relationally contains everything from the fact that there is a light on in my room to the social practices and institutions of my society which made this particular work possible. The conditions of its existence are taken to be part of what it is, and indicated by the fact that it is just this and nothing else. In the history of ideas, where every new thought is invariably an old one warmed over, this view is generally referred to as the philosophy of internal relations.[1]

There are four kinds of evidence for attributing a philosophy of internal relations to Marx. First, Marx makes statements which place him on the side of those who view things as Relations. He declares, for example, that "the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man" (Marx, 1959a, 103). Marx also calls man (who, after all, has a body as well as a social significance) the "ensemble [aggregate] of social relations" (Marx and Engels, 1964, 646). Elsewhere, this same creature is said to be "a natural object, a thing, although a living conscious thing" (Marx, 1958, 202). Marx can refer to man as a thing as well as an ensemble of social relations, because he conceives of each thing as a Relation, in this instance, as the ensemble of social relations. Engels' comments are often more explicit still, as when he maintains that "the atom itself is nothing more than a Relation" (Marx and Engels, 1941, 221).

To be sure, Marx also speaks—particularly when treating the fetishism of commodities—of social relations which are taken for things. However, it is not difficult to interpret these instances as attempts to make a distinction between two kinds of Relations, one of which (in conformity with ordinary usage) he calls "things". The view I am proposing does not require that Marx cease speaking of "things", only that they also be grasped as Relations. While statements indicating the existence of things can be interpreted relationally, his statements which present things as Relations cannot be interpreted as easily in a way that accords the former their customary independence.

neoliberal shift in labor relations

Second, even if Marx's direct comments on the subject of things as Relations are ambiguous, his treatment of man and nature (or its material components) as Relations with internal ties to one another is not: "That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself" (Marx, 1595a, 74). Likewise, when he declares that man "is nature" or that his objects "reside in the nature of his being", the ties to which our attention is drawn are clearly *not* external ones (Marx, 1959a, 156). Rather, the individual is held to be in some kind of union with his object; they are *in* fact relationally contained in one another, which requires that each be conceived of as a Relation.

The same inner tie is presented from the other side when Marx declares that he views "the evolution of the economic foundations of society" as a "process of natural history", or includes among the forces of nature "those of man's own nature" along with "those of so-called nature" (Marx, 1958, 10; Marx, 1973, 488). Unless we accord Marx a conception of things as Relations, those comments (of which I have quoted but a few) which reveal man as somehow an extension of nature, and nature as somehow an extension of man, can only be understood metaphorically or as poetic utterances.[2]

Third, if we take the position that Marx drew an indelible line between things and social Relations we are left with the task of explaining what kind of interaction he saw in the physical world and how the two worlds of nature and society are related. Does Marx view natural development on the model of cause and effect? He specifically states his opposition to seeking for first causes in economics and religion, where it is the relations in which the so-called first causes stand that still require explanation (Marx, 1959a, 68-9). In a rare instance where he records the connection he sees between two physical objects, his adherence to a philosophy of internal relations is evident. "The sun", he says, "is the object of the plant—an indispensable object to it confirming its life—just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an expression of the life awakening power of the sun, of the sun's objective essential power" (Marx, 1959a, 157). The sun's affect on the plant, which most of us are inclined to treat causally, is considered by Marx to be an "expression" of the sun itself, a means by which it manifests what it is and, in this way, part of it.

To clarify this, Marx adds that "A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature" (Marx, 1959a, 157). Each physical object, by virtue of being a natural object, is more than

whatever part of it is apparent or easier to isolate. As natural objects, the sun and the plant have their natures—as Marx puts it—outside themselves, such that the relation between them is conceived as appertaining to each, and is part of the full meaning conveyed by their respective concepts.[3]

It is not only the difficulty of attributing to Marx a causal explanation of physical phenomena but also—as I have indicated—the problems raised by combining a common sense view of nature with his conception of social relations that argues for his having a philosophy of internal relations. Sidney Hook offers the arresting case of a critic who makes a clean break between Marx's social relations, of which he gives one of the better accounts, and the objects of nature. Hook claims "the Marxian totality is social and limited by other totalities", and that "For Marx there are wholes not the whole" (Hook, 1962, 62). This raises the practical problem of how to explain the affect of the physical world on social phenomena. For example, how are we to interpret Marx's claim that the mode of production determines what occurs in other social sectors when the mode of production includes machines and factories (physical objects) as well as the way people use these objects and cooperate among themselves (social relations)? The former suggests a causal interpretation of this claim, for this is the kind of explanation into which physical objects generally enter; while the latter suggests one that emphasizes reciprocal action between the parts, for this is the kind of explanation into which social relations generally enter.[4]

In *From Hegel to Marx* and *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* Hook wavers between these two incompatible explanatory models. Under pressure to choose, in his most recent work, *Marx and the Marxists*, he has finally settled on a causal account, and Marx's conception of history is declared a "monistic theory" with the mode of production held solely responsible for all major social developments (Hook, 1955, 37, 36). In the last analysis, the division of Marxism into separate wholes simply did not allow Hook to use his own considerable insights into Marx's social relations to explain the complex interaction which he knows is there. This is not to dismiss the fact that for a variety of reasons Hook's views on Marxism have changed over the years. I have simply indicated the position taken in his early works which allowed for and even rendered likely this later development.

Fourth and last, I believe I am justified in ascribing a philosophy of internal relations to Marx because it would have required a total break with the

philosophical tradition in which he was nourished for this not to be so. Hegel, Leibniz and Spinoza had all sought for the meanings of things and/or of the terms which characterize them in their relations inside the whole (variously referred to as "substance", "nature", "God", etc); and, judging by his voluminous notebooks, these are thinkers the young Marx studied with the greatest care (Marx/Engels, 1932, 99-112).

It is chiefly because the philosophy of internal relations is currently held in such disrepute that it is assumed Marx could not have accepted it, and, consequently, that the burden of proof rests upon me to show that he did. In presenting evidence from Marx's writings which places him in this tradition I have agreed to play the role of prosecutor. I should now like to suggest, however, that if Marx inherited this conception from his immediate predecessors, the burden of proof rests with those who believe he discarded it; in which case we are also entitled to know the conception of things and social factors with which he replaced it—an atomist outlook, such as is implied in the interpretation of Marxism as "economic determinism", or something completely different for which no name exists as Althusser claims, or what? In the remainder of this chapter and in the one that follows I shall briefly sketch the history of the philosophy of internal relations, and respond to some of the "devastating" criticisms which have kept writers of all persuasions from even taking seriously the possibility that Marx might have shared this view.

II

The philosophy of internal relations, which can be traced as far back as the early Greek philosopher Parmenides, first came into prominence in the modern period in the work of Spinoza. Spinoza's own version of this philosophy is constructed upon Aristotle's definition of "substance" as that which is capable of independent existence. Since only nature taken as a whole is capable of independent existence, it is, according to this view, the sole substance. It is such a unified nature which Spinoza labels "God". All components of this single substance, whether material things or thoughts, are conceived of as its transient forms, as its 'modes' of being and, hence, expressive of the sum of interrelations which determines their individual characters. For Spinoza, who accents the totality, the parts are strictly adjectival (Spinoza, 1925, Parts I and II).

Leibniz, on the other hand, puts his emphasis on the parts and devotes little attention to the whole he sees reflected in each. Not one, but an infinite number of

substances exist for him. By asserting that these substances, which he calls "monads", have individual qualities but no extension, Leibniz is refusing to treat what we ordinarily take to be things as the basic units of reality. However we understand the queer mental construct that is Leibniz's monad, what stands out clearly from his account is the relational tie that exists between each one and the universe. Hence, he can claim, "there is no term so absolute or so detached that it doesn't enclose relations and the perfect analysis of which doesn't lead to other things and even to everything else, so that one could say that relative terms mark expressly the configuration which they contain" (Leibniz, 1966, 195).[5]

Coming a century later, Hegel was perhaps the first to work through the main implications of the philosophy of internal relations and to construct in some detail the total system which it implied. In this he was aided—as is often the case in philosophy—by the character of the impasse bequeathed to him by his immediate predecessor, Kant. The latter had convincingly demonstrated that things are no more than the qualities by which we know them, but found such a conclusion unacceptable. Determined to believe that what appears is something more than (really, for him, something behind) what actually strikes our senses, Kant invented the nebulous "thing in itself", which remains the same through all changes in the entity.

Hegel exhibited less timidity before Kant's first conclusion, that things dissolve upon inspection into their qualities, but considered that the decisive task is to show how this conclusion must be understood. Setting aside for the moment the idealistic content of Hegel's philosophy, his main contribution consists of providing the context of the whole, or "Absolute", in which to place both Kant's problem and answer. Thus, for Hegel, the thing under examination is not just the sum of its qualities but, through the links these qualities (individually or together in the thing) have with the rest of nature, it is also a particular expression of the whole. To a great extent, the distinctiveness of Hegel's system lies in the various means used to maintain our awareness of the whole while he sets about distinguishing between its parts. His formidable vocabulary receives most of its character from this task. For example, when Hegel refers to things as "determinations", "moments" or "phenomena", he means to suggest something partial and unfinished, something whose full analysis requires that it be conceived of as including far more (both in space and through time) than is immediately apparent.

In establishing the identity of each thing in its relation to the whole, as a mode

of expression of the Absolute, Hegel altered the notion of identity used by Kant and of truth itself. Mathematical equality (1=1) is replaced as the model for comprehending identity by what may be called "relational equality", where the entity in question is considered identical with the whole that it relationally expresses. For Hegel, "Self-relation in essence is the form of identity", where "essence" refers to just such extended relations (Hegel, 1965, 211). However, identity in this sense is clearly a matter of degree; small, simple things possess less identity with the whole than large, complex ones. For most modern philosophers, this proposition is manifestly absurd, but Hegel not only embraces it but uses it as a central thesis on which to construct other notions.

Thus, he maintains that truth "is the whole" (Hegel, 1964, 81). If things are more or less identical with the whole that they express, then what can be said about them is more or less true, depending on how much of what can be truly said of the whole is said about them. Each thing being relationally identical with the whole, all that is true of the latter is its entire truth; and everything short of that—which means all that we say about particular things (determinations, moments, etc.)—is partial truth. Hegel himself registers the practical effect of this interpretation for his phenomenological undertaking when he declares that knowledge "can only be set forth fully . . . in the form of system" (Hegel, 1964, 85).[6] To state what is known about any one thing is to describe the system in which it exists; it is to present, as Hegel invariably did, each part as a facet of the whole. Returning to Kant's dilemma, Hegel, while denying the existence of a "thing in itself" behind observed reality, affirms that through their interrelations things are much more than they appear.

Is this the aspect of Hegel's philosophy which Marx disparaged as idealist? I think not. Hegel constructed the framework described here in order to treat ideas, characterizing what I have called the "whole" as "Absolute Idea" or "Reason". Marx's criticism is always directed against how Hegel chose to apply this framework and his preferred subject matter, and *never* against the relational quality of his units or the fact of system which this entails.[7] Essentially, his complaint is that having produced the category of "Absolute Idea" from the real world by generalizing from the thinking of living men, Hegel produces the real world, the actual thoughts of men, out of this category. Individual ideas are given a mystical significance by representing them as moments in the life of a generalization which they themselves have given rise to.

After reversing the real relation between ideas and their concept, Hegel is led to reverse the real relation between ideas and nature—it is impossible for nature to effect the immanent unfolding of what is absolute. There is nothing left for the material world to be but an externalization and profanation of what people think about it. Without ever stating explicitly that ideas create matter (there has been considerable confusion over this point), by presenting real developments as following upon and reflecting what occurs in the realm of ideas, this is the general impression that Hegel conveys. Marx pinpoints his error as that of "considering the real as the result of self-coordinating, self-absorbed, and spontaneously operating thought" (Marx, 1904, 293). There is, in short, no contradiction between opposing the role Hegel gives to ideas and their concept and accepting the relational framework that houses these views. Feuerbach—from whom Marx derived much of his criticism of Hegel—did just this.[8] And, indeed, Marx's silence on Hegel's relational conception, while criticizing so much of what he wrote, speaks eloquently in favor of this interpretation.[9]

Marx's philosophical rebellion began with his refusal to accept the independent development of ideas, a refusal in which he was by no means unique. In his case, this led to study which showed that social change generally preceded Hegel's vaunted history of ideas. He concluded that it was just these "material" relations, relegated by Hegel to the backside facets of an all pervasive thesis, which required the closest investigation in order to comprehend both ideas and the real world. What has been insufficiently recognized, however, is that in stressing social factors Marx does not dispense with the broad philosophy of internal relations in which he was initially introduced to them. Naturally, a new focus of interest as well as the real ties he uncovers in research required the adoption of some fresh concepts, but they too were incorporated into this relational scheme.

It is hardly remarkable (though seldom remarked upon) that whenever any system-owning attribute of a factor is at question, Marx generally relies on Hegel's vocabulary. "Identity", "abstract", "essence" and "concrete", for example, are all used by Marx, as they were by Hegel, to mark some aspect of the whole in the part. These terms which appear in rich profusion throughout Marx's writings—late as well as early—cannot he consistently interpreted in any other way. Likewise, it is clear that the unusual approach to meaning which was attributed earlier to both these thinkers is a necessary result of the relational conception they shared.

One of the more significant effects of Marx's refusal to countenance the independent development of ideas is that the concept of the whole, which in the form of Absolute Idea served Hegel as the source of its particular expressions, no longer has the central role to play in the system it represents. It remains the sum of all relations and that which is expressed in each, but offers little help, as a distinct concept, in elucidating any one of them. The real world is too complex, diffuse and unclear in its detail serve as an adequate explanation for any of the events that go on inside it. One result is that whereas Hegel offers a large assortment of terms in which he attempts to capture the whole—"Absolute Idea", "Spirit", "God", "Universal", "Truth"—Marx does not offer any (unless we choose to consider "capitalist mode of production" or "history", meaning class history, in this light). It is likely that this difference is at least partly responsible for the belief that Marx did not hold a philosophy of internal relations. However, what essentially characterizes this view is the internal nature of the tie between the parts (whatever parts), and not the function of the whole *qua* whole in clarifying these ties. In this same tradition, some thinkers, such as Spinoza and Hegel, devote considerable attention to what they take to be the totality, and others, such as Leibniz and Marx, do not.

Naturally the conception of change and development embedded in Marx's "materialistic" philosophy of internal relations differs significantly from its counterpart in Hegel's philosophy. The reconciliation that Hegel foresaw as the eventual outcome of history was the World Spirit becoming conscious of itself. In this context, development could only be the self-discovery of the greater ideational form of whatever is developing. The individual himself is reduced to passivity, except in so far as he partakes in his thoughts of the understanding that properly belongs to the World Spirit.

Even before Marx, the school of Young Hegelians led by Bruno Bauer replaced Hegel's World Spirit as subject with man. In the early works of this group, reconciliation was understood, however imprecisely, in terms of revolutionary activity. Disappointed by the failure of the radical movement of their day, they adopted by 1843 the pose of "Critical Criticism" for which they are better known, holding that reconciliation occurs through "right interpretation", through people coming to understand the world.[10] Marx, who was a close friend of Bauer's during his student days in Berlin, developed the Young Hegelians' early perspective: if man is the subject, the way to reconcile himself with the world, now understood as his object (actual or potential), is actively to change it. Change becomes a matter

of man transforming his existence. From being a passive observer of development, as in Hegel, the individual has become the actor whose daily life brings it about.

Even from this brief outline, it is apparent that Marx's Hegelian heritage is too complex to allow simple characterization. Hegel never ceased being important for Marx, as Lenin, for example, perceived when he wrote in his notebook in 1914, "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapters, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx" (Lenin, 1961, 180).[11] To those who argue that Marx made his break with Hegel in 1842, 1844 or 1848, my reply is that there was no such break. This does not mean that I would like to join the ranks of critics who maintain that Marx was a Hegelian, with its connotations of idealist bias, foreshadowed behavior and metaphysical posturing. In my opinion, the choice offered by these two positions is not the real one. If by "theory" we mean—as I think we should—an explanation in general terms of particular events or conditions, it is doubtful whether Marx in any period of his life, going back to university days, ever agreed with any of Hegel's theories, which gave to the World Spirit and ideas generally a role that he found unacceptable.[12] However, as regards the epistemological decision concerning the form in which any and all subject matter is considered, Marx never wavered from the relational conception bequeathed to him by Hegel.

Of what then does Marx's movement away from Hegel, which practically all writers on this subject have noted, consist? If we rule out Hegel's concrete theories (which Marx always rejected) and the philosophy of internal relations (which he always accepted), this development could only involve the meaning of the concepts Marx borrowed as well as those new ones he introduced. By transferring his attention to the real world Marx instills the concepts taken from Hegel with fresh meaning while removing their idealistic content. This upheaval was not accomplished in a moment; it had to be worked out, and this took time.

Likewise, by progressively shifting his main area of concern from philosophy to politics and then to economics, the information and ties Marx uncovered became parts—and sometimes the major part—of the sense conveyed by these same concepts. I have already noted that the meanings of Marx's concepts were extended through his research, and that their particular denotations were determined by what was relevant to the problem under consideration. But Marx's

research never ceased, and new problems were constantly arising out of actual events and his study of them. It is in the developing meanings of Marx's concepts, which reacted upon his system but left its relational features intact, that we can best observe his growing estrangement from Hegel. The character of this *evolution*, which began when Marx the student read Hegel and registered his first uncertainties, is seriously distorted by any talk of "breaks" and even of "stages" and "periods".

III

Marx never dealt with the special problems raised by the materialist content he gave to the philosophy of internal relations. No doubt this would have been part of the work he wanted to do on Hegel, but the pressing claims of his social and economic studies and of political activity never allowed him to begin. Provided that he could successfully operate with his relational view, he gave low priority to its elaboration and defense. This task was undertaken to some degree by Engels, particularly in his writings on the physical sciences, but more directly by the German tanner, Joseph Dietzgen. "Here is our philosopher," Marx said on introducing Dietzgen to the Hague Congress of the First International (Dietzgen, 1928, 15).[13] Yet, despite further eulogies by Engels, Dietzgen's work remains relatively little known.[14] However, Dietzgen's views provide a necessary supplement to Marx's own. The relationship between these two thinkers is clearly set out by Anton Pannekoeck, who claims that Marx demonstrated how ideas "are produced by the surrounding world", while Dietzgen showed "how the impressions of the surrounding world are transformed into ideas" (Pannekoeck, 1948, 24).[15]

Mindful of the dangers of using what one thinker says to support an interpretation of another, I shall limit my comments to features which Marx could not have missed in praising Dietzgen's work. Like Hegel, Dietzgen affirms that the existence of any thing is manifested through qualities which are its relations to other things. Hence, "Any thing that is torn out of its contextual relations ceases to exist" (Dietzgen, 1928, 96). So, too, Dietzgen declares—in almost the same words as Hegel-"The universal is the truth," meaning that the full truth about any one thing includes (because of its internal relations) the truth about everything (Dietzgen, 1928, 110).[16] But unlike Hegel—and Marx too—who proceeds from these foundations to an investigation of the whole in each part, Dietzgen's inquiry is directed toward how such parts get established in the first place. For Hegel's and Marx's approach suggests that the preliminary problem of deciding which

units of the whole to treat as parts has already been solved. Yet, it may legitimately be asked whether the unity posited by this conception does not preclude the very existence of those separate structures in which they claim to have caught sight of this unity. This is essentially the problem of individuation, or "abstraction", and it constitutes a major stumbling block for any philosophy of internal relations.

Dietzgen's contribution to the solution of this problem is his account of what can occur in individuation and what does occur. He asks, "Where do we find any practical unit outside of our abstract conceptions? Two halves, four fourths, eight eighths, or an infinite number of separate parts form the material out of which the mind fashions the mathematical unit. This book, its leaves, its letters, or their parts —are they units? Where do I begin and where do I stop?" (Dietzgen, 1928, 103). His answer is that the real world is composed of an infinite number of sense perceptible qualities whose interdependence makes them a single whole. If we began by applying the relational conception to social factors and then to things, we see now that it can also apply to qualities. Because the process of linking up qualities may be stopped at any point between the individual quality and the whole, the ways of dividing up the latter into distinct parts called "things" is endless. One result is that what appears as a thing here may be taken as an attribute of some other thing there. Every quality can be conceived of as a thing, and every thing as a quality; it all depends where the line is drawn. So much for what is possible.[17]

What actually occurs, that is the construction of units of a particular size and kind out of the "formless multiplicity" presented to our senses, is the work of the human mind. In Dietzgen's words, "the absolutely relative and transient forms of the sensual world serve as raw material for our brain activity, in order through abstraction of the general or like characteristics, to become systematized, classified or ordered for our consciousness" (Dietzgen, 1928, 103). The forms in which the world appears to our senses are "relative" and "transient", but they are also said to possess the "like characteristics" which allow us to generalize from them. "The world of the mind", we learn, finds "its material, its premise, its proof, its beginning, and its boundary, in sensual reality" (Dietzgen, 1928, 119). In this reality, like qualities give rise to a single conception because they are, in fact, alike. This is responsible, too, for the wide agreement in the use of concepts, particularly of those which refer to physical objects. Yet, it is only when we supply these similar qualities with a concept that they become a distinct entity, and can

be considered separately from the vast interconnection in which they reside.

According to Dietzgen, therefore, the whole is revealed in certain standard parts (in which some thinkers have sought to reestablish the relations of the whole), because these are the parts in which human beings through conceptualization have actually fragmented the whole. The theoretical problem of individuation is successfully resolved by people in their daily practice. The fact that they do not see what they are doing as individuating parts from an interconnected whole is, of course, another question, and one with which Dietzgen does not concern himself. He is content to make the point that, operating with real sense material, it is the conceptualizing activity of people that gives the world the particular "things" which these same people see in it. Even mind, we learn, results from abstracting certain common qualities out of real experiences of thinking; they become something apart when we consider them as "Mind" (Dietzgen, 1928, 120).[18]

Dietzgen's practical answer to the problem of individuation suggests how structures can exist within a philosophy of internal relations, something which Althusser for one has declared impossible.[19] Yet, if individuation is not an arbitrary act but one governed by broad similarities existing in nature itself, there is a necessary, if vague, correlation between such natural similarities and the structures conveyed by our concepts. This is how the study of any conceptual scheme, whether based on a philosophy of internal relations or not, teaches us something about the real world (unfortunately, this cannot be pressed—as many insist on doing—beyond what is common to all conceptual schemes). That Marx, through his study of capitalism, came to stress certain social relations as more important does not in any way conflict with his conception of each part as relationally containing its ties of dependence to everything else. The fact that some ties are preferred and may, for certain purposes, be viewed as forming a structure is no more surprising than any other act of individuation (conceptualization) based on real similarities.

The significant service Dietzgen renders Marx is to show how a proper balance can be reached on a relational view between accepting the reality of the external world (including, too, the general trustworthiness of sense perception) and holding that the conceptual activity of human thought is responsible for the precise forms in which we grasp the world. Marx's support for Dietzgen and, more so, his own practice in conceptualizing new social units show clearly that he

accepted such a balance. Yet, by stressing the first part (in criticism of his idealist opponents) and neglecting to develop the second, he left his epistemology open to misinterpretation as a kind of "naive realism"; and it is this belief that lies behind the widespread, mistaken use of ordinary language criteria to understand Marx's concepts.[20]

IV

The line of reasoning which I have followed so far in this work may be summarized as follows: either Marx means what he seems to (what common sense and ordinary language strongly suggest he means) or he does not. If he does, many of his claims appear very one-sided and are easy to falsify. Furthermore, he frequently wrote sentences which are utter nonsense, and was wise enough to avoid his own theories when describing any concrete situation. The attempt by some "vulgar" Marxists to defend the master while accepting the interpretation of Marxism popularly referred to as "economic determinism" is vulnerable at every point.

If Marx did not mean what we ordinarily mean in using the same terms, it is incumbent upon those who take this view to offer not only an alternative interpretation but also another basis for their interpretation than common sense. It is not enough to claim that words in Marxism have unusual meanings (no matter what we take them to be) without making clear how Marx could use words in this way. In undertaking the latter task, I followed a thread leading from Marx's *actual* use of concepts to the way in which he referred to concepts, his view of them as social components, his treatment of social components as Relations, his use of Relations as meanings and, finally, to his belief in a philosophy of internal relations which served as the necessary framework for these practices.

Besides placing Marx in this tradition, I have also tried to make the point that the relational conception shared by such thinkers as Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel and Marx cannot be rejected out of hand. Yet, holding that it can be defended is not quite the same as defending it. This is an important distinction, and it is one readers should bear in mind. Only after examining the main criticisms directed against this relational conception (chapters 4 and 5), seeing how it is connected to other aspects of Marx's method, and in particular to the process of abstraction (chapters 5-9), and then seeing how Marx applies this method to problems in the real world (chapters 6, 8, 9, and 12) will it be possible to make a fair evaluation of its worth.

1. Outside Marx's peculiar conception of things as Relations, there is nothing so unusual in viewing the whole as bound up in some sense in each of its parts. Writing in 1880, William James says, "it is a common platitude that a complete acquaintance with any one thing, however small, would require a knowledge of the entire universe. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but some of the remote conditions of his fall are to be found in the milky way, in our federal constitution or in the early history of Europe" (James, 1956, 216). I remain unconvinced, however, that what James calls a "platitude" ever really was so common, or that if it was it is now, or that if it was and is now that it has ever been more than an unintegrated hypothesis for most of the thinkers concerned. Marx's philosophy of internal relations goes further by conceptualizing these ties in each part and is—as I hope to show—thoroughly integrated in his work.
2. Kamenka has noted that Marx sometimes incorporates nature in man, but he treats this as an unfortunate metaphysical departure and an occasion for criticism (Kamenka, 1962, 97-9).
3. Engels, whose extensive studies in the physical sciences were well known to Marx, never offers what we ordinarily take to be a causal explanation. Instead, his position is that "natural science confirms what Hegel has said . . .that reciprocal action is the true *causa finalis* of things. We cannot go back further than to knowledge of this reciprocal action, for the very reason that there is nothing behind to know" (Engels, 1954, 307). And this mutual effect does not occur between conceptually distinct parts, for as Engels tells us, "What Hegel calls reciprocal action is the organic body" (Engels, 1954, 406). To explain change in the physical world by referring to the reciprocal action of its parts is said to be the same thing as presenting the world as an organic body.
4. We come across a similar problem within the mode of production itself in trying to grasp the tie Marx posits between the distribution of the means of production and the distribution of the working population that corresponds to it. Unless the physical means of production are conceived of as internally related to the people who work on them, the distribution of the two cannot be part of an organic union, allowing for full reciprocal effect. In this case, there will be a strong temptation to interpret this relation causally, to find that the

distribution of the means of production determines the distribution of population. Whereas Marx himself refers to the latter's tie to the former as a "further determination of the same Relation" ("*eine weitere Bestimmung desselben Verhältnisses*") (Marx, 1953, 17). This has been mistranslated in the English version as "what is practically another wording of the same fact" (Marx, 1904, 286). It is in this manner that the interpretation I am offering is often hidden by translators who do not know quite what sense to make of "*Verhältnis*".

5. For the clearest statement of Leibniz's views on this subject, see his *Monadologie*.
6. Truth which can only be presented in the form of system can only be evaluated by the criterion of coherence. On one occasion, Hegel goes so far as to equate truth with consistency (Hegel, 1965, 52). Such an approach to truth sets as the number one problem of logic to "examine the forms of thought touching their ability to hold truth", that is, roughly, how much of the system which is the whole truth is actually conceptualized (brought to the fore and made an object of consciousness) in each of our concepts (Hegel, 1965, 52).
7. Typical of statements which indicate this distinction is Marx's claim that "*The Phenomenology* is, therefore, an occult critique... but inasmuch as it keeps steadily in view man's estrangement, even though man appears only in the shape of mind, there lie concealed in it *all* the elements of criticism, already *prepared* and *elaborated* in a manner often rising far above the Hegelian standpoint" (Marx's emphasis) (Marx, 1959a, 150).
8. Of Hegel's philosophy, Feuerbach had said, "We only have to make of the predicate a subject, and of this subject the object and principle, we only have therefore to invert speculative philosophy in order to have the revealed truth, pure and naked truth" (Feuerbach, 1959, 224). In the inversion performed by Feuerbach, the philosophy of internal relations remains unaltered.
9. Marx's critique of Hegel (which includes as well, it must be noted, his favorable remarks) is to be found throughout his writings. The most important discussions of Hegel occur in the *1844 Manuscripts*, 142-71; and in the "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'" and "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right' Introduction" in Marx, 1970, 1-127 and 128-142. I would also add, since it is perhaps the clearest treatment of Hegel's central philosophical fault, Marx's attack on the "Mystery of

Speculative Construction" in *The Holy Family*, 78-83. Despite all the pages devoted to Hegel, however, Marx's position is nowhere fully worked out. On the whole, because most of what he wrote on this subject came early in life and was more often than not directed against thinkers who had accepted the worst of Hegel, Marx's attitude appears more negative than it really is. Later on, he often mentioned in letters to friends (Engels, Kugelmann, Dietzgen) that he would like to write something on the positive value of Hegel's method, but he never had the opportunity to do so. My own sketchy and one-sided treatment of the Marx-Hegel link can be supplemented by reading Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* and Shlomo Avineri's *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*.

10. The widespread impression that the Young Hegelians were always Critical Critics, an impression due mainly to Marx's attack on them in *The Holy Family* and Hook's popular study, *From Hegel to Marx*, has recently been corrected in David McLellan's *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*.
11. It is interesting to speculate what revisions this late enthusiasm for Hegel would have caused in Lenin's major philosophical effort, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), written at a time when—according to Lenin—"none of the Marxists understood Marx".
12. In a poem written in 1837, when Marx was only nineteen years old, Kant's and Fichte's preoccupation with the world of thought is contrasted with his own concern for the everyday life of man. (Marx/Engels, 1932, 42) It is in this context that Marx's oft quoted letter to his father, written in the same year, in which he speaks of moving "closer" to the Hegelian view of the world, must be understood (Marx, 1962, 15).
13. Marx's enthusiasm for Dietzgen was not unqualified. To Kugelmann, he writes of a "certain confusion and... too frequent repetition" in a manuscript that Dietzgen had sent him, but makes it clear that despite this the work "contains much that is excellent" (Marx, 1941, 80). Since these comments were directed to the manuscript of Dietzgen's work and forwarded to him, it is not unlikely that they affected the published version.
14. Engels writes, "And this materialist dialectic, which for years has been our best working tool and our sharpest weapon, was, remarkably enough, discovered not only by us, but also, independently of us and even of Hegel, by Joseph Dietzgen" (Marx and Engels, 1951, 350-1). Engels too was not altogether unambiguous in his estimation of Dietzgen, whose work he, like Marx, first saw in manuscript form. Writing to Marx, Engels complains that

Dietzgen's use of the dialectic appears "more in flashes than as a connected whole". On the other hand, "the account of the thing-in-itself as a thing made of thought" is scored as "brilliant" (Marx and Engels, 1941, 252).

15. This is the nature of their relationship; whether one accepts the claims made by Pannekoeck is something else again.
16. This approach to truth is accompanied, as in the case of Hegel, by a use of "identity" to express what I have called "relational equality" (Dietzgen, 1928, 111).
17. Dietzgen asks further, "Is not every *thing* a part, is not *every* part a thing? Is the color of a leaf less of a thing than that leaf itself?... Color is only the sum of reactions of the leaf, light, and eye, and so is all the rest of the matter of a leaf an aggregate of different interactions. In the same way in which our faculty of thought deprives a leaf of its color attribute and sets it apart as a 'thing itself', may we continue to deprive that leaf of all its other attributes, and so doing we finally take away everything that makes the leaf. Color is according to its quality no less a substance than the leaf, and the leaf is no less an attribute than its color. As the color is an attribute of the leaf, so the leaf is an attribute of the tree, the tree an attribute of the earth, the earth an attribute of the universe. The universe is the substance, substance in general, and all other substances are in relation to it only particular substances or attributes. But by this world-substance is revealed the fact, that the *essence of the thing-in-itself, as distinguished from its manifestations, is only a concept of the mind or mental thing*" (Dietzgen's emphasis) (Dietzgen, 1928, 103-4). It should be recalled that it is Dietzgen's account of the "thing-in-itself as a thing made of thought" which Engels said was "brilliant".
18. Though Dietzgen makes a determined assault on the empiricist dogma that perception is passive and that our mind merely registers the effect produced upon it by external reality, his account of the conceptualization process remains partial. The link with language is underdeveloped, and the affect of physical needs and of various social and economic structures on conceptualization requires elucidation. Much of the relevant work on these subjects, of course, was unavailable in Dietzgen's time, but what was available—such as Marx's own writings—was not always put to the best use.
19. It is because of the supposed inability of this relational view to house structures that Althusser rejects the conclusion to which so much of his work

points. Instead, after clearly demonstrating the impossibility of isolating social factors in Marxism, he argues that Marx instigates a revolution in philosophy by making the "structure of the whole" (a previously untried concept) ultimately responsible for the character and development of any part (Althusser, 1965, 166). On my view, in attempting to reconstruct the whole from each major vantage point, Marx is erecting—if we insist on this expression—as many structures of the whole as there are major units in his analysis. The whole grasped as the interrelated conditions necessary for the existence of capital has a somewhat different structure from this same whole grasped as the interrelated conditions necessary for the alienation of workers, and so on. The difference in where we begin leads to a difference in perspective, in the size and importance of other factors, and in the relevance of the various ties between them. Althusser's fundamental error lies in misusing the concept of structure in much the same way that Hegel misused the concept of idea; that is, a generalization based on examining many particular instances (in this case, various particular structures of the whole) is treated as an independent entity, which is then said to determine the very parts that gave rise to it. Althusser has in fact confused structure with complexity, so that when Marx speaks of the social whole as an "already given concrete and living aggregate" ("*schon gegebnen konkreten, lebendigen Ganzen*") (Marx, 1953, 22), Althusser paraphrases this as a "complex, structured, already given whole" ("*un tout complexe structure déjà donnée*") (Althusser, 1966, 198). The transition, apparently slight but possessing serious ramifications, from the idea of complexity to that of structure has no basis in Marx's text.

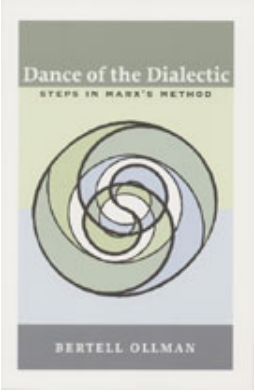
20. After Dietzgen, the philosophy of internal relations has been largely ignored by Marx's followers and critics alike. Though a number of writers have alluded to relational elements in Marx's thought, I am not aware of a single full-scale study of the philosophy in which they are embedded, with the possible exception of Hyman Levy's A *Philosophy for a Modern Man* (1938). As a result, it was left to thinkers as far removed from the Marxist tradition as F.H. Bradley and Alfred North Whitehead (to mention only the major figures) to continue wrestling with the problems posed by this relational conception. See, for example, Bradley's, *Appearance and Reality*, 25-34 and 572-85, where there is a particularly good discussion of the concept "relation". Though burdened with a cumbersome jargon, Whitehead's is (along with Levy's book) the most noteworthy attempt to work out a

relational view of physical nature. See, especially, his *The Concept of Nature* and *Process and Reality*.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 4

Is There a Marxian Ethic?

The question Marx set out to answer in *Capital* is 'Why is labor represented by the value of its product and labor-time by the magnitude of that value?'"[1] If Marx had succeeded in writing the work he planned to do on ethics, I believe the question which would have occupied most of his attention is 'Why are approval and condemnation represented in our society as value judgments?' Marx's critique of the capitalist economy is essentially an explanation of how existing forms of production, distribution, exchange and consumption arose, and how they are dependent on one another and on the character of human activity and achievement in areas far removed from the economy proper. Any critique of ethics would likewise have concentrated on showing how the distinctive forms of our ethical life, such as treating approval and disapproval as value judgments, are internally related to the whole social fabric out of which they arose. Why is this aspect of reality organized in this manner into these forms?

Such an approach is already apparent in some of Marx's brief comments on this subject. He says, for example, that in bourgeois ethics speaking and loving lose their characteristic significance and 'are interpreted as expressions and manifestations of a third artificially introduced Relation, the Relation of utility'. According to Marx, 'something is demanded of the individual's power or capacity to do anything which is a foreign product, a Relation determined by social conditions—and this is the utility Relation'.[2] In short, a social relation has become a thing in the form of a principle, and moreover a thing which exerts important

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - McCoy Award Acceptance Speech

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

influence over people's thinking and action.

Unfortunately, this approach to the problem of ethics has received little attention from Marxist scholars. Instead, they have generally been content to elaborate on the following claims: '(1) moral values change; (2) they change in accordance with society's productive forces and its economic relations; and (3) the dominant moral values at any given time are those of the dominant economic class'.[3] As part of this case, concepts such as 'good', 'right' and 'justice' are shown to derive their very meaning from the conditions of life and corresponding interests of the men who use them.[4]

One result of avoiding the larger question of why acts of approval and condemnation in capitalist society appear as value judgments, as deductions from absolute principles, is that Marx's own acts of approval and condemnation defy easy classification. Without wishing to probe too deeply into what is a vast and growing subject, the unorthodox position taken in the last two chapters requires some clarification of what have been called 'value judgments' in Marx's own works. Is there a Marxian ethic, no doubt different from other ethical systems in what it is based on and in what it advocates but constructed like them and performing the same general function? The debate on this subject has been badly marred by the existence of several different (and not always recognized) standards for deciding. Depending on which one or few are chosen, Marx may be taken as being, or not being, or both being and not being an ethical thinker. For example, if we are asking whether Marx considered he had ethical views and/or used such stock ethical terms as 'good', 'bad', 'evil', 'value judgment', etc., clearly the answer is that Marx is not an ethical thinker. We come quickly to the same conclusion if our standard is whether Marx is moralizing, that is concerned with scolding and praising as ends in themselves.

On the other hand, if we are asking whether Marx expresses feeling of approval and disapproval in his works, the answer can only that Marx is an ethical thinker. The same answer applies if the standard is whether Marx takes sides with one of the classes he is describing, and again, if it is a matter of whether he uses his writings to incite people to act. But perhaps the most important standard that has been used concerns the character of Marx's own personal commitment. Is Marx motivated, it is asked, by some idea of the 'good'? Phrased in this manner, once more I am inclined to respond—though with some hesitation—that Marx is an ethical thinker. However, unlike most writers who adopt this position, I find it

neoliberal shift in labor relations

difficult to decide just what is his idea of the 'good'. Is Marx's morality a matter of defending the interests of the proletariat, whom he thinks of as 'the hardest working and most miserable class'?[5] Does he believe that whatever contributes to thei""r interest is 'good' and whatever harms them is 'bad'? Or is humanity the cause Marx believes he must serve? Lafargue recounts Marx's statement that scientists should 'put their knowledge to the service of humanity'.[6]

There are still third and fourth possibilities (among the more plausible interpretations), which I shall treat as one—as do most writers who offer them. Is it communist society and the human fulfillment which occurs there that Marx regards as 'good' and 'just'? An affirmative reply has recently been given by Charles Taylor who claims that 'Marxism has a definite standard of value, of higher and lower… The basis of this standard of value lies in the teleological notion of human nature: a stage or form of society is higher than another because it involves a greater realization of human goals.'[7] My own difficulty with all these questions is not that I find it hard to answer 'yes', but that I find I hard to answer 'no' to any of them. In other words, if Marx's theories—including too his statements of approval and disapproval, his siding with the proletariat, and his incitements to action—rest on some prior moral commitment, I believe that this commitment can be stated equally well in terms of working class interests, humanity, communism and human fulfillment. With this admission, however, where have we arrived? We have simply arrived back at the theories from which we had originally set out. That is, once what is taken to be the 'good' involves us with so many factors, the relations between these factors needs to be explained, and the explanation situates us within the very theories from which we thought to stand apart. What is the link, for example, between serving working class interest and serving humanity, and between either, or both, and the social and human achievements of communism? In answering such questions one must offer the very theories on man and society which, on this model, are supposed to be the *results* of Marx's ethical views.

There is still another objection to ascribing an ethic to Marx on the basis of his commitment to human fulfillment or any of the other goals listed. This is that it is easily mistaken for a description of what Marx actually and daily does, rather than a way of viewing his work. Neither Taylor nor Maximilien Rubel, who takes a similar position, sees Marx measuring each new question as it comes up alongside an absolute standard and deciding which position to take accordingly.[8] Yet, both men have been misunderstood in this way. This misunderstanding arises

because what is called 'ethics' is generally taken to involve a conscious choice; to act on the basis of a principle, under any guise, is to decide to do so. An ethic assumes that for each question studied there was a period before the standard was applied when one's attitude was neutral, or at least less certain than afterwards; and also that there is a possibility that one could have chosen otherwise.

Robert Tucker rightly remarks that ethical inquiry (and hence ethics) is only possible on the basis of a suspended commitment. But Marx never suspends his commitments; nor does he ever consciously choose to approve or disapprove; nor does it make any sense to say of the matters he studied that he might have judged otherwise. Tucker's conclusion is that Marx is not an ethical, but religious thinker with a 'vision of the world as an arena of conflict between good and evil forces'.[9] However, if expressing approval and favoring certain goals are insufficient grounds for ascribing an ethics to Marx, his conception of class struggle coupled with his version of the future society are hardly enough to burden him with a religion. But if Tucker is unlucky in the alternative he offers, his criticism of attempts t treat Marxism as an ethical theory or as the product of an ethical theory remains valid.

The foregoing remarks may be summarized as follows: all ethical systems, that is all those ways of thinking which are generally accepted as such, have a basis for judgment which lies outside that which is to be judged. This results in a suspended commitment until the 'facts' have been gathered and their relation to the standard for judgment clarified. The evaluation, when it comes, is a matter of conscious choice. Our problem then reduces itself to this: do we want to say of Marxism, where none of these things apply, that it either is or contains an ethical theory? One might, but then the limited sense in which this claim is meant would have to be made explicit.[10]

II

I prefer to say that Marx did not have an ethical theory. But how then to explain the approval and disapproval which he expresses in his works, the fact that he sided with the proletariat and incited them to overthrow the system? How, too, it may be asked, do I account for his attachment to the cause of humanity and to the ideas of communism and human fulfillment? In asking such question, however, one must be careful not to assume at the outset the form the answer

must take. For this is what happens if one is saying, 'Here are two worlds, facts and values; how do you link them?' But to accept that reality is halved in this way is to admit failure from the start. On the contrary, the relational conception which was discussed in the last two chapters required that Marx consider what was known, advocated, condemned or done by everyone, himself included, as internally related. Every facet of the real world, and people's actions and thoughts as elements in it, are mutually dependent on each other for what they are, and must be understood accordingly.

The logical distinction which is said to exist between facts and values is founded on the belief that it is possible to conceive of one without the other. Given a particular fact, the argument runs, one may without contradiction attach any value to it. The fact itself does not entail a specific value. Historically the view that moral beliefs are contingent has tended to go along with the view that they are also arbitrary. On this model, all judgment depends in the last instance on the independent se of values which each individual, for reasons best known to himself, brings to the situation. The ethical premise is not only a final arbiter but a mysterious one, defying sociological and even psychological analysis. Though some recent defenders of orthodoxy have sought to muddle the distinction between fact and value with talk of 'context', 'function', 'real reference', 'predisposition', etc., the logical line drawn in conception remains. Yet, if one cannot conceive of anything one chooses to call a fact (because it is an open ended relation) without bringing in evaluative elements (and vice versa), the very problem orthodox thinkers have set out to answer cannot be posed.

Moreover, on Marx's view, the real judgments which are made in any situation are a function of that situation and the particular individuals active in it. Thus, the very notion that it is logically permissible to take any attitude toward a given 'fact' is itself a judgment inherent in the circumstances out of which it emerges. Rather than being logically independent of what is, any choice—as well as the idea that one has a choice is linked by innumerable threads to the real world, including the life, class interests, and character of the person acting. Judgments can never be severed, neither practically nor logically, from their contexts and the number of real alternatives which they allow. In this perspective, what is called the fact-value distinction, appears as a form of self-deception, an attempt to deny what has already been done by claiming that it could not have been done or still remains to do.

Marx would not have denied that the statements "This is what exists' and 'What exists is good' or 'This is what should exist', mark some distinction, but he would not have called it one of fact and value. If we define "fact" as a statement of something known to have happened or knowable, and 'value' as that property in any thing for which we esteem or condemn it As man is a creature of needs and purposes, however much they may vary for different people, it could not be otherwise. Because everything we know (whether in its immediacy or in some degree of extension through conditions and results) bears some relation to our needs and purposes, there is nothing we know toward which we not have attitudes, either for, against or indifferent.

Likewise, our 'values' are all attached to what we take to be the 'facts', and could not be what they are apart from them. It is not simply that the 'facts' affect our values', and our 'values' affect what we take to be the 'facts—both respectable common sense positions—but that, in any given case, each includes the other and is part of what is meant by the other's concept. In these circumstances, to try to split their union into logically distinct halves is to distort their real character.

Followers of Marx have always known that what people approve or condemn can only be understood through a deep-going social analysis, particularly of their needs and interest as members of a class. What emerges from the foregoing is that the forms in which approval and condemnation appear—like setting up absolute principles or values—must be understood through the same kind of analysis. This is not the place to undertake such an analysis, but it may be useful to sketch its broad outlines. The attempt to establish values which apply equally to everyone results, to al large extent, from the need to defuse growing class conflict arising from incompatible interest in a class-ridden society. To apply values equally is to abstract from the unequal conditions in which people live and the incompatible interest that result. The main effort of capitalist ideology has always been directed to dismissing or playing down this incompatibility. The abstractions with which such ideology abounds are so many attempts to sever the class-affected 'facts' from the judgments and actions that ordinarily follow upon their comprehension.

Marx goes so far as to suggest that the fact—value distinction is itself a symptom of man's alienation in modern capitalist society: 'It stems from the very nature of estrangement that each sphere applies to men a different and opposite yardstick—ethics one and political economy another.'[11] A chief characteristic of

alienation, as we shall learn, is the separation of what does not allow separation without distortion. The organic unity of reality has been exchanged for distinct spheres of activity whose interrelations in the social whole can no longer be ascertained. Removed from their real context, the individual's relations with nature and society, taken one at a time, appear other than they are. As part of this process, many, often contradictory yardsticks for measuring achievement come into existence for different areas of life, making all broad plans of reform seem 'illogical' or 'irrational' in some respect of other. In this context, it would appear that altogether too much attention has been paid to the biased and false message in capitalist ideology and too little to what is predisposed in the forms of though themselves, to the class advantage contained in accepted rules of thinking. For any attempt to universalize a moral code, whatever its content, by undercutting the reality of class conflict only succeeds in serving capitalist ends.

As far as Marx's own work is concerned, those remarks which strike us as being an evaluative nature are internally relate facets of all he says and knows, which in turn are internally tied to his life and all surrounding circumstances—not as an exception, but because everything in the world is related in this way. However, being conscious of this, Marx integrated his remarks of approval and disapproval more closely into his system than have most other thinkers, making any surgical division into facts and values so much more destructive of his meaning. For example, Marx claims that when a communist stands in front of 'a crowd of scrofulous, overworked and consumptive starvelings', he sees 'the necessity, and at the same time the condition, of a transformation both of industry and of the social structure'.[12] Marx is asserting that for those who share his outlook these 'facts' contain their own condemnation and a call to do something about them. If an individual ""chooses otherwise, it is not because he had made a contrary moral judgment, but because the particular relations in which he stands (the class to which he belongs, his personal history, etc.) have led him to a different appreciation of the facts.[13]

Such internal relations between what others take to be factual and evaluative elements are also apparent in an early comment Marx makes on the import of religious criticism: 'The criticism of religion ends', he says, 'with the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man. It ends, therefore, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being'.[14] Marx's analysis of what religion is does not prepare us for an evaluation but includes it. And he believes that to fully accept

one is necessarily to accept the other—because the latter, the judgment, is internally related to the whole set of information which makes it both possible and necessary. Though it is not always so obvious, all Marx's descriptions may be treated in a similar manner. There are no 'morally neutral' statements in Marxism (which is no more than he would claim for the statements of any other thinker).

What then is the best way to characterize what are taken to be evaluative elements in Marx's works? On the basis of the preceding analysis, I would say they are straightforward descriptions of the factor of factors before him which he makes on the basis of its function in the problem under consideration, set in the larger context of what he knows to be true of the world. Such knowledge, as indicated earlier, includes where things are tending as well as where thy have come from. Alternatively, one may say Marx is individuating from the whole information which contains elements that are ordinarily placed in each sphere, rather than relating logically independent facts and values. With the philosophy of internal relations, the problem is never how to relate separate entities but how to disentangle a relation or group of relations from the total and necessary configuration in which they exist.

Thus, in asserting that the workers are degraded, Marx is not making an evaluation on the basis of what he sees but describing what the workers are; but what they are is a Relation which includes, among other things, their ties to other classes who are suffering less, the state of poor people before capitalism, and the achievements which everyone will be capable of under communism. Viewed in this perspective, that is conceiving what we would consider external objects of comparison as parts of the workers themselves, the assertion that the workers are degraded is a fair description of their condition.

Treating the achievements of people in communism as one part of what workers are depends not only on conceiving of workers a Relation that incorporates both their real past and future potential but on analyzing this potential in a manner that uncovers these communist achievements. Projecting present patterns and trends forward, given the new priorities that would be established by a socialist government, Marx's study of the past is likewise an inquiry into the future, into the probable destiny of mankind. He then uses this vision of communism, along with the other comparisons mentioned, to help orient himself to the problems of his day.

Finally, what applies to Marx's statements applies equally to his concepts.

That is, as his ideas about the world which find expressions in his terms, Marx's concepts convey the real relations which he takes to be in the world; and, in so far as these relations include elements which some would consider of an evaluative nature, these concepts can be said to convey in what them mean the very 'judgments' that Marx ordinarily makes with them. It is in this way, we will recall, that concepts were said to have a truth value apart from the statements in which they are found. Marx's concept 'proletariat', for example, contains as part of its meaning the same degradation and other 'moral' qualities which he uncovered in his analysis of the Relation, proletariat. The truth value of this concept, therefore, depends on the validity of this analysis.

It should now be possible to understand Marx's otherwise confusing admission in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'the theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from an historical movement going on under our very eyes.'[15] Marx is concerned to explain why capitalist economic, political and ideological forms appear when they do and what general attitudes result from people's interest as members of a particular class. He never, however, goes beyond stating the relations involved when he himself approves or condemns anything, or when he concludes from a situation what must be done. It is no coincidence that other thinkers who possess a philosophy of internal relations —Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Dietzgen, etc.—have likewise foresworn the fact—value distinction; for partaking of this philosophical tradition any value judgment would have to be understood as internally related to what they know, and hence as an expression of all that makes it both possible and necessary. In these circumstances, 'Marxian ethics' is clearly a misnomer is so far it refers to Marx as opposed to certain 'Marxists' who came afterwards.

As with any misnomer in the human sciences, 'Marxist Ethics' is not without its ideological consequences. For to accept that Marxism either is or contains an ethic, to admit that Marx operated from fixed principles (whatever content one gives them), is to put Marx on the same logical plane as his opponents. It is to suggest that Marx, for all his effort at historical explanation and despite his explicit denial, criticized them because he favored different principles. In which case, the capitalist ideologist easily removes the noose Marx has place around his neck by the simple device of rejecting what passes for the latter's principles. Either he declines the honor of serving the goals of communism or of human fulfillment as

understood by Marx because he doesn't consider this state of affairs possible, or he refuses to serve the interests of the proletariat or of humanity because—for reasons best known to himself—he prefers other ends, whether of this or the next world. To berate such refusals as irrational only begs the question, as it uses the very ends put aside as guides to what is rational The crucial fault comes earlier in accepting that Marx's position, and the criticism evolved from it, is based on any principles whatsoever.

It is in this manner, by permitting Marx's opponents to free themselves from the untenable position in which his criticism places them, that attributing an ethic to Marxism inevitably serves the ends of the bourgeoisie. This is the real danger, for example, in espousing 'Marxist Humanism' (quite apart from its dubious standing as a 'scientific concept'), whatever the short-term political benefits in Eastern Europe of this reformulation.[16]

The debate between Marx and the ideologists of capitalism is and could only be a debate carried on at cross purposes, and this fact must not be lost sight of through a too facile use of labels. Properly speaking, there is now clash of judgments or goals involved here. While capitalist thinkers belabor Marx for an overemphasis on economic factors and—without noticing any inconsistency—for idealism, Marx tries to trace their beliefs and principles (including the forms taken) and the arguments based on them to the real world out of which they arose. Marx's object is, in the broadest sense, to show that they have done something other than they think, that what they have said generally results from and functions other than they know, and through this analysis itself to bring readers to another kind of understanding and action. The enormous critical power inherent in Marxism is diluted whenever its scientific character is misrepresented.[17]

---

1. *Capital*, I, 80.

2. *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, Werke, III, 394-5.

3. Howard Selsam, *Socialism and Ethics* (New York, 1943), p. 52.

4. The best study of the social and economic origins of stock ethical terms is William Ash's *Marxism and Moral Concepts* (New York, 1964).

5. Quoted in M. Rubel, 'Introduction à l'éthique marxienne', Pages choisies

pour une éthique socialiste (Paris, 1948), p. xl.

6. Lafargue, 'Reminiscences of Marx', Reminiscences, p. 70.

7. Charles Taylor, 'Marxism and Empiricism', in *British Analytical Philosophy*, ed. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (London, 1966), p. 244.

8. The fullest statement of Rubel's views on Marx's ethics is found in the 'Introduction' mentioned above (see note 5), though the role of ethics in Marx's thought also constitutes a major theme in his *Karl Marx, essai de biographie intellectuelle* (Paris, 1957).

9. Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 21-2. Tucker also tries to make a case that Marxism is structurally a religious system (pp. 22-4), but the parallels which do exist are superficial, and drawing any firm conclusions from them only serves to hamper our understanding of both Marxism and religion.

10. Taylor, who defines 'morality' as 'a doctrine touching the fundamental good and the way to realize it, where "fundamental" good is taken to mean a good which is inescapable and universally the good of man', can treat Marxism as a moral system, for communism does apply to everyone alive at the time and Marx's conception of human fulfillment serves as the guarantee that what occurs in communism is for the best. Taylor, 'Marxism and Empiricism', *British Analytical Philosophy*, pp. 244-5. However, for reasons given in the text, this strikes me as an overly broad definition of morality, and one likely to occasion misunderstanding of the views Taylor is trying to elucidate.

11. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 121.

12. *The German Ideology*, p. 37.

13. In one form or another, the necessary tie between 'facts' and 'values' for example, has commented that 'in opposition to the majority of the democratic theories of his time, Marx believed that values could not be contemplated in isolation from facts but necessarily depended upon the manner in which the facts were viewed'. Isaiah Berlin, Karl Marx (London,

1960), p. 6. Once this is recognized, however, what remains to be asked is how could Marx do this and what are its implications for his other views?

14. 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie', *Werke*, I, 385.

15. *The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 31-2.

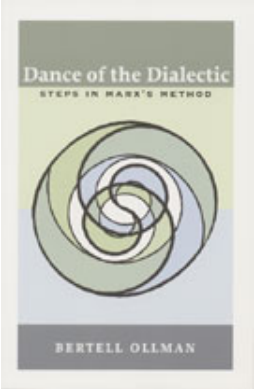
16. Althusser rightly criticizes 'humanism' as a concept that does not permit an adequate comprehension of its subject matter. Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 256.

17. For helpful summaries of the positions taken by some of the major writers on our subject, see Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, pp. 11ff., and Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (London, 1962) pp. 2ff.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Part III, The Theory of Alienation

By Bertell Ollman

Chapter 18

The theory of alienation

The theory of alienation is the intellectual construct in which Marx displays the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part. Centered on the acting individual, it is Marx's way of seeing his contemporaries and their conditions (a set of forms for comprehending their interaction) as well as what he sees there (the content poured into these forms). Brought under the same rubric are the links between one man, his activity and products, his fellows, inanimate nature and the species. Hence, as a grand summing up, as Marx's conception of man in capitalist society, the theory of alienation could only be set out after its constituent elements had been accounted for.

For purposes of discussing alienation, the following points, made early in Part I and illustrated in subsequent chapters, will serve as my philosophical character: Marx's subject matter comprises an organic whole; the various factors he treats are facets of this whole; internal relations exist between all such factors; reciprocal effect predominates and has logical priority over causality; laws are concerned with patterns of reciprocal effect; the concepts Marx uses to refer to factors convey their internal relations; this makes it possible to speak of each factor as an 'expression' of the whole (or some large part of it) or as a 'form' of some other

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - McCoy Award Acceptance Speech

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

factor; finally, Marx's view that factors are internally related, together with his practise of incorporating such relations as part of the meanings of the covering concepts, allows him to transfer qualities which are associated in the popular mind with one factor to another to register some significant alteration in their reciprocal effect. In attempting to construct a coherent account of Marx's theory of alienation within this framework, this framework itself will be put to test.

Perhaps the most significant form into which the theory of alienation is cast—most significant because it chiefly determines the theory's application—is the internal relation it underscores between the present and the future. Alienation can only be grasped as the absence of unalienation, each state serving as a point of reference for the other. And, for Marx, unalienation is the life man leads in communism. Without some knowledge of the future millennium, alienation remains a reproach that can never be clarified. An approach to grasping the 'logical geography' involved may be made by contrasting the expressions 'health' and disease': we only know what it is to have a particular disease because we know what it is not to. If we did not have a conception of health, the situation covered by the symptoms would appear 'normal'.[1] Furthermore, when we declare that someone is ill we consider this a statement of 'fact' and not an evaluation based on an outside standard. This is because we ordinarily conceive of health and disease as internally related, the absence of one being a necessary element in the measuring of the other. Similarly, it is because Marx posits an internal relation between the states of alienation and unalienation that we cannot regard his remarks as evaluations. There is no 'outside' standard from which to judge.

'Alienation', then, is used by Marx to refer to any state of human existence which is 'away from' or 'less than' unalienation, though, admittedly, he generally reserves this reproach for the more extreme instances.[2] It is in this sense and on this scale, however, that Marx refers to alienation as 'a mistake, a defect, which ought not to be'.[3] Both the individual and his way of life can be spoken of as 'alienated', and in the latter case the tag 'realm of estrangement' is applied to the most infected areas.[4]*

Moreover, it follows from the acceptance of communism as the relevant measure that all classes are considered alienated in the ways and to the degree that their members fall short of the communist ideal. Accordingly, Marx claims that one of the manifestations of alienation is that 'all is under the sway of inhuman power' and adds, 'this applies also to the capitalist'.[5] The forms of alienation differ

neoliberal shift in labor relations

for each class because their position and style of life differ, and, as expected, the proletariat's affliction is the most severe. Marx dwells far more, too, on the fate of the producers, and usually has them in mind when he makes general statements about 'man's alienation'. In such cases, other classes are included in the reference in so far as they share with the proletariat the qualities or conditions which are being commented on. I have adopted the same practise in relating Marx's views. By adding a special chapter on the peculiar alienation of capitalists, I hope to dispel whatever confusion this may cause.

The theory of alienation, however, is more than a mere summary of what has already been said regarding Marx's conception of man. It is also a new focal point from which to view human beings and hence to speak of them, one which stresses the fact of segmentation or practical breakdown of the interconnected elements in their definition. All those traits, grasped by Marx as relations, which mark man out from other living creatures have altered, have become something else.[6] In one statement of his task, Marx declares:

> What requires explanation is not the *unity* of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolism, with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature; nor is this the result of a historical process. What we must explain is the *separation* of these inorganic conditions of human existence from this active existence, a separation which is only fully completed in the relation between wage-labor and capital.[7] (Marx's emphasis.)

Given the particular unity between man and nature with Marx—abetted by his conception of internal relations—grasps as human nature, any significant alteration in these relations which diminishes the individual's role as initiator is seen as rendering them apart. From evident expressions of his distinctive character, the relations between man and the external world have become means to dissimulate this character behind each of the various elements over which he has lost control. The theory of alienation focuses on the presumed independence of these elements.

The distortion in what Marx takes to be human nature is generally referred to in language which suggests that an essential tie has been cut in the middle. Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it)—a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he

makes or what becomes of it afterwards)—a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility has rendered most forms of cooperation impossible)—a break between man and man. In each instance, a relation that distinguishes the human species has disappeared and its constituent elements have been reorganized to appear as something else.

What is left of the individual after all these cleavages have occurred is a mere rump, a lowest common denominator attained by lopping off all those qualities on which is based his claim to recognition as a man. Thus denuded, the alienated person has become an 'abstraction'. As we saw, this is a broader term Marx uses to refer to any factor which appears isolated from the social whole. It is in this sense that estranged labor and capital are spoken of as 'abstractions'.[8] At its simplest, 'abstraction' refers to the type of purity that is achieved in emptiness. Its opposite is a set of meaningful particulars by which people know something to be one of a kind. Given that these particulars involve internal relations with other factors, any factor is recognized as one of a kind to the degree that the social whole finds expression in it. It is because we do not grasp the ways in which the social whole is present in any factor (which is to say, the full range of its particular qualities in their internal relations) that this factor seems to be independent of the social whole, that it becomes an 'abstraction'. As an abstraction, what is unique about it (which—again—is the particular ways in which it is linked to others, conceived as part of what it is) is lost sight of behind its superficial similarities with other abstractions. And it is on the basis of these similarities, generalized as classes of one sort or another, that alienated men set out to understand their world. In this manner is intelligence misdirected into classification.

Alienated man is an abstraction because he has lost touch with all human specificity. He has been reduced to performing undifferentiated work on humanly indistinguishable objects among people deprived of their human variety and compassion. There is little that remains of his relations to his activity, product and fellows which enables us to grasp the peculiar qualities of his species. Consequently, Marx feels he can speak of this life as 'the abstract existence of man as a mere workman who may therefore fall from his filled void into the absolute void'.[9] Though Marx clearly overstates his case in calling alienated man a hole in the air, it is in such an extreme notion that the term 'abstraction' is rooted.

At the same time that the individual is degenerating into an abstraction, those parts of his being which have been split off (which are no longer under his control) are undergoing their own transformation. Three end products of this development are property, industry and religion, which Marx calls man's 'alienated life elements'.[10] (This list is by no means complete, but the point does not require further examples.) In each instance, the other half of a severed relation, carried by a social dynamic of its own, progresses through a series of forms in a direction away from its beginning in man. Eventually, it attains an independent life, that is, takes on 'needs' which the individual is then forced to satisfy, and the original connection is all but obliterated. It is this process which largely accounts for the power that money has in capitalist societies, the buying of objects which could never have been sold had they remained integral components of their producer.

What occurs in the real world is reflected in people's minds: essential elements of what it means to be a man are grasped as independent and, in some cases, all powerful entities, whose links with him appear other than what they really are.[11] The ideas which encompass this reality share all its shortcomings.[12] The whole has broken up into numerous parts whose interrelation in whole can no longer be ascertained. This is the essence of alienation, whether the part under examination is man, his activity, his product or his ideas. The same separation and distortion is evident in each.

If alienation is the splintering of human nature into a number of misbegotten parts, we would expect communism to be presented as a kind of reunification. And this is just what we find. On one occasion, Marx asserts that communism is 'the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished with the entire wealth of previous development.' It is 'the positive transcendence of all estrangement—that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e. social mode of existence'.[13] In communism the breach is healed, and all the elements which constitute a human being for Marx are reunited. Many of the characteristics ascribed to full communism, such as the end of the division of labor (each person is engaged in a variety of tasks) and the erasure of social classes, are clear instances of this unification process at work. In the remainder of this study, I will be mainly concerned to show the evidence of segmentation that required such a remedy.[14]

Notes

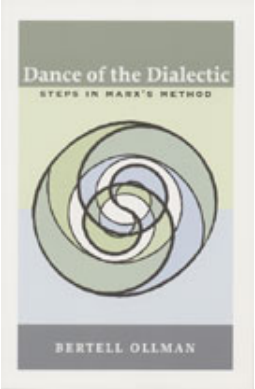
1. We see the same 'logical geography' in the whole host of 'double-headed' adjectives with which Marx showered his contemporaries. How can he describe the laborer's plight as 'degradation', 'dehumanization' and 'fragmentation', and the laborer himself as 'stunted', 'thwarted' and 'broken'? Only because he is aware, however imprecisely, of their opposites.
2. That communism is the yardstick by which Marx ascribes alienation in the present emerges clearly from the following: 'the community from which the worker is isolated is a community of quite other dimensions than the political community. The community from which his own labor separates him, is life itself, physical and intellectual life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, human essence.' 'Kritische Randglossen', *Werke*, I, 408. 'Human', we will recall, is an adjective that Marx usually reserves for describing communism.
3. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 170. He states too that 'the existence of religion is the existence of a defect'. 'Zur Judenfrage', *Werke*, I, 352.
4. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 109. On the broadest possible canvas, and keeping communism clearly in mind, Lichtheim is justified in defining 'alienation' as 'failure to attain this self-realization'. George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London, 1965), p. 44.
   *For most purposes, 'alienation' (*Entäusserung*) and 'estrangement' (*Entfremdung*) may be taken as synonymous. The difference in emphasis which is sometimes suggested by these terms will only become clearer in the course of the following discussion.
5. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 126.
6. On one occasion, Marx says, alienation is manifested 'in the fact that everything is in itself something different from itself—that my activity is something else...' *Ibid*.
7. *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, pp. 86-7.
8. *1844 Manuscripts*, p.75; ibid. p. 91.
9. *Ibid*. p. 86. Elsewhere, Marx refers to the proletariat as 'abstract individuals' because the forces of production have been wrested away from them. He claims that, as a result, they have been robbed of 'all real life content'. *The German Ideology*, p. 66.
10. *The Holy Family*, p. 157.
11. *1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 169-70.

12. Marx claims, 'The man estranged from himself is also the thinker estranged from his essence—that is, from the natural and human essence. His thoughts are therefore fixed mental shapes or ghosts dwelling outside nature and man.' Ibid. p. 168.
13. Ibid. pp. 103-3. See too, 'Zur Judenfrage', *Werke*, I, 370.
14. Of the many recent works dealing with Marx's theory of alienation, three of the most competent are Calvez's *la Pensée de Karl Marx,* Kostas Axelos' *Marx penseur de la technique* (Paris, 1961), and Ivan Mészáros' *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London, 1970). The latter book contains probably the best discussion of the origins of the concept 'alienation'. In virtually all such works, however, readers are given little help in comprehending Marx's vocabulary, and the theory of alienation is used to help explain communism rather than the reverse. The account which follows is chiefly distinguished by the central role accorded Marx's conception of human nature (as constructed earlier), the use of Marx's vision of communism as an aid to understanding alienation and, most of all, by my emphasis on the internal relations between all components of the theory, including its major concepts.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 19

Man's relation to his productive activity

In his only organized treatment of the subject, Marx presents alienation as a partaking of four broad relations which are so distributed as to cover the whole of human existence. These are man's relations to his productive activity, his product, other men and the species.[1] Productive activity in capitalism is spoken of as 'active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation'.[2] Asking "What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?', Marx offers the following reply:

> First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it's forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.[3]

In claiming that labor does not belong to man's essential being, that in it he denies rather than affirms himself and that it is not a satisfaction of a need but merely satisfies needs external to it, Marx's point of reference is species man. In asserting that labor in capitalism mortifies man's body and ruins his mind and that

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

in it he is uncomfortable an unhappy, Marx is alluding to the actual appearance of the proletariat. Alienated labor marks the convergence of these two strands of thought.

Before trying to explain Marx's comments on labor from the standpoint of species man, a brief review of what was said about activity in the previous Part is in order. Marx attributes to man certain powers, which he divides into natural and species, and maintains that each of these powers is reflected in one's consciousness by a corresponding need: the individual feels needs for whatever is necessary to realize his powers. The objects of nature, including other men, provide the matter through which these powers are realized and, consequently, for which needs are felt. Realization occurs through the appropriation of objects which accord in kind and level of development with these powers themselves. 'Appropriation' is Marx's most general expression for the fact that man incorporates the nature he comes into contact with into himself. Activity enters this account as the chief means by which man appropriates objects and becomes, therefore, the effective medium between the individual and the outer world. Marx sees such activity in three special relationships to man's powers: first, it is the foremost example of their combined operation; second, it establishes new possibilities for their fulfillment by transforming nature and, hence, all nature imposed limitations; and third, it is the main means by which their own potential, as powers, is developed.

In asserting that labor in capitalism does not belong to man's essential being, that he denies himself in this labor and that he only satisfies needs external to it, Marx is describing a state where the relations between activity and man's powers exist at a very low level of achievement. As we saw earlier, the terms 'essence' and 'essential' are used by Marx to refer to the whole thread of real and potential ties that link man and nature. Capitalist labor does not belong to man's essential being in the sense that it leaves most of the relations that constitute a human being for Marx unaffected. With the development of the division of labor and the highly repetitive character of each productive task, productive activity no longer affords a good example of the operation of all man's powers, or does so only in so far as these powers have become fewer and narrower in their application. As regards the second relationship, by producing slums, wastelands, dirty factories, etc., such labor does as much or more to decrease the possibilities in nature for the fulfillment of man's powers than it does to increase them.

neoliberal shift in labor relations

However, it is the third relationship between activity and powers that capitalism almost completely reverses. Instead of developing the potential inherent in man's powers, capitalist labor consumes these powers without replenishing them, burns them up as if they were a fuel, and leaves the individual worker that much poorer. The qualities that mark him as a human being become progressively diminished. I referred to this process on another occasion as the 'retrogression' of man's powers. It is in this sense that Marx refers to labor as 'man lost to himself'.[4] Communist society supplies the proper contrast. Here, man's productive activity engages all his powers and creates widening opportunities for their fulfillment. In this manner, work in communism is an affirmation of human nature, while capitalist labor is its denial, withholding from man what in Marx's view belongs to him as a human being.

Marx also conceives of alienated labor, in part, as the actual appearance of people who engage in such activity. What has capitalist labor done to workers on a level where everyone can observe the results? Marx's answer is that it 'mortifies his body and ruins his mind'. *Capital* I is, in at least one very important respect, an attempt to document this thesis. Among the physical distortions described in this work are stunted size, bent backs, overdeveloped and underdeveloped muscles, gnarled fingers, enlarged lungs and death pale complexions. Some of these distortions—Marx singles out the overdevelopment of certain muscles and bone curvatures—may even add to the worker's efficiency in performing his limited and one-sided task, and become in this way an advantage to his employer.[5] Such physical traits are matched by as many industrial diseases. In Marx's words, the worker is a 'mere fragment of his own body', 'a living appendage of the machine', and he looks the part.[6]

The worker's mind, too, has been ruined by the nature of his task and the conditions in which he does it. His delusions, decaying will power, mental inflexibility and particularly his ignorance are all of monumental proportions. Capitalist industry produces in its laborers, according to Marx, 'idiocy' and 'cretinism'.[7] The total contrast between this condition of man and his condition under communism is too obvious to require comment, and, as before, it is the connection Marx presumes between them which allows him to register the one as alienation.

The worker's subjective feelings of being 'at home when he is not working' and 'not at home' when he is working is still another indication of the alienated

character of his labor. Marx's concern about workers being discontented and uncomfortable is incomprehensible if we adopt the view that people will always dislike their work, that work is by its very nature an activity that people cannot wait to finish with. Given what he foresaw in communism, Marx did not and could not share this view.

With capitalist labor variously described as 'torment', a 'sacrifice of life' and 'activity as suffering', it is not to be wondered at that no one in capitalism works unless he is forced.[8] Only circumstances which require that one labor in order to eat drives workers to make such an extraordinary sacrifice. Whenever compulsion disappears, 'labor is shunned like the plague'.[9]

Two other aspects of alienated labor dealt with by Marx are that this labor is the private property of non-workers and that it results in a reversal of man's human and animal functions. As regards the former, Marx says, 'the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another'.[10] If labor is forced, even if its effectiveness lies in the worker's impoverished circumstances, someone must be doing the forcing. According to Marx, 'If his own activity is to him an unfree activity, then he is treating it as activity performed in the service, under the domination, the coercion and the yoke of another man'.[11] This overlord, of course, is the capitalist. And so complete is his control that he determines the form of labor, its intensity, duration, the kind and number of its products, surrounding conditions and—most important of all—whether or not it will even take place. The worker engages in his productive activity only on the sufferance of the capitalist, and when the latter decides he has had enough, that is, that further production will not yield a profit, this activity comes to a halt.

What we call a 'reversal of man's human and animal functions' refers to a state in which the activities man shares with animals appear more human than those activities which mark him out as a man. Marx claims that as a result of his productive activity,

> man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal

> becomes human and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuine human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal.[12]

An abstraction, as we saw, is a break in connections, a link in the chain which has set itself off as an independent piece. Eating, drinking and procreating are occasions when all man's powers may be fulfilled together; yet, in capitalism, they only serve their direct and most obvious functions as do their equivalents in the animal kingdom. Despite their depraved state, however, the individual exercises more choice in these activities than he does in those others, work in particular, which distinguish him as a human being. As unsatisfactory as eating and drinking are from a human point of view, the worker feels at least he is doing something he wants to do. The same cannot be said of his productive activity.

All the components of alienated labor are best understood as particular relations which converge to form the Relation, alienated labor. Stated as accurately as possible, the relations of capitalist productive activity to man's species self, to his body and mind, to his subjective feelings when doing labor, to his will to engage in labor, to the capitalist, to his own human and animal functions and to what productive activity will be like under communism equal unalienated labor.[13]

It should be apparent that these particular relations are constantly finding their way into one another, but Marx never meant them to be distinct. His practise of seeing the whole in the part links all particular relations together as aspects in the full unfolding of any one of them. Overlapping explanations, therefore, cannot be avoided. This coin has another side: just because a full explanation of each of these relations results in the conception of alienated labor, it does not follow that the latter contains only these parts. In reconstructing alienated labor I have limited myself to the largest and most obvious building blocks given in the few pages devoted to this subject in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Many other relations enter into its structure, and we are about to learn that at least one of them, which has been bypassed to facilitate exposition, is of crucial importance.

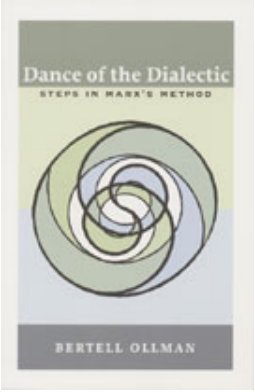
---

1. The account referred to appears in the *1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 69-80. Most of the material for these chapters on the basic relations of alienation is taken from these pages. As with other relations in Marx's work, the four listed here are aspects of an organic whole. Hence, an explanation of alienation could begin with any one and go naturally on to others. Marx himself begins with man's alienation in his product, but, for reasons which will soon become apparent, alienated activity offers a better starting point. Also for purposes of facilitating exposition, I have transposed Marx's relations three and four. Thus, what appears in the order—product, activity, species and other men—in Marx's explanation of alienation, appears as—activity product, other men and species—in my own.
2. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 72. Such labor is also described as 'an activity quite alien to itself, to man and to nature, and therefore to consciousness and the flow of life'. *Ibid*. p. 86. See too, *Ibid*. pp. 110, 129, 152.
3. *Ibid*. p. 72. This is also an account of self-estrangement as distinct from estrangement from the thing. *Ibid*. pp. 73-4.
4. *Ibid*. p. 84.
5. *Capital*, I, 349.
6. *Ibid*. p. 360; *Ibid*. p. 484.
7. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 71.
8. *Ibid*. pp. 79, 83, 73.
9. *Ibid*. p. 72.
10. *Ibid*. p. 73.
11. *Ibid*. p. 79.
12. *Ibid*. p. 73.
13. Another similar compilation of the main relations of alienated labor is as follows: 'This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life or what is life rather than activity—as an activity which is against him, neither depends on nor belongs to him.' *Ibid*.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 20

Man's relation to his product

The second of the four broad relations into which Marx divides alienation is the individual's relation to his product. This is, in Marx's words, 'the relation of the worker to the product of labor as an alien object exercising power over him'.[1] Between activity and product the link is clear and direct; man is alienated from his product because the activity which produced it was alienated. According to Marx, 'the product is...but the summary of the activity, of production...In the estrangement of the object of labor is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself.'[2] He asks, 'How would the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself?'[3]

Man's alienation in his product can be viewed as one of the particular relations which constitute alienated activity or as a coequal general relation. If taken in the context of alienated activity, product alienation appears as a result alongside the ruination of the worker's own body and mind. However Marx, by treating product alienation on a par with alienated activity, wishes to stress its significance, some might claim its primary significance, for understanding the worker's overall alienation.

The account of product alienation is scattered through Marx's writings. Nevertheless, the pieces can be collected without too much difficulty under the three particular relations that appear in the following statement: 'The alienation of

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him.'[4] The first relation is brought out more clearly in Marx's claim that 'The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification.'[5] As the chief means of expressing the life of the species, productive activity is often referred to as life itself. So it is more than a turn of phrase when Marx says, 'The worker puts his life into the object.'[6]

We can only grasp the full sense of this claim by returning once again to Marx's conception of human nature. Here, man's relation to nature was declared to be intimate, because his powers exist in one real object, himself, and can only be expressed in others equally real. Accordingly, Marx says of man, that 'he is nature', and of objects, that they 'reside in the very nature of his being'.[7] The relation between the two is an internal one. As the chief means by which man's powers interact with nature, productive activity is also the medium through which they become objectified. These powers exist in their products as the amount and type of change which their exercise has brought about.[8] The degree of change is always proportionate to the expenditure of powers, just as its quality is always indicative of their state. Marx, we will recall, refers to industry, by which he means the forces of production as well as its products, as 'the exoteric revelation of man's essential powers'.[9] By transforming the real world to satisfy his needs, man's productive activity leaves its mark, the mark of his species powers at this level of their development, on all he touches. It is in this manner that he 'puts his life' into his objects, the latter expressing in what they are the character of the organic whole to which both they and the living person who made them belong.

Man's productive activity, however, is objectified in his products in all societies. What distinguishes such objectification in capitalism is the presence of two further relations which have their roots in alienated labor. These are that man's product 'exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him'. What Marx means by the objectification of products that are alien to the worker is elaborated upon when, speaking of alienated labor, he says,

> The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labor is manifested, in

neoliberal shift in labor relations

> which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces. But just as nature provides labor with the means of life in the sense that labor cannot live without objects on which to operate, on the other hand, it also provides the means of life in the more restricted sense—i.e., the means for the physical subsistence of the worker himself. Thus the more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of the means of life in the double respect: first, that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor—to be his labor's means of life: and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker.[10]

The worker's products are alien to him in that he cannot use them to keep alive or to engage in further productive activity.[11] Marx claims, 'So much does the labor's realization appear as loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death', and elsewhere that 'the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume'.[12] The worker's needs, no matter how desperate, do not give him a license to lay hands on what these same hands have produced, for all his products are the property of another.

Not only can he not use them, but he does not recognize them as his. It follows, of course, that he has no control over what becomes of his products, nor does he even know what becomes of them. Only indirectly, through spending the wage he receives for his labor, can the worker take possession of part of what this same labor has created.

Like the products the worker requires to live, the products he needs for his work are also beyond his control: 'So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work.'[13] Thus, the forces of production, which are products of yesterday's labor, 'appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals'.[14] Although man's species powers can only be fulfilled through his use of the means of production, the means of production which come into existence in capitalism are decidedly hostile to his fulfillment.[15] By transforming nature through alienated labor, man has deprived himself of all that he has transformed. The individual's helplessness before his products must be contrasted with the ready accessibility of nature in

communism to grasp the full measure of his alienation in this area.

What remains of the worker after subtracting the products he needs to live and to carry on his work—both internal components of human nature according to Marx—is an abstraction, the 'abstract individual'. Earlier, work in capitalism was labeled 'abstract activity' because of an equally drastic paring down of relationships. This abstract individual is humanly impoverished; he has lost his life in proportion to his having lived it and as much of nature as he has worked upon. His productive potential has been drained off into his product without giving him any return. According to Marx,

> the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own...The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater his activity, the greater is the worker's lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore the greater is this product, the less is he himself.[16]

The interaction which occurs is all productive activity between man's species powers and their object results, in capitalism, in a one-sided enrichment of the object. The product gains in power the more the worker spends his own and, Marx maintains, even acquires qualities (not suitably altered) that the worker loses. As the embodiment of powers the workers no longer have, products may be spoken of, Marx believes, in ways otherwise reserved for the people who produce them. Essential here is that these products have the ability to enter into certain relationships with one another and with man himself as a result of their production under conditions of capitalism, which ability the workers have lost, likewise as a result of such production.

This displacement of certain relations from the worker to his product is responsible for the illusion that the inanimate object is a living organism with powers and needs of its own: 'In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.'[17] For the most part, the life of the workers' products in capitalist society is the course of events which befall them in the process of exchange, which includes their production for purposes of exchange. People follow the progress of these products in the market place as if they were watching a play enacted by real flesh

and blood creatures. In this drama, the part played by individuals 'is that of owners of commodities only. Their mutual relations are those of their commodities.'[18] With men taking themselves and others as appendages of their products, their own social relations will appear in the first instance as relations between things. Thus, an exchange of shoes for cloth, an exchange in which given amounts of these articles are soon to be equivalent, merely masks a relationship between the people involved in their production. In terms of the attention Marx gave it, particularly in *Capital*, this aspect of alienation constitutes one of the major themes in his writings. *

The third relation in product alienation has to do with the worker being subservient to what he has lost. His product has become 'a power on its own confronting him'. 'So much', Marx claims, 'does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement, that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital.'[19] For Marx, those things with which the individual is closely related but which he does not control are, in fact, controlling him. He requires his products for consumption and further production, but he has no power to make them available. The worker, further, has no part in deciding what form these needed products will take. Instead, in every situation, he can merely respond to what already exists. His products face him as something given, both as to amount and form. The resulting interaction between the worker and his product, therefore, becomes one of total adjustment on the part of the former to the requirements (and hence the demands) of the latter. It is chiefly in this sense that the products of capitalism control their producers. This is probably the outstanding example of what was referred to above as a 'displaced relation'; whereas man, being a man, has the power to control nature, through exercising this power, his product is now in a position to control him.[20]

This exchange of roles between the worker and his product is equally evident in production and consumption. The former, in particular, is emphasized, as where Marx says:

> It is no longer the laborer that employs the means of production, but the means of production that employ the laborer. Instead of being consumed by him as material elements of his productive activity, they consume him as the ferment necessary to their own life-

> process...Furnaces and workshops that stand idle by night, and absorb no living labor, are 'a mere loss' to the capitalist. Hence, furnaces and workshops constitute lawful claims upon the night-labor of the workpeople. The simple transformation of money into the material factors of the process of production, into means of production transforms the latter into a title and right to the labor and surplus-labor of others.

Marx adds that 'this complete inversion of the relation between dead and living labor' is a 'sophistication, peculiar to and characteristic of capitalist production'.[21]

Articles of consumption, on the other hand, have power over their producers by virtue of the desires which they create. Marx understood how a product could precede the need that people feel for it, how it could actually create this need. Consumption, we are told, 'is furthered by its objects as a moving spring. The want of it which consumption experiences is created by its appreciation of the product. The object of art, as well as any other product, creates an artistic and beauty-enjoying public.'[22] What can we expect, therefore, where consumers have no say in the production of things which they must consume? In this situation, the very character of man is at the mercy of his products, of what they make him want and become in order to get what he wants. These products are responsive to forces outside his control, serving purposes other than his own, generally the greed of some capitalist. Hence, Marx's claim that 'every new product represents a new potency of mutual swindling and mutual plundering'.[23]

Besides manipulating people's needs, the form given to articles of consumption helps determine the prevailing mode of consumption. Every product carries with it a whole set of accepted usages. Taken together they constitute the greater part of what is meant by the way of life of a people. In capitalism, the worker's way of life has degenerated into one drawn out response to the requirements of his own products. Herein lies the inhuman power of man-made matter over man.

---

1. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 73.
2. *Ibid*. p. 72. It is in this sense that Marx declares 'Objectification

(*Verausserung*) is the practise of alienation'. 'Zur Judenfrage', *Werke*, I, 376.

3. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 72.
4. *Ibid*. p. 70.
5. *Ibid*. p. 69.
6. *Ibid*. p. 70. This is another part of what Marx means when he speaks of labor as 'man lost to himself'. *Ibid*. p. 84.
7. *Ibid*. p. 156. Recall too that Marx included among natural objects both animate and inanimate nature as well as such ideational constructs as music and physics.
8. Hence, the claim that 'The object of labor is...the objectification of man's species life.' *Ibid*. p. 76.
9. *Ibid*. p. 110.
10. *Ibid*. pp. 70-1.
11. The terms 'outside' (*ausser*) and 'independent' (*unabhangig*) could be substituted for 'alien' (*fremd*) here. The three are practically equivalent expressions for Marx.
12. *1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 69, 71.
13. *Ibid*. p. 69.
14. *The German Ideology*, p. 65. Elsewhere, capital, or the material forces of production in capitalism, is spoken of as 'the alienation of the conditions of social production...from the real producers'. *Capital*, III, 259. See too, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 317. In this instance, 'alienation' is being used in a one-sided way (to convey only part of the relations it contains), practically as a synonym for 'alien'.
15. It is in this sense that products in capitalism are said to stand 'in direct opposition...to the laborer's own development.' *Capital*, III, 859.
16. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 70.
17. *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 34.
18. *Political Economy*, p. 41.
19. *1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 69-70.
20. Marx claims, 'This crystallization of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power over 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.' *The German Ideology*, pp. 22-3.
21. *Capital*, I, 310. See too, his claim that workers in capitalism are transferred around according to the 'needs' of their machines. *Ibid*. p. 420.

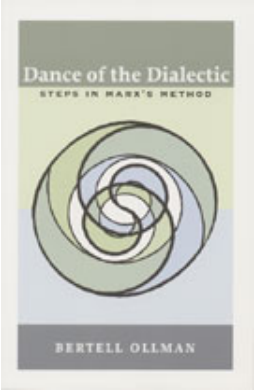
22. Introduction, *Political Economy*, p. 279.
23. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 115.

- * This theme will be explored in greater detail in the chapters on Marx's economics and again in the chapters on class, politics and religion.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapter 21

Man's relation to his fellow men

The third broad relation in which Marx exhibits the worker's alienation is his tie with other men. This social alienation is fitted on to activity and product alienation in the following manner:

> If the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker...man's relation to himself only becomes objective and real for him through his relation to other men. Thus, if the product of his labor, his labor objectified, is for him an alien, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him...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.[1]

The hostility of the worker's product is due to the fact that it is owned by the capitalist, whose interests are directly opposed to those of the worker. The product serves Marx as both the mask and the instrument of the capitalist's power.

If, when describing capitalists, Marx states they are but personal embodiments of capital, he is equally able to assert, when dealing with capital as

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

a product, that it is an expression of the real power of the capitalist. One claim must not be read as being more 'ultimate' than the other, or else we shall forever be turning in circles as Marx's writings abound with claims of both sorts. On the basis of the internal relations Marx posits between the worker, his product and the man who controls it, these otherwise incompatible remarks become complementary characterizations of the same whole. When proceeding from the vantage point of the product, Marx wants to show ways in which the product of alienated labor exercises power over people (including, as we shall see, the capitalist). And when proceeding from the vantage point of the capitalist, he wants to show ways in which this man controls the product. It is with this latter relation that the present chapter deals.

The worker's dwelling provides an excellent example of how his relation to his product is bound up with his relation to the man who owns it. Marx refers to the worker's home as a 'cave' which he occupies 'only precariously, it being for him an alien habitation which can be withdrawn from him any day—a place from which, if he does not pay, he can be thrown out'. Comparing capitalism with primitive society, Marx adds: The savage in his cave—a natural element which freely offers itself for his use and protection—feels himself no more a stranger, or rather feels himself to be just as much at home as a fish in water. But the cellar-dwelling of the poor man is a hostile dwelling, 'an alien, restraining power which only gives itself up to him so far as he gives up to it his blood and sweat'—a dwelling which he cannot look upon as his own home where he might at last exclaim, 'here I am at home', but where instead he finds himself in someone else's house, in the house of a stranger who daily lies in wait for him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent.[2]

As elsewhere in capitalism, the worker's need carries no title to use what his own labor has produced. In his dwelling, man should feel himself 'at home as much as a fish in water'. This really expresses the degree of acceptance and trust in the possession of nature that all men will feel in communism. Under capitalism, however, the worker's relation to his home is one of uncertainty which he manifests through his fear of the landlord.

As with the worker's relation to his product, his alienated relation to the man who owns his product is a necessary result of his productive activity being what it is. Marx maintains:

> through alienated labor man not only engenders his relationship to the

neoliberal shift in labor relations

> object and to the act of production as powers that are alien and hostile to him; he also engenders 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. Just as he begets his own product as a loss, as a product not belonging to him; so he begets the dominion of the one who does not produce over production and over the product. Just as he estranges himself from his own activity, so he confers to the stranger activity which is not his own...a man alien to labor and standing outside it...the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor.[3]

Each capitalist only retains his pedestal through the repeated acts of workers. Without capitalist production in which the creative force is alienated labor there would be no capitalists. By engaging in totally unfulfilling labor, labor which destroys his mind and his body, labor which is forced upon him by his drive to live, labor in which all choice is left to someone else who also controls the finished articles, that is, capitalist labor, the worker is said to produce the degrading social relations that distinguish this period.

Marx is capable, as we know, of approaching the same relation from the other side. He says, for example:

> The estrangement of man, and in fact every relationship in which man stands to himself, is first realized and expressed in the relationship in which a man stands to other men. Hence within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the position in which he finds himself as a worker.[4]

By separating out social relations and treating them as primary, Marx has in mind the fact that the worker-capitalist relation is already established when the worker asks for a job. On the other hand, this relation is the product of previous labor, and is reproduced for tomorrow by labor today.

In making the transition from man's relation to his product to his relation to the owner of this product, Marx allows, we will recall, the adjectives applied to the former to stand also for the latter. He claims that 'if the product of his labor...is for him an alien, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, and independent of him'.[5] The worker faces the capitalist with the

very same attitudes, but whereas his employer is able to act toward him with the callous and reckless abandon of the strong, the worker shows his weakness only too clearly through sullen and hateful acquiescence. Their social alienation is a two-way street. Pulling in opposite directions, at the command of competing interests, their relations are necessarily antagonistic.*

---

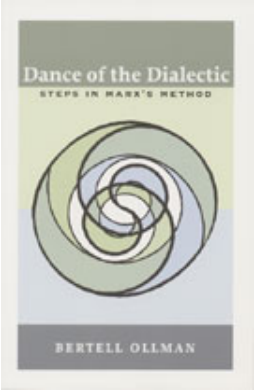
1. *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 79. The workers' tie to the capitalist has also been brought forward as a particular relation in alienated labor.
2. *Ibid*. p. 117.
3. *Ibid*. pp. 79-80.
4. *Ibid*. p. 78.
5. *Ibid*. p. 79.

- This account of the worker's alienated relation to the captalist is only a partial account of social alienation, which includes mutual hostility within a class as well as between classes. A fuller treatment of this subject is given in Chapter 29.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

By Bertell Ollman

Chapter 22

Man's relation to his species

The last of the four broad relations Marx uses to reconstruct man's alienation in capitalist society is the tie between the individual and his species. Species, as we saw, is the category of the possible, denoting in particular those potentialities which mark man off from other living creatures. In so far as the conditions of communism allow an individual to develop and express all that he is capable of as a human being, communist man and species man are identical. When, therefore, Marx claims that 'estranged human labor estranges the species from man', he is saying that the unique configuration of relations which distinguishes the individual as a human being has been transformed into something quite different by the performance of capitalist labor.[1]

Man's relation to his species differs qualitatively from the other relations that were examined. His relations to his work, product and other men are tangible, both ends of which exist in the present, while the relation between man and his species is removed, in which living people are measured by the standard of what it means to be a man. Perhaps this facet of alienation can be more clearly grasped if we consider it a reformulation of man's alienation in his work, product and other men, viewed now from the angle of the individual's membership in the species. As Marx says:

> In tearing away from man the object of his production…estranged

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

> labor tears from him his species life, his real species objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him. Similarly, in degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labor makes man's species life a means to his physical existence.[2]

The connection between species alienation and social alienation is made explicit elsewhere: 'The proposition that man's species nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature.'[3]

Marx makes several comparisons between man and animals in his attempts to clarify what is lost through species alienation. When the capitalist appropriates the product of the worker's labor, Marx declares that the latter's 'advantage over animals' is transformed into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him'.[4] All living creatures have numerous relationships to the natural objects about them. As a result of his powers and needs being more extensive that any animal's, man enjoys the advantage of having the most complex ties of all. This shows in production where he is able to create things which are not objects of immediate need, a greater range of things, more beautiful things; he can also reproduce the objects he finds in nature.[5]

All man's advantages over animals become disadvantages when the natural objects to which he is related become the property of other men. While animals in the forest take whatever they need from their immediate surroundings, man is restricted in his use of objects to what their owners will allow, which is invariably less than his powers require. If, as Marx says, 'The object of work is…the objectification of man's species life,' with the removal of these objects from his control, the human species is deprived of its reality, of what it requires to manifest itself as the human species.[6]

We must be careful here as elsewhere not to substitute our concept of the processes and events which come into the discussion for Marx's own. Thus, though we may consider that people realize their human potential in conditions of private property, Marx does not. And his conception of this potential and of individual control over any part of nature is such that each necessarily excludes the other. This conclusion in no way affects the historical role that Marx attributes to the institution of private property in helping to prepare a time when man—

neoliberal shift in labor relations

through the abolition of such property—will be able to fully manifest his species powers. Until then, however, the distinctive character of man's complex relationship to nature is lost below the horizon of the animal world through the confiscation of this entire nature by another.

In treating species alienation, Marx gives a favored place, as we might expect, to man's relation to his activity. For Marx, 'the productive life is the life of the species'.[7] Such activity is the chief means through which the individual expresses and develops his powers, and is distinguished from animal activity by its range, adaptability, skill and intensity. In capitalism, however, the worker's labor 'turns for him the life of the species into a means of individual life'.[8] Work has become a means to stay alive rather than life being an opportunity to do work. Living, mere existence, has always been a necessary pre-condition for engaging in productive activity, but in capitalism it becomes the operative motive.

The worker's departure from what it means to be a man is also found in the world of thought. Marx says, 'The consciousness which man has of his species is thus transformed by estrangement in such a way that the species life becomes for him a means.'[9] As a conscious being, the individual is aware of what he is doing and possesses the faculty of being able to choose and to plan. He can also make provisions to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for his fulfillment. This degree of foresight belongs to him as a member of the human species. In estranged labor, however, 'it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence'.[10] The greater part of man's consciousness in capitalism is used to direct his efforts at staying alive, for he recognizes that such concentration is necessary if he is to be successful.

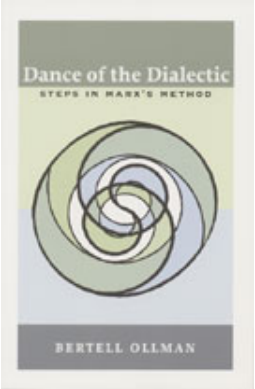
What is left after the most distinctive qualities which set man apart from other living creatures are erased by the processes of capitalist society? For Marx, the 'rump' of human nature which remains is neither man nor animal, nor is it simply matter. It is, in his terminology, an 'abstraction'. Thus, when he says estranged labor 'makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract form', he is asserting that man's existence, denuded of all human characteristics, has become the purpose of work, likewise denuded of all human characteristics.[11] In this comment, the reversal of his species relations to activity, product and other men has gone the full distance, and man has succeeded in becoming all that he is not.

1. *1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 74-5.
2. *Ibid*. p. 76.
3. *Ibid*. p. 77.
4. *Ibid*. p. 76.
5. *Ibid*. pp. 75-6.
6. *Ibid*. p. 75.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*. p. 76.
10. *Ibid*. p. 75.
11. *Ibid*.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.

Printable version of this page

Search articles and book chapters



Latest book - ***Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method***

Reviews of Ollman's Books

Featured article - **America Beyond Capitalism: A Socialist Stew Prepared for Liberals and**

Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

Chapters 25-28

Alienation and the Law of Value

I

The idea that *Capital* is a work about alienation has struck many people in the years since the publication of the *1844 Manuscripts*.[1] There is little to be gained, therefore, in simply repeating this claim, but perhaps a great deal in making a case for it. Too much of the dispute over the role of alienation in Marx's later economic writings has centered on the use of the term "alienation" and certain stock analyses that occupy a prominent place in the *Manuscripts*. The logic of the theories concerned, the actual relations between them, has received altogether too little attention. It is the purpose of this essay to exhibit the connections between the theories of alienation and value by examining some of the components of the latter, by seeking for the theory of alienation in the theory of value itself.[2]

At the core of Marx's economics, it is generally conceded, is the labor theory of value and the adjoining theory of surplus-value. Marx offers what is probably the most concise statement of his theory of value where he says: "That which determines the magnitude of the value of any articles is the amount of labor socially necessary, or the labor-time socially necessary, for its production. Each individual commodity in this connection is to be considered as an average sample of its class. Commodities, therefore, in which equal quantities of labor are embodied, or which can be produced in the same time, have the same value. The

[Conservatives]

Featured speech - [McCoy Award Acceptance Speech]

[Video: Marxism and Progress]

[Marxism (the cartoon version)]

[From Theory to Practice]

[Radical Jokes]

[Photos]

[Recommended Web Sites]

[NYU Course Bibliographies]

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ETF Site

Lectures

Plays
Not To Dare
Butcher Shop

[Poems]

SUGGESTED READINGS

Video

[Kiki & Bubu explain the]

value of one commodity is to the value of any other, as the labor-time necessary for the production of the one is to that necessary for the production of the other. As values all commodities are only definite masses of congealed labor time."[3]

The theory of surplus-value is best seen as an appendage to the theory of value; for, according to Marx: "If we now compare the two processes of producing value and of creating surplus-value, we see that the latter is nothing but a continuation of the former beyond a definite point. If on the one hand, the process be not carried beyond the point where the value paid by the capitalist for the labor-power is replaced by an exact equivalent, it is simply a process of producing value; if, on the other hand, it be continued beyond that point, it becomes a process of creating surplus-value."[4]

Before trying to explain what Marx is saying here, we must know what kind of thing is being said. What in other words, is the labor theory of value about? It is most often viewed as a theory of price determination, holding that the cost of any article is determined by the amount of labor-time given to its production. More sophisticated critics see it as a theory which explains existing exchange relationships, price being but a handy indication of what these generally are. A variation on this theme has Marx's labor theory of value expressing a view as to what ought to determine exchange relationships rather than what actually does. The theory of surplus-value is usually seen as a theory dealing with profits, and, sometimes, simply as a way of highlighting capitalist exploitation.[5]

Marx's theories are criticized or defended differently, of course, depending on which interpretation is adopted. In our opinion, there is a degree of truth in each of them—Marx's theories of value and surplus-value have some application in all these areas—but the purpose for which these theories were constructed lies elsewhere. Paul Sweezy has underlined what should be obvious but unfortunately is not, that the problems great economists have directed their attention to are not the same. He gives as examples, "'the nature and causes of the wealth of nations' (Adam Smith); 'the laws which regulate the distribution of the produce of the earth' (Ricardo); 'man's actions in the ordinary business of life' (Marshall); 'price and its causes and its corollaries' (Davenport); 'human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses' (Robbins)."[6] Marx's preoccupation was different still. In every case, we can only comprehend the person's theories after clearly grasping the problems he set out to answer, what he wants his theories to do. Yet, this preliminary task, particularly—it seems to us

neoliberal shift in labor relations

—as regards Marx's writings, is frequently shirked. The result is that a lot of the comment on his economic theories is simply beside the point, that is, the point that Marx was trying to make.

Marx's declared aim in *Capital* is "to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society."[7] His is an attempt to establish how capitalism works. There is no other economist who has undertaken a similar task. Viewing society as an organic whole, Marx is concerned with men's relations to all their activities, products, and others, and not only with those found in the economic sphere. For him, all human relations in capitalism are part of the necessary conditions and results of what occurs in production and exchange, and, hence, a proper extension of their subject matter. The ways in which factors throughout society are mutually dependent on one another, both for what they are and are becoming, is "the economic law of motion" that Marx sought to reveal.[8]

Capital I approaches this problem from the vantage point of economic life narrowly understood, and makes use of the categories which are generally applied to this subject. The labor theory of value emerges as Marx's conceptualization of capitalist economic life, in which are included the ties he sees to its necessary conditions and results, and in particular to the totally alienated people who inhabit this period. It was chiefly to describe, explain, and condemn their situation that this theory was given birth. In the labor theory of value Marx welds together the main economic categories of capitalism, their links with each other and with categories far distant from economics proper, his conceptualization of the sum of these relations as alienation, and his belief that a truly human society is the next stage in man's development. The very terms, "labor" and "value," as we hope to show, are only applicable to the kind of society Marx believes capitalism to be, both "factually" and "morally." With words such as these, Marx is saying, in effect: "This is how capitalism works, and this is the workings of an alienated society soon to be supplanted by communism."

II

Labor is the center piece of the theory which bears its name. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx asks: "What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?" He replies: "First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker

therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it."[9] We also learn that "the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another."[10] And, finally, the other major quality which Marx ascribes to such labor is that it necessarily results in a product from which the worker is alienated or, in Marx's words: "The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him."[11]

Marx always understands productive activity in capitalism as alienated labor with all that this entails regarding the individual's relations to his activity, product, other men, and the species. Thus, for example, we find Marx stating in *Capital* that before entering the process of production the laborer's "own labor has already been alienated from himself by the sale of his labor-power, has been appropriated by the capitalist and incorporated with capital." As a consequence, "it must, during the process, be realized in a product that does not belong to him."[12] Wherever the term "labor" appears in Marx's economic writings, therefore, what is conveyed is something more and different than what this same term conveys in the works of bourgeois economists.[13] The widespread misconception that in his later life Marx left the theory of alienation behind him bears most of the responsibility for the equally widespread misunderstanding of his term "labor." Grasping "labor" in *Capital* as alienated labor is the key to understanding Marx's economic theories.

In *Capital*, Marx separates out the potential for engaging in labor from the term "labor" and refers to it apart as "labor-power." This conceptual bifurcation does not effect the character of the productive activity involved; "labor-power" is the potential for doing that kind of work which the worker in capitalism can do, i.e. alienated labor. Thus, when Marx says: "By labor-power or capacity for labor is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description," he has in mind the capabilities of alienated men.[14] "Use-value," we shall soon learn, means far more than that which people value because someone wishes to use it. For our present purposes, it is only necessary to declare that the use-value of labor-power (potential productive activity) is labor (actual productive

activity). This innovation was introduced, because, as Marx states: "Labor itself in its immediate being, in its living existence, cannot be directly conceived as a commodity, but only labor-power, of which labor itself is the transient manifestation."[15] Labor disappears, is used up, as soon as it appears, and, hence, is not available for trading; labor-power, which is more stable, is.

Therefore, it is the potential for work which the worker sells and the capitalist buys. In this transaction: "The former receives the value of his commodity, whose use-value—labor—is thereby alienated to the buyer."[16] "Alienate," here, means to give up the use-value of one's productive activity; the most essential of all human functions is put under the control of another.[17] The worker sells his labor-power in order to acquire the means of subsistence to live. To keep from dying the worker sells his life. While the capitalist buys the worker's labor-power in order to make a profit. Labor-power is unique among all commodities in having a use-value which creates a greater amount of exchange-value than its own exchange-value. That is, labor, the use-value of labor-power, creates a store of commodities, shoes, steel, etc., which exchange for a greater value than that which hired the labor-power expended in their production.

The human result of the worker alienating the use-value of his labor is the alienated worker.[18] Both his person and mind exhibit its effects. And, as always for Marx, the mountain is capped when the individual himself misconstrues what appears to be the case for what really is. Thus, "The capitalist epoch is, therefore, characterized by this, that labor-power takes in the eyes of the laborer himself the form of a commodity which is his property; his labor consequently becomes wage-labor."[19] "Wage-labor" is society's label for productive activity that has become alienated, really and ideally, from the producers.

But if the worker's alienation follows from the sale of his labor-power, it also precedes it. This emerges clearly from Marx's frequent claim that the labor-power involved in the aforementioned sale is "abstract" and "general." For him, wage-labor is always "indifferent to the specific character of its labor and must submit to being transformed in accordance with the requirements of capital and to being transformed from one sphere of production to another."[20] It is only such productive potential not tied to any particular activity that the term "labor-power" conveys. Hence, Marx's criticism of Ricardo that by using "labor" instead of "labor-power" he "forgets the qualitative characteristic that the individual labor, through its alienation, must present itself as abstract, general, social labor."[21] No other

labor could do and be done to in this manner.[22]

Marx has frequently been criticized for treating labor as an abstraction, as productive activity in general, not taking into account where and how it is exercised. However, this innovation is not Marx's alone, but belongs to the whole school of political economy which began with Adam Smith. Marx's contribution to the discussion was to exhibit the ties between this use of "labor" and the particular social conditions it is meant to describe and out of which it arose. The question is not how could Marx treat labor as an abstraction, but how could society do so. It is in virtue of his response to this question (and others like it) that Marx can describe *Capital* as "a critique of economic categories or, if you like, the system of bourgeois economy exposed in a critical manner."[23]

By introducing "labor in general" into economic discourse, Adam Smith is said to have found an expression for the special character of productive activity in capitalism, where people pass easily from one kind of work to another and are generally indifferent to what they do. This, in turn, presupposes a situation where there are a great many highly developed productive tasks, none of which is clearly dominant. Thus, though "labor" also expresses productive activity in the simple, uncomplicated sense in which it must go on in all societies, the concept "labor" (meaning abstract productive activity) could only be formulated at a time when the common quality of all such activity had become evident, and conveys for Marx the full set of conditions that make it so. Accordingly, "labor" is declared to be "a product of historical conditions" and only "fully applicable to and under those conditions."[24]

Marx's conception of labor as alienated productive activity also lies behind his claim that labor has "socially a two-fold character": it can satisfy a definite social want, and all its particular forms are on a part with one another, i.e., measured for worth on the same scale. The former characteristic derives from the nature of productive activity as invariably purposive, and the latter from its abstract quality under capitalism, where all labor is directed toward producing wealth in general rather than particular objects.

To the individual worker, however, these distinctive features of his productive activity appear "only under those forms which are impressed upon that labor in everyday practice by the exchange of products. In this way, the character that his own labor possesses of being socially useful takes the form of the condition, that the product must be not only useful but useful for others, and the social character

that his particular labor has of being the equal of all other particular kinds of labor, takes the form that all the physically different articles that are the products of labor, have one common quality, viz., that of having value."[25] Hence, we may say that the qualitative aspect of labor creates use-value and its quantitative aspect creates exchange value, the two-fold character that Marx sees in labor being responsible for the two-fold character he attributes to value.[26] Labor becomes use and exchange-value when its product is treated and understood as such, and that this does occur is a function of labor's quality of alienation. But, before we focus attention on the different aspects of value, the total relation between labor and value must be clarified.

III

If alienated labor is at the center of Marx's economics, value is not one wit closer to the perimeter—for the two are "identical," different facets of the same whole, contrasting expressions for the same social relations. According to Marx, "Value is labor"; it is "materialized labor in its general social form."[27] Or, again, he claims, "Value as such has no other 'material' than labor itself."[28] There are other such forthright statements of the equation of labor and value, but they seem equally to have missed their mark.[29] For most readers of *Capital*, "value" remains an economic expression synonymous with "worth," an approbation strictly measurable in monetary terms. Its tie with labor is believed to be capable of conclusive empirical demonstration; this applies to most defenders of the labor theory of value as well as its critics.[30] However, Marx's conception of value is of an altogether different nature. Its unity with labor is definitional, and the rich assortment of facts that he brings forward on this subject are for purposes of illustration and not proof. For Marx, value, or, as he sometimes says, "value in general," is transfigured labor, and no manner of evidence could serve him as a counter argument.

Thus, while Marx frequently declaims what value is, he never sets out to discover it, nor is he interested in proving it. Indeed, he treats the "necessity of proving the concept of value" as "nonsense."[31] In *Capital*, Marx tries to measure value, to chart out where it goes, and to detail the forms it takes, but he devotes little time to uncovering its basic character. His chief concern is with a question other political economists have never asked: "Why is labor represented by the value of its product and labor-time by the magnitude of that value?"[32] Rather than presenting the case that value is labor, he is attempting to explain why in our era

labor is expressed as value.

Marx's is an investigation into social philosophy rather than economics proper, though only we would make such a distinction, and Marx bring the whole of his social philosophy to bear in providing the answer. It has only proven necessary to affirm the "identity" of labor and value, because Marx's assumption, albeit a stated assumption, has been generally overlooked. What Marx could take for granted, with some justification, in a period where labor theories of value dominated economic thinking must be made fully explicit now that these views have been widely discarded.

In a sense, all the labor theory of value economists, Smith, Ricardo, etc., accepted in practice the equation of value of labor, so it wasn't necessary for Marx to stress this point. Since, however, the political economists also equated value with price, the relation they saw between value and labor was open to empirical rebuttal. For them the concept of value arose from price every bit as much as from labor, and any one of the three was readily quantifiable in terms of the others. In effect, theirs was an empirical generalization that products tended to exchange in proportion to the average amount of labor needed to produce them. Marx, who would not have denied this claim, arrived at his concept of value from what he took to be the relations bound up in alienated labor. Value's connection with price, therefore, is—as we shall see—of an altogether different order.

Besides Marx's few direct statements that labor is value, the definitional tie between the two also emerges from his treatment of what are widely held to be exceptions to his value theory. For example, though land may have a price, not being a product of labor, it can have no value. Consequently, Marx claims that rent is irrational.[33] His critics frequently confuse value with price, but Marx is adamant that there are items which have prices but not values, "i.e., are not the products of labor."[34] In such cases, prices are said to be determined by "fortuitous combinations." Land, antiques, and works of art are offered as instances of this.[35]

Also indicative of the equation of labor and value is Marx's claim that machines add to the value of their product only what they lose in exchange-value. The exchange-value of any machine is the amount of labor-power, measured by labor-time, which went into its production. With each increase in the value of the product for which it is held responsible attributed to a decrease in its own exchange value, and, hence, indirectly to the efforts of those who made these machines, the equation of labor with value is left intact. Whatever other benefits

these machines confer, such as shortening that part of the day the laborer works to produce his own means of subsistence, is viewed in the same light as a gratuitous gift of nature.[36]

But simply to assert *that* labor is value is not to tell *how* it could be so. What is the essential character of value which allows Marx to equate it with the labor that goes into its production? The answer is pointed to when Marx calls value "the most abstract form of bourgeois wealth."[37] Value is the abstract product of abstract labor, where "abstract" refers to the absence of specificity. Value could only be the form of the product, therefore, where it is nothing in particular but, instead, everything which all the products of capitalism have in common. Marx maintains, "the value form of the product of labor is not only the most abstract, but is also the most universal form, taken by the product in bourgeois production."[38]

However, robbed of all specificity, these products have nothing in common besides the fact that they were produced by alienated labor. Hence, *value is the relations of alienated labor, transmitted by such labor, as they appear in the product*. The "identity" of labor and value is the identity of two major forms of capitalist production relations which entail one another, each expressing form its own special vantage point the set of conditions that makes their particular interaction both possible and necessary. All the factors which come into Marx's analysis are actually social relations with internal ties to one another, facets of the same organic whole which constitutes the full sense of each one. Consequently, rather than an independent entity, value is dependent in what it is on all that made it that and nothing else. It is best grasped as a vantage point from which to view (and begin an analysis of) the complex conditions of which it is part and which are part of it. From the perspective of what happens to all the products of capitalism, value offers a view of capitalism itself. It may also be seen as the power to do and be done to in ways which characterize all capitalist products, ways which themselves express the relations of alienation out of which they arose. This is the meaning of Marx's declaration that capital "produces value as the power, alienated from labor, of labor's own material conditions over labor, only as one of the forms of wage-labor itself; as a condition of wage-labor."[39]

Though labor creates value, value—as the relations embodied in labor transferred to its products—constitutes the most general conditions in and through which future labor must be exercised. In this manner, value may also be said to create labor; i.e., transform man's potential for productive activity into alienated

labor. Thus, we saw in the citation given above that value is not only a product of capital but serves as well as "a condition of wage labor."

It should be clear from the foregoing that Marx's concept "value," like "labor" itself, is especially tailored to fit capitalist society. Marx says that "to stamp an object of utility as a value is just as much a social product as language."[40] Value could only be produced in capitalism; and capitalism had to issue in the production of value.[41] Granted that some elements of the capitalist mode of production, such as wage-labor for example, have existed from time to time on the fringes of older societies, value, as we have described it, could not have resulted. If Marx uses the term "value" in such cases, it is to express but part of the relations this term generally conveys, to indicate resemblance, just as "labor" when applied to pre-capitalist societies refers to but the universal element of what is meant by "labor" in capitalism. In Marx's eyes, the existence of value "presupposes: the dissolution of 1) primitive communism (India, etc.); 2) of all undeveloped pre-bourgeois modes of production not completely dominated by exchange." He says of value, "Although an abstraction this is an historical abstraction which could only be adopted on the basis of a particular economic development of society."[42] It is simply that the most general expression of capitalist production relations could not exist before capitalist production relations.

Likewise, it is only in late capitalism, the stage of society in which Marx believed he was living, that the equation of "labor" and "value" became apparent. According to Marx, "The secret expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labor are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labor in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice."[43] Where slavery or feudalism exist, the productive activity of different people appears manifestly unequal, and the notion of human equality, which is the basis of understanding value, can hardly arise.

IV

So far we have only been concerned with "value in general." What of its better-known facets, exchange-value and use-value? Exchange-value, which Marx oftimes rather misleadingly calls "value," is the "ideal" ratio at which a product exchanges for others, i.e., its trading power, or ability to relate to other products on the basis of embodied labor-time. Exchange-value, which corresponds to the quantitative aspect of labor referred to earlier, is said to have

the qualitative characteristic "that the individual labor, through its alienation, must present itself as abstract, general, social labor."[44] As the labor in all products is the same alienated labor, value can be measured by the amount of labor-time expended in production. Commodities would not be sufficiently alike to be measured by one standard if the labor in them were not the same abstract, general labor (alienated labor) that Marx sees constituting the soul of value. Thus, it is the theory of alienation, with its insight into the worker's relations to his activity and product, which provides Marx with the answer to his question: "Why is labor represented by the value of its product and labor-time by the magnitude of that value?"[45]

The external events of trading, i.e., price rations, correspond so closely to the results of Marx's *a priori* arithmetic, because the items exchanged, coming from the same source, are qualitatively the same. They are all abstract wealth, the only possible product of alienated labor, and are exchanged as such. Their individual concrete forms determine, of course, who buys what, but don't count for purposes of exchange ratios. The "fluctuations" in price that occur in the market place, which result in some commodities exchanging at more or less than the amount dictated by embodied labor-time, is explained by competition, whether of buyers or sellers. Given this fluctuation, however, Marx maintains that the price of any commodity will be determined by the amount of labor-time necessary to produce it.[46] From this, it follows that when supply and demand cancel each other out a commodity sells at its value.[47] This leads Marx to the further conclusion that over the long run, where for any given commodity this does occur, price will equal value.[48] It must be stressed, however, that Marx's main contribution to this discussion is not in rehashing what Smith and Ricardo had said before, but in making clear why such exchanges occur, in treating the entire process as an historical development based on specific social conditions.

In ascribing a major role to competition in effecting actual prices, Marx is taking account of the realities of the market place which so many of his critics have accused him of dismissing.[49] However, competition, for Marx, always has a point of reference from which it takes its start. This is the exchange-value, or "ideal" trading power of the commodity. When supply is equal to demand, it is what makes the price of one pair of shoes equal to the price of one pair of trousers, and not more and not less. It is the median around which the actual price of shoes and trousers, swayed by various market factors, will always gravitate.[50]

The exchange-values themselves can only be altered by technical advances which affect the amount of labor-time required to produce one or the other commodity. Hence, a new invention which enable workers to produce twice as many shoes in the same amount of time will reduce the exchange-value of a pair of shoes to one half that of a pair of trousers. The prices of these two commodities may not immediately reflect this drastic alteration in their exchange value ratios, but, according to Marx, over the long run they will.

Exchange-value, however, is more than the ratio at which the products of alienated labor exchange; along with value itself, it is a definite social expression for the underlying relations of alienation. The need to work and to distribute the social product exists in every society; only the forms differ. And, Marx claims that "the form in which this proportional division of labor operates in a state of society where the interconnection of social labor is manifested in the private exchange of the individual products of labor is precisely the exchange-value of these products."[51]

Thus, exchange-value is a "form" taken by the division of labor in societies where there is "private exchange of the individual products of labor." It is not only that which facilitates such exchange, but is an expression of the conditions in which it occurs. "It can," as Marx says elsewhere, "have no other existence except as an abstract one-sided relation of an already concrete and living aggregate."[52] As such, it is—in his speech—a "form" of each of the other main elements in the situation. We have already seen Marx refer to "value in general" as a "form of social labor," and we shall shortly discover that capital, money, and commodities are also presented as "forms" of one another, or of value, or labor. Only by conceding that these factors are internally related, such that each is actually conceived of as part of the others, can Marx's practice be adequately explained. On this model, it is *logically* impossible for any of the factors which distinguish capitalist production to appear without the others.

It pays to examine in this connection what seems to be a major exception to this dictum. In an isolated comment in volume III of *Capital*, which Engels later develops at some length, Marx declares, "It is quite appropriate to regard the values of commodities as not only theoretically but also historically prius to the prices of production. This applies to conditions in which the laborer owns his means of production, and this is the condition of the landowning farmer living off his own labor and the craftsman, in the ancient as well as in the modern world."[53]

In other words, some products were traded at their exchange-value before the modern era, and it is only under conditions of capitalist competition that all prices have strayed as far from exchange-value as is now the case. To understand Marx's position here it is essential to distinguish what he is talking about from the way he talks about it. Certainly, exchange, in some sense, has existed from earliest times. So, too, Marx is probably right that labor-time was the operating measure by which people, who owned their own means of production, exchanged their products (it is important to note that the qualification of owning that with which they produced leaves out more classes than it includes).

Given that such was the case, the question which remains to be asked is—"In what sense can we speak of the existence in precapitalist times of 'exchange-value'?" And Marx's answer, it appears to us, is that exchange-value may be said to exist but in a very limited sense, where its concept conveys but a small part of what it does when applied to capitalist society. This is the same thing we saw earlier in regard to the concept of "labor." Insofar as products in any period exchange in proportion to the labor-time that goes into their production, we may expect to find suitably altered for the occasion—alienated relations between the worker and his activity, product, and other men. Alienation, as Marx frequently makes clear, is not peculiar to capitalist society. It is in the modern era, however, that is has become so thorough-going and evident that concepts have been formulated to mark its more prominent features. Such is "labor" (meaning labor in general) and such is "exchange-value." In focusing attention on particular facets of man's alienated life situation in capitalism, such concepts also instruct us regarding the undeveloped character of these same facets in earlier times. In Marx's words, what "had formerly been intimated has now developed to complete significance" in the categories of bourgeois society. It is in this sense, too, that he declares that "the bourgeois economy furnishes a key to ancient economy," and that "the categories of bourgeois economy contain what is true of all other forms of society" (though they contain this truth in a much modified form, i.e., by incorporating in their meanings the developments which have occurred since).[54]

Thus, though exchange on the basis of exchange-value took place in pre-capitalist times, "exchange-value" is a modern concept, arising out of modern conditions and conveying—in virtue of Marx's relational conception—the whole state of affairs which made its appearance both possible and necessary. It conveys, in effect, the situation where exchange-value is the *dominant* principle governing the exchange of products. In slave owning and feudal societies (leaving

aside the people who owned their means of production), products coming out of the division of labor changed hands on the basis of force or right; while, in communism, products will be secured by everyone on the basis of need. Only in the modern period, where production relations are completely alienated, has exchange-value become the dominant principle governing the exchange of all man's products. Thus, exchange-value, in its full sense (which is how Marx generally understands it), does not exist in pre-capitalist societies, cannot because of all that is meant by its concept.

Our earlier conclusion that the major "forms" of capitalist society logically entail one another still holds. Exchange-value can no more appear independently of labor, capital, commodities, interest, etc., than they of it, each factor expressing —as part of what it is—the full conditions which make it that and nothing else. In the instance cited, however, we see that this does not preclude Marx from using "value" (in the sense of exchange-value) to refer to an element in its full definition in order to mark some feature which different stages of social evolution have in common. Only by allowing that Marx meant much more by "value" than is suggested when he uses it to refer to precapitalist societies can we reconcile this practice with his repeated assertions that value is a special product of capitalism. The fact that Marx devoted so little attention to recounting what occurred in periods when some goods actually traded at their exchange-values, and so much to unraveling the relations expressed by "exchange-value" as a category of modern political economy (at a time when all prices fluctuated from it) demonstrates clearly what he considered to be the priority task.

V

As already indicated, besides exchange-value, another facet of value is use-value. A commodity is a use-value, because it has the power to satisfy some human need. It received this quality from the workers who have produced it, who have engaged in purposive productive activity, and in so doing have transferred something of what they are to their product. On one occasion, Marx defines "use-values" as "*the reproduction of the individual* in certain definite relationships to his community.[55] (Marx's emphasis.) A use-value, therefore, is not simply that for which an article is used, but a specific relation between the worker and his activity, product, and other men.

The worker in capitalism, being who he is, creates what he does; and what he does—including many of the physical characteristics of his product—indicates

clearly who he is, being, in fact, the extension of his person in society. Given Marx's conception of social factors as relations and his belief in the worker's alienation, the attempt by workers to produce useful objects must, of necessity, result in objects whose very usefulness bespeaks the alienated relations of the workers involved in their production. Even the notion of utility, we saw Marx declare, is a definite social product. Thus, whereas exchange-value corresponds to what was referred to as the quantitative aspect of labor, use-value corresponds to its qualitative aspect, to what kind of labor it is.[56]

How does use-value bespeak the alienated labor that goes into its production? In capitalism, no commodity is a use-value for the workers who make it. A worker does not produce what he wants, but what will earn him sufficient money to buy what he wants. He produces use-values for others, and only further degradation for himself, the price which he must pay for his extraordinary generosity. Thus, his product becomes a use-value only after it is exchanged, and must contain such abstract and general labor as qualifies it for exchange.[57] According to Marx, "To become use-values commodities must be universally alienated; they must enter the sphere of exchange... Hence, in order to be realized as use-values, they must be realized as exchange-values."[58] Putting the use of one's own products under the control of others, producing them with this aim in mind, lies at the core not only of use-value but of alienation itself. The production of use-values in capitalism is the production of articles from which the workers who made them are alienated; it could only proceed from alienated workers and is the self-same action which perpetuates their condition.

The alienated character of use-value also stands out in many of the physical traits of the products produced by alienated labor. Production is said to "put the finishing touch on consumption" because its "object is not simply an object in general, but a definite object, which is consumed in a certain definite manner prescribed in its turn by production."[59] In producing for sale to people who lead alienated lives, what kind of articles does the worker produce? He produces, first of all (and on instigation of the capitalist), articles whose qualities are intended to attract customers rather than to give satisfaction. Hence, we find in all capitalist societies a great emphasis on design and little attention paid to durability. The worker will also produce some articles which are only suitable for alienated societies; such are locks of all sorts, guns, most advertisements, churches, etc. Finally, many products which have their equivalent in a non-alienated society are here made in a way which indicates the alienated social relations in which they

are found. Thus, houses are made in family units; washing machines, automatic dish washers, and most other household durables are generally quite small and can service only a few people; automobiles are mass produced in preference to minibuses, and so on. In all these ways, the alienated character of capitalism can be read from the real physical characteristics of the goods produced, form their use-values, from seeing how they are made to be used.

Though use-value, as we have said, is predicated on production for exchange, exchange-value is also predicated on production for use, and use by others: "Thus, while a commodity can become a use-value only after it has been realized as an exchange-value, it can on the other hand, be realized as an exchange-value only if it proves to be a use-value in the process of alienation."[60] The two facets of value presuppose one another, and really cannot be conceived of apart. Like exchange-value, therefore, use-value expresses capitalist production relations.

Still, on occasion, Marx uses the concept "use-value" to refer to only the universal party of its component relations, and this can be misleading. For example, he states: "So far as work is a creator of use-value, is useful work, it is a necessary condition independent of all forms of society for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and nature, and therefore no life."[61] In this case, use-value enters the theory of alienation which it becomes the "material depository of exchange-value."[62] The explanation for this practice has already been given as it applied to "exchange0value." It remains the case that Marx almost always uses "use-value" to refer to a situation where what is useful has already been given over to another and is, in fact, being produced with this end in mind, i.e., as a component relation of capitalist production. Consequently, neither use-value nor exchange-value ever come into Marx's descriptions of Communism, where each individual, as a conscious and fully cooperating member of the community, produces what he wants and consumes what he needs.

VI

At the beginning of our discussion of the labor theory of value, we spoke as well of the adjoining theory of surplus-value. The latter is indeed an extension of the former, but only now can we judge their common substance. Like so many of his expressions, "surplus-value" has a long history, but the sense that Marx gives

it is unique.[63] For him, surplus-value is the amount of the abstract product of alienated labor which is not returned to the worker in the form of wages. It constitutes that part of the use and exchange-values created in capitalist production which goes to everyone other than the workers. Marx considers it one of his original contributions to political economy that he works with the general form of surplus-value rather than any of its specific forms, such as profit or rent.[64] But Marx could only regard surplus value in its pure form because "value" meant something more to him than what is usually understood by "exchange-value." Without a conception of value as the abstract product, he could not treat surplus-value in its concrete, exchange-value forms.[65]

Marx seems to believe that the mistake of his predecessors in not dealing with surplus-value in its pure form is less excusable than our own account of this matter would suggest. For in order to operate with the pure form of surplus-value, Smith and Ricardo would have had to grasp value as the abstract product, and, this, in turn, would have required an understanding of alienated labor. In believing all this was within the range of the classical economists, Marx seems to have though that the real world and, especially, the plight of the proletariat could exercise the same effect on other honest men seeking for the truth that it did on him. We are well aware of his great respect for Ricardo. Furthermore, though the political economists had no conception of labor as alienated productive activity and its division, as such, into use and exchange-value, this distinction, according to Marx, "is practically made, since this school treats labor, at one time under its quantitative aspect, at another under its qualitative aspect."[66] Could the intellectual realization of what they were being forced to do in practice really be so long in forthcoming?

Our own conclusion on this subject is more severe. We would consider the theory of value exposed here a closed book for anyone who has not mastered the theory of alienation of which it is part and the conception of internal relations which serve it as a necessary frame. Marx's revolution in economics consists in providing a full answer to a question only he asked, and stating it with concepts which partake of the originality of his analysis. Immersed as they are in capitalist assumptions, whose import is only indifferently grasped, no one is less qualified to understand the unique contribution of Marxian economics than the economists.[67]

VII

Having grasped labor-power as potential for alienated productive activity and the equation of labor and value, we are now in a position to explain the most striking feature of Marxian economics, the metamorphosis of value. Labor, as we saw, is embodied in all its products. Hence, as its equivalent in capitalism, the same applies to value. The worker produces an article which contains his labor in the form of use- and exchange-value. Then, according to Marx: "The actual process of production, as a unity of the direct production process and the circulation process gives rise to new formation, in which the vein of *internal connections* is increasingly lost, the production relations are rendered independent of one another, and the component values become ossified into forms independent of one another."[68] (Our emphasis).

The guises assumed by value in its merry-go-round journey through the economy include capital, commodity, landed property, profit, interest, rent, wages, and money. Marx would maintain that these are "more concrete economic determinations from which value is abstracted and which from another point of view, can therefore also be regarded as a further development of it."[69] All derive from the worker's alienated productive activity, and each expresses the full set of conditions in which it exists. As component of value, they are facets of the same organic whole, capitalist society. On this view, too much of orthodox economics has been devoted to trying to explain how such apparently distinct entities are related. For Marx, the reverse was the problem: he sought to show how such essentially identical entities differ, or what is each value form's peculiar function in the economy. Their "identity" is definitional; whereas the distinctiveness of each form, which includes the unique ways in which it is related to others, is the subject of his empirical research.

No doubt the most important of these concrete economic determinations is capital, which lends its very name to the period. Marx declares that capital is "value that sucks up the value-creating power."[70] It is that part of surplus-value which re-engages labor for the production of further value. A more complete account is given where Marx says, "capital is not a thing but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character. Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is rather the means of production transformed into capital, which in themselves are no more capital than gold or silver in itself is money. It is the means of production monopolized by a certain section of society, confronting living labor-

power as products and working conditions rendered independent of this very labor-power, which are personified through this antithesis in capital. It is not merely the products of laborers turned into independent powers, products as rulers and buyers of their producers, but rather also the social forces and the future ineligible form of this labor, which confront the laborers as properties of their products."[71]

Capital, in short, expresses the major economic relations of capitalism from the standpoint of the products of former labor which now constitute the means of production. It is the use of such means to produce value, and presupposes all those conditions necessary for it to operate in this way, subsumes them as component relations.[72] Hence, Marx speaks of the alienated worker as "variable capital," and says the capitalist himself "is contained in the concept of capital."[73] So, too, money, commodities, and interest are all spoken of, on occasion, as capital.[74] In so far as each expresses the alienated relations bound up in labor, each is a "form" of value; but in so far as each functions in a way associated with the core notion of capital, i.e., contributes to the production of value, each is also a "form" of capital. Thus, money, for example, may be viewed as value, capital, commodity, etc., depending on which of its potential functions in capitalism Marx takes it to be fulfilling, which depends, in turn, on the problem he is then considering.

The difference between Marx's concept of "capital" and that ordinarily used in political economy is clearly set out by Marx himself when he criticizes Ricardo for thinking of capital as simply the material means of production, "only distinguishable as 'accumulated labor' from 'immediate labor.'" Because he understands it as "something purely material, a mere element in the labor process," Marx says, "the relation between labor and capital, wages and profits, can never be developed."[75] For Ricardo, these relations cannot be developed *out* of capital as a "definite social relationship," which he describes on this occasion as "the material conditions of labor confronting the laborer as a power that had become independent of him."[76] A component of this relationship, without which it could not be what it is, is the relation referred to above between "labor and capital, wages and profits." Marx is able to develop these complex ties out of capital because they are covered by his concept "capital."[77]

Capitalism is a tale that Marx could approach from many angles. In his earlier writing, his chief port of entry, in so far as he had one at this time, was the concept

of "alienated labor." In the *Critique of Political Economy*, which was written as the first installment of the opus that later became *Capital*, "money" served as the central concept. He then chose "capital," because, as he tells us, it is the "dominant category" of the capitalist era, "its determining production relation."[78] "Determining" is to be understood here, as elsewhere in Marx's work, in the sense of "most important." For Marx, the use of the means of production to produce wealth in general is the most striking of capitalism's many unique features, and, therefore, the relation the unfolding of which offers the clearest insight into the whole.

Taking "capital" as the pivotal concept of the system which bears its name also permitted Marx to enter the economic debate with the fewest preliminary qualifications. To have chosen "alienated labor" would have required at least as extensive an investigation into philosophy and anthropology as appeared in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Without such qualifications, however, it is all too easy to mistake key categories, such as "capital" and "value," for their equivalents in the works of other economists. If we view Marx as treating his subject on two interrelated levels, that of economics proper as reflected in the writing of Smith and Ricardo, and that of alienation, then, it has proven the bane of his theories that by transferring commonly accepted meanings to his terms enough sense could be made of what he was saying on this first level that most people deferred trying to make sense of what was being said on the second. However, given their interrelated character—even the idea of two levels is misleading—the result has been widespread misunderstanding of the whole corpus of Marx's economics.

VIII

Having grasped how value is embodied in capital, such other concrete products of capitalism as commodity and landed property should offer little difficulty; but in what sense, it may be asked, is value embodied in money, whether cash or in one of the guises in which it is distributed to the population—profit, interest, rent, and wages? Marx would maintain that money contains value in the same sense that capital does; both result from alienated labor and both, therefore, possess a use as well as an exchange-value. In the case of money, its use-value is its facility in being exchanged; whereas its exchange-value, as with capital, is the amount of value it exchanges for.

As a product of alienated productive activity entering into exchange, money, like capital itself, is a commodity. It differs essentially from other commodities, first,

in being the form in which all the rest "appear as exchange-values to each other," or, as Marx says elsewhere, money is "the commodity in its continually exchangeable form."[79] According to him, "The particular commodity which thus appears as the specifically adopted expression of the exchange-value of all other commodities, or the exchange-value of commodities as a particular exclusive commodity, is money. Money is a crystallization of the exchange-value of commodities which they themselves form in the process of exchange. Thus, while commodities become use-values to each other in the process of exchange by casting off al definite shape, they must assume a new form, viz., proceed to the formation of money in order to appear as exchange-values to each other."[80] To facilitate the comparison of commodities on the basis of a single standard, value, money is evolved. According to Marx, it is a form of commodities themselves, that in which they exchange for one another, and expresses the same alienated conditions which make the exchange of equivalents both possible and necessary.

As the substance in which their relative worths are reckoned, money replaces over time all other commodities as the object of practical effort. This is a second distinguishing feature of money as a commodity: people work to make money. As the necessary mediator between man and his wants, money has come to be what he wants.[81] Furthermore, by possessing the power to buy everything, money puts the individual into relations with other commodities and people that he could not enter into on the basis of his own needs and personal characteristics. Money enables him to buy the food which his hunger cannot secure, to occupy the hearth to which his numb limbs give him no right, to possess the woman whom his personal traits cannot win, etc.

It is the same alienated labor, which makes it impossible for workers to appropriate the world of objects, that enables money to do so. The ability of money is man's own, man's potential for entering into relations with nature, including other men, which has been taken from him in labor and incorporated in his products. Money's power to buy is a function of people's necessity to sell what they have (labor-power, products, virtue); this is a function of their inability to acquire what they need as human beings by simply manifesting their needs; and this, in turn, is a function of a situation in which those who control what is needed have interest other than and hostile to the interests of the persons in need. By producing a product which he gives over to the control of another, the worker begins a chain reaction that culminates (on this scale, at least) in the particular role that money plays in capitalist society.

What money is able to buy, therefore, is no more than what people potentially can do, but actually cannot. For if they were doing it, then money could not buy it; and if they could never do it, then there would be nothing for money to buy. It is in this sense that Marx declares that "*money is the alienated ability of mankind*."[82] (Marx's emphasis.) Without alienation there would be no money; people would not offer a sterile metal for what they want and would refuse to accept it for what they have. In describing the dictatorship of the proletariat, where the worker's alienated relations to his activity, product, and other men have already been seriously modified, Marx dispenses with the concept of "money" and speaks instead of "labor vouchers."[83] In communism, of course, even these have disappeared.

IX

The metamorphosis of value from one form to another occurs through the alienation in exchange of use-value. To alienate the use-value of labor-power, capital, money, etc., means, in every instance, to give up all control over it to another. This presupposes, of course, that individuals have such control over the value forms in their possession, and accept that others do as well. According to Marx, exchange becomes possible whenever "men, by a tacit understanding... treat each other as private owners of those alienable objects, and by implication as independent individuals."[84] All acts of exchange, then, are characterized by the mutual transfer of the power to use-value forms. Afterwards, both the buyer and the seller "have the same value they had before the transactions"; only the form of value is different, as each has acquired what the other had.[85]

In answer to the question, "What is alienated in an ordinary sale?" Marx replies, "Not the value of the sold commodity, for this merely changes its form... What is really alienated by the seller, and, therefore passes into the individual or productive consumption of the buyer, is the use-value of the commodity—the commodity as a use-value."[86] Value cannot be alienated in a sale, for all capitalist products continue to express, both before and after their sale, the relations which underlie their production. However, the form of value changes in the sense that the object of value performs a different function for the buyer than it did for the seller, and for Marx, changes in function betoken changes in the concept which applies. Hence, the value form of a machine in the hands of a merchant is the commodity; he uses it to make money. In the sale, the merchant gives up its use-value to a capitalist, who uses it to employ workers to produce value. The machine owned by the capitalist remains a value (it continues to express the

alienated relations involved in its production), but its value form has changed to capital with the new function that it serves. According to Marx, each form of value has a unique mode of alienating its use-values: "A special sort of commodity, capital has its own peculiar mode of alienation," which is transferring the value that went into its production to its products.[87] And, elsewhere, lending is given as the mode in which the banker alienates the use-value of his money to the capitalist.[88]

The whole process of transferring use-value has its start when the worker alienates his labor-power to the capitalist in order to earn enough money to buy means of subsistence. Labor-power, we will recall, is the only commodity whose use-value, labor, is capable of creating a greater exchange-value than its own. The capitalist sells the workers' products, i.e., alienates their use-value to buyers, for money, i.e., to obtain the use-value of their money. He, then, alienates the use-value of party of the money he receives to a landlord, in the form of rent, and of another part to a banker, in the form of interest. This is really the exchange, though in this instance not an equitable one, of a new for an old value, the product of previous workers, whose use-values were initially alienated to the capitalist by the landlord and the banker. In this way the surplus-value is distributed. What the capitalist retains for himself is his profit, part of which he will undoubtedly alienate to workers to obtain more labor-power.

From the foregoing discussion it may appear that the sense of "alienate" has shifted somewhat from what it was when we began. To give up all control over use-value does not seem at first glance to be the same thing as what was treated above under this concept. It is from such evidence that some critics, who note the appearance of "alienation" in *Capital*, have concluded that Marx intends something completely different than he did in his earlier writings. Aside from the fact that this concept is frequently used, particularly in the *Grundrisse* (1857, 8), to convey exactly the same information that it does in the *1844 Manuscripts*, our discussion of use-value should make it clear that the difference which does exist is more apparent than real.[89]

When, in *Capital*, Marx speaks of "alienating" any commodity, he does not simply mean the act of selling it; he means giving up all control over its use-value. And, as we have shown, this transaction could only take place because the workers, who create all value, engage in alienated activity on a product from which they are all alienated and on behalf of a capitalist from whom they are

alienated. To transfer use-values is one facet of alienation and is logically dependent on the entire way of life that goes with it. By referring to such a sale as "alienation," Marx is using this concept, as he does so many others, to express only part of the structured information which comes under it in order to meet some immediate purpose. In this instance, the universal practice under capitalism of giving up the right to use what one has for a practice is called "alienation," first because the act itself is an alienated one, and, second, to draw attention to the source of such exchange (and, hence, the entire metamorphoses of commodities which evolves from it) in the alienated labor of workers.

X

Capital is a treatise on the law of value, and, consequently, could only be a work about alienation. Like all other laws in Marxism, the law of value has to do with the necessary development of an entity through the temporal relations Marx sees bound up in it. It concerns not only what happens but what must happen to value given its "essential nature," a nature which is bound up with its production by alienated labor. The transformation of value into capital, wages, rent, money, etc., as well as its transformation into prices of productions and eventually into market prices, all come under this law. In following value in and through the various forms it takes in capitalist circulation, Marx is charting the law of its development. He is uncovering what is referred to at different times as the "inner relations," "hidden substratum," "physiology," and "organic coherence" of capitalism. He is describing the life processes of an alienated society. It is this which makes Marx's work—on his own understanding of the term—a "science": "The science consists precisely in working out how the law of value operates."[90]

Marx's labor theory of value, therefore, unlike Smith's and Ricardo's, is *not* the claim that labor produces value, but the whole panorama of faces exposed in the metamorphosis of value, in which the equation of labor with value is the underlying assumption.[91]

XI

The 'fetishism of commodities' refers to people's misconception of the products of labor once they enter exchange, a misconception which accords these forms of value leading roles in what is still a human drama.[92] The metamorphosis of value is a tale about man, his productive activity and products, and what happens to them all in capitalist society. Misreading this story as one about the

activities of inanimate objects, attributing to them qualities which only human beings could possess, positing living relations for what is dead, is what Marx calls the "fetishism of commodities.'[93]

According to Marx, "This fetishism of commodities has its origins... in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them."[94] This character, as we saw, is reproduced in the product, value. As the abstract product of alienated labor, value expresses the relations of the individuals engaged in such labor. However, though value contains human relations, it actually conveys them as relations between their products. Hence, the remark, "When, therefore, Galiani says: Value is a relation between persons... he ought to have added: a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things."[95]

For Marx, it is through the monetary expression of exchange-value that the ties between people at work have remained so carefully hidden. He maintains that it is this ultimate money-form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing the social character of private labor, and the social relations between the individual producers. When I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen, because it is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots compare these articles with linen, or, what is the same thing, with gold or silver, as the universal equivalent, they express the relation between their own private labor and the collective labor of society in the same absurd form.[96]

With the relations between people so artfully disguised as relations between things, we should not be surprised that this is how they are grasped. In the fetishism of commodities the appearance of the metamorphosis of value is mistaken for its essence. By treating value solely as the ratio at which their products exchange, people attribute to these products the personal ties which make such an exchange of equivalents possible. Accordingly, Marx declares that character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor.[97]

In this manner, a commodity is seen to have a "natural price," a relation to money and other commodities independent of the human factors involved. This price, which—as an indication of exchange-value based on the alienation of use-value—simply expresses relations between people in production, is taken as a

non-social quality of the commodity on a par with its physical character. Shoes have openings for the feet, and cost five dollars a pair. So it is with other forms of value, where this same phenomenon is better described as "reification." Capital, for example, is seen to "earn" a profit; this is taken as its proper, natural, and, therefore, deserved product.[98] Admittedly, this way of speaking is sometimes no more than a shorthand for presenting a complex situation, but Marx believes that it usually is not, that most people who speak of capital earning a profit actually grasp the relation between the two in terms of cause and effect.

Capital is also reified in its relations with workers. For Marx, capital exploits workers as an instrument of the capitalists. Dead matter dominates living labor because it is in the hands of men whose interests are diametrically opposed tot hose of the producers. Though Marx speaks of the capitalist's actions as a "mere function of capital," it is the capitalist and not capital who is endowed with a conscience and a will.[99] Only because machines, factories, etc., are used for the purpose they are does alienation result. However, in the course of experiencing exploitation, workers are prone to confuse the means with the people who direct them, and to attribute to inanimate objects the social character of an exploiting agency. In this way, machines are seen to need workers, and factories blamed for making the life of the proletariat intolerable.

Reification also occurs with landed property, which is invested with the natural ability to produce rent.[100] According to Marx, "One of the objective condition of labor alienated from labor, and therefore confronting it as the property of others" is land, which in our era takes the form of "monopolized land, or landed property."[101] Like profit, rent is a social relation, in this case, that part of value which is siphoned off to landlords. Marx maintains, "Just as products confront the producer as an independent force in capital and capitalists who actually are but the personification of capital—so land becomes personified in the landlord and likewise gets on its hind legs to demand, as an independent force, its share of the product created with its help."[102] As in the case of capital, the domination of landed property over men is misconstrued as deriving from the land itself, rather than from its owners.

The reification that Marx uncovers is not limited to the concrete products of labor but applies equally to all the forms touched upon by the metamorphosis of value. We saw earlier all that money was able to do in capitalism, but, instead of seeing this as the expression of man's relation to his products being turned on its

head, money is taken to possess these colossal powers as natural attributes. People's attitude toward money is, undoubtedly, the outstanding instance of capitalist fetishism, reaching its height in interest bearing capital (money lent at interest). Here, people think they see "money creating more money, self-expanding value."[103] When money "grows" in this way, Marx says, "This result of the entire process of reproduction appears as a property inherent in the thing itself."[104] Workers, machines, raw materials—all the factors of production—are downgraded to mere aids, and money itself is made the producer of wealth.

Finally, the labor relation itself is reified, made into a "ghost," wage-labor, an abstraction divested of its unique character. People in capitalism see labor, their distinctive alienated labor which produces value, as the productive activity of all men at all time and as an activity which is responsible for only the part of value that is returned to them as wages. Hence, labor is thought of as having a "natural price," a conception Marx considers "as irrational as a yellow logarithm."[105]

In treating the social production relations, capital, landed property, and labor, as things, their integral unity is lost, and the society in which they exist united hopelessly distorted. According to Marx: In capital-profit, or still better capital-interest, land-rent, labor-wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct coalescence of the material production relations with their historical and social determination. It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which *Monsieur le Capital* and *Madame la Terre* do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as things.[106]

What could only have been expected once the different forms of value are reified, the very connections between them, the time sequences on which they are hung, are also given lives of their own. In this case, where production relations appear to people as things, their interrelations due to the world market, its conjecture, movements of market prices, periods of credit, industrial and commercial cycles, alternations of prosperity and crisis appears to them as overwhelming natural laws that irresistible enforce their will over them, and confront them as blind necessity.[107]

People tend to view these recurring economic events, which they dignify with

the label "law," as natural attributes of nature. But neither god nor nature demands their occurrence. What appears as "blind necessity" is but the unchecked development of the social production relations of capitalism.[108]

The practical effect of all such fetishism, of course, is the blanket ignorance it imposes on anyone trying to understand the capitalist economic system. With its origins, real mechanisms and future possibilities so well hidden, criticism is misdirected and action that would alter the situation rendered ineffective. As Marcuse rightly points out:

> If wages... express the value of labor, exploitation is at best a subjective and personal judgment. If capital were nothing other than an aggregate of wealth employed in commodity production, then capital would appear to be the cumulative result of productive skill and diligence. If the creation of profits were the peculiar quality of utilized capital, such profits might represent a reward for the work of the entrepreneur.[108]

By dismissing the essential human relations, the basic relations of alienation which underlie capitalist production, its surface relations become everything.

XII

So far, I have been proceeding as if reification had necessarily to be based on faulty evidence. However, by attributing an independent life to the various forms of value, people succeed in transferring to them certain powers for regulating their own existence. In a situation where all entities are related to each other as both cause and effect, to be viewed as an initiating force is to become one in fact. To conceive of money as having the power to buy everything is indeed to have money which has the power to buy everything. The laws of capitalism operate as eternal necessity in the same manner. They become necessary in virtue of everyone thinking and acting as if they are. For all practical purposes, that is for purposes of life in capitalism, reification brings about the very mistake it embodies.[109]

The difficulty in grasping this notion comes from the impossibility on what I have called the common sense view of treating man's objects as "subjects" without falling into the error of personifying the inanimate. Man, it is said, uses, needs, and has power over his products; he may misuse them, be ignorant or

ineffective, but these products cannot easily use, need, nor have power of him. Yet, as we have seen, these are claims that Marx often makes. By holding that the relation between man and nature is an internal one, Marx is able to transfer qualities usually associated with one to the other to mark some special feature. The power man has to affect his relations with nature, for example, is a quality he has as a facet of the whole, which includes nature; hence it is also a quality of the whole (what applies to any of its parts applies to the whole); and so, too, of other facets (what applies to the whole applies to all its parts—assuming internal relations between them). Thus, as explained in Chapter 2 above, the qualities of one factor are applicable to another (whether offered as part of the meaning of its concept or ascribed in separate adjectives) whenever the latter functions in ways associated with the core meaning of the former.

Through his alienated productive activity in capitalism, the worker has established relations between himself and his products (both parts of human nature for Marx) which enable each to function in some respects like what is generally meant by the other's concept. The worker has needs for objects to fulfill his powers as a human being but cannot acquire these objects. Instead, he passes his days producing value, satisfying the profit needs of his employer, behaving in short as "variable capital." His product, which is meant to satisfy human needs, serves instead to re-order the lives of the people who come into contact with it, getting them to act in ways that affirm its character as a capitalist product. The worker has no claim to a machine when he is unemployed, while the machine has a claim to the worker when it is unemployed. Hence, a machine (as capital) is said to need the night labor of workers; the relation between the two is such that what the product is determines what the worker does rather than the reverse.

All forms of the worker's product are, on occasion, spoken of in terms that we ordinarily reserve for men, but it is money which is most frequently characterized in this way. Money, as we saw, is the mediator between man and all his objects in capitalism; he can get nothing he needs without paying for it. Cast in this role, money is said to have "changed into a true god, for *the intermediary reigns in real power over the thing it mediates for me*. Its cult becomes an end in itself.[110] The notion that the mediator between man and his object (the means which enable him to make use of it) is something that exercises "real power" over him comes up again—as we shall see—in Marx's discussion of religion and the state.

Thus, for Marx, the relations between men are not only reified in their products, but these reified products interact with men so as to make what appeared false true. Rather a contradiction, this is perhaps the most important example in Marxism of reciprocal effect: people acquire their conception of reality from what they experience (they reify the forms of value because of what occurs in the metamorphosis of value), and their conception of reality helps determine what they experience (the metamorphosis of value only occurs through the reification of the forms of value). The power of capital, or of any of the worker's products, over the worker always reflects the power of the people who dominate it and use it as an instrument. However, through reification and inside the context of capitalism capital itself may exercise certain powers. Marx is not guilty of the fetishism he discovers in capitalist society, because the powers he ascribes to products are never considered theirs as natural qualities.

To exclude either side of this internal relation between man and his products (such that each may be seen to dominate the other) is to arrive at a dead end, in one instance of "vulgar determinism" and in the other of equally vulgar "free will." To admit only one of these perspectives is to treat *Capital* as a work on fetishism or a fetishized work. Though Marx, here, as in his historical essays, emphasizes the effect until then neglected proceeding from material factors, the full cloth, Marxism, is the product of the dialectical interweaving of the two.

Notes

1. One of the better discussions of the place of alienation in *Capital* can be found in Raya Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* (New York, 1958), p. 103-149.
2. Given that the presence of the term "alienation" in *Capital* has been brought into question, it may be useful to point out that this term can be found in *Capital* I, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow, 1958), p. 87, 168, 570, 584, and 608; in *Capital* III (Moscow, 1959), p. 48, 84-86, 226, 259, 297, 324-325, 342-348, 375, 383-384, 427, 619, 622, 792, and 804; and in *Theories of Surplus-Value*, translated by G. A. Bonner and Emile Burns (London, 1951), p. 122 and 317. This list of citations is not meant to be exhaustive. Furthermore, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Okonomie* (Berlin, 1953), which contains Marx's notes for *Capital*, contains

literally dozens of references to "alienation." One reason that English speaking readers may have thought that this term dropped out of Marx's vocabulary is that the much used Moscow edition of *Capital* I has no index and their volume III, which does have an index, makes no mention of "alienation." The Eden and Cedar Paul translation of *Capital* I (1928) likewise has an index, but does not include "alienation." An exception is the London edition of *Capital* I (1937), which is a photographic reprint of the 1889 original that was gone over by Engels, which does give "alienation" in the index.

3. *Capital* I, p. 39.
4. *Ibid*., p. 195.
5. This list of interpretations is not meant to be exhaustive. Our only purpose here is to indicate some of the more important levels on which these theories have been understood.
6. Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York, 1964), p. 12.
7. *Capital* I, p. 10.
8. Maximillien Rubel has made it clear that *Capital* was originally intended as the opening salvo in a broader study of capitalist society that was to include works on law, morals, politics, and still other sectors of social life (M. Rubel, Karl Marx, *Essai de biographie intellectuelle*, Paris, 1957, p. 10, 11). It is in this sense—and because only part of what Marx actually wrote on economics was published—hat Rubel would have us understand Marx's best known accounts of capitalism as "formulas detached from a vast argument of the whole" (*Ibid*., p. 11). The interaction and mutual interdependence that Marx uncovered between social factors reaches far beyond the economic sphere proper, so that not all of what Marx took to be the economic laws of capitalism is presented in the pages given over to this task.
9. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Moscow, 1959), p. 72.
10. *Ibid*., p. 79.
11. *Ibid*., p. 70. In his only organized treatment of the subject (*1844 Manuscripts*, p. 69-80), Marx presents alienation as partaking of four broad relations which are so distributed as to cover the whole of human existence. These are the individual's relations to his productive activity, product, other men, and the species. The descriptions of alienated labor which we have

quoted offers a one-sided view of these four relations.

12. *Capital* I, p. 570, I.
13. According to Marx, "Political Economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relations between the worker (labor) and production" (*1844 Manuscripts*, p. 71). As a result, for orthodox economists, "labor" does not convey these relations.
14. *Capital* I, p. 167.
15. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 168, 9. Engels, who incorporates "labor-power" into an edition of Marx's *Wage Labor and Capital* (1849), which was published after the latter's death, offers a lengthy explanation of why this expression was introduced that does not in the least detract from our use of it to establish links between marx's theories of alienation and value. Cf. Engels' Introduction to Marx's *Wage Labor and Capital*, *Selected Writings I* (Moscow, 1951), p. 67 ff. A good discussion of the effect of substituting "labor-power" for "labor" on economic analysis can be found in John Stratchey's much underestimated work, *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis* (New York, 1935), p. 177 ff. This book also contains one of the best accounts we have seen of political economy's turn away from the labor theory of value in the period after Marx (*Ibid*., Part II).
16. *Capital* I, p. 584.
17. We shall see shortly that "alienate" means to transfer use-value in regard to the product of the worker's activity as well.
18. Marx quotes from Hegel to underline this point: "I may make over to another the use, for a limited time, of my particular bodily and mental aptitudes and capabilities; because, in consequence of this restriction, they are impressed with a character of alienation with regard to me as a whole. But by the alienation of all my labor-time and the whole of my work, I should be converting the substance itself, in other words, my general activity and reality, my person, into the property of another" (*Capital* I, p. 168). It is worth noting too that it is not in the *Manuscripts* but in *Capital* that we find the fullest descriptions of the physical and mental aspects of the worker's alienation.
19. *Ibid*., p 170.
20. *Capital* III, p. 191.
21. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 381.
22. Productive activity in feudalism, for example, which is "not yet grasped in its generality and abstraction," brings other results. For Marx, the labor of serfs,

"is still bound to a particular natural element as its matter, and it is therefore only recognized in a particular mode of existence determined by nature. It is therefore still only a specific, particular alienation of man, just as its product is conceived only as a specific form of wealth, due more to nature than to labor itself" (*1844 Manuscripts*, p. 96).

23. Letter to Lassalle quoted in M. Rubel, Fragments sociologiques dans les inédits de Marx, in *Cahiers internationaux de Sociologie* (vol. 22, 1957), p. 129.
24. Marx, Introduction, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by N. I. Stone (Chicago, 1904), p. 298-300.
25. *Capital* I, p. 73.
26. The relation between the twofold character Marx ascribes to labor and the twofold character he ascribes to value is also made clear in the distinction Engels draws in two separate notes to *Capital* I between the English terms "work" and "labor." He claims, "The labor which creates use-values, and counts qualitatively, is work, as distinguished from labor; that which creates value and counts quantitatively, is labor as distinguished from work" (*Ibid*., p. 47). The value referred to in the second half of this statement is exchange-value. See, too, *Ibid*., p. 186.
27. *Capital* III, p. 795, 372.
28. Marx, Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, edited and translated by Dona Torr (London, 1941), p. 106.
29. He also says that "value in general is a form of social labor" (*Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 52). See, too, his claim that the substance of commodities is labor—"That is why they are value" (*Ibid*., p. 201). Engels provides a still more striking statement of this equation in replying to the question, "What is the value of labor?": "Value itself," he says, "is nothing more than the expression of the socially necessary human labor materialized in an object. Labor can therefore have no value. It would be just as possible to speak of the value of labor and to try to determine it, as to speak of the value of value, or to try to determine the weight not of a body, but of heaviness itself" (*Anti-Dühring*, p. 224). Yet many Marxists continue to speak about the "value of labor." See, for example, Leon Trotsky's *The Living Thoughts of Karl Marx* (New York, 1963). The seriousness of this error will shortly become apparent. In all this, great care must be taken not to confuse labor with labor-power, which does have a value equal to the amount of labor-time required to produce the means of subsistence people need in reproducing it.

30. One early exception is Edward Bernstein who claims that Marxian value is what is left of a commodity after everything but labor has been abstracted. He believes that if Marx had finished his chapter on class in *Capital* III, he would have made it clear that "value is nothing more than a key, an abstract image" to aid in understanding capitalist society (Edward Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, translated by Edith Harvey, London, 1909, p. 35, 38). The same thought continues to crop up, but it has never been adequately explained.
31. Marx, *Letters to Dr. Kugelmann* (London, 1941), p. 73.
32. *Capital* I, p. 80. In his chapter on economics in Anti-Dühring, a chapter reputedly drafted by Marx, Engels begins with the question: "Whence comes this surplus-value?" That there is value and its equation with labor are taken for granted (Engels, Anti-Dühring, translated by Emile Burns, London, no date, p. 227, 8).
33. *Capital* III, p. 608.
34. The rest of nature is similarly dismissed: "Since exchange-value is a definite social manner of expressing the amount of labor bestowed upon an object, nature has no more to do with it than it has in fixing the course of exchange" (*Capital* I, p. 82).
35. *Ibid*., p. 618, 9.
36. *Capital* I, p. 371, 388. Even the qualification that the labor theory of value takes account of only socially useful labor exhibits the aforementioned link. Marx says "nothing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labor contained in it; the labor does not count as labor, and therefore creates no value" (*Capital* I, p. 41). Thus, labor which does not produce items people want is no labor at all. Some critics have seen this as an attempt by Marx to stack the cards in his favor, and so it is if we view Marx as trying to arrive at inductive conclusions. See Ludwig von Böhm-Bawerk, *Karl Marx and the Close of His System*, translated by Alice A. MacDonald (London, 1890), p. 134, 5. But if we allow that Marx is trying to disclose why labor in our era appears as value, the tie between the two cannot be criticized as one would an inductive conclusion.
37. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 106.
38. *Capital* I, p. 81.
39. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 134. Value again may be seen as what finally happens under capitalist conditions to the powers workers expend in production, the result of "transferring" species powers to objects. See Marx's

discussion of product alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 70 ff.

40. *Capital* I, p. 74.
41. The value form of the product in bourgeois production, according to Marx, "stamps that production as a particular species of social production, and thereby gives it its special historical character" (Capital I, p. 81). See, too, Engels' claim that "value is just another expression for labor, that expression whereby in our present day capitalist society is designated the amount of socially necessary labor contained in a particular commodity" (Engels, Introduction to *Wage Labor and Capital*, *Selected Writing I*, p. 72).
42. Selected Correspondence, p. 106. The same qualification that rules out the past rules out the future. Consequently, though labor-time serves as the measure of exchange under socialism, it is wrong to view this, for example as Joan Robinson does, as an instance where the labor theory of value has been put into practice. The contrast between Paul Sweezy and Joan Robinson as major interpreters of Marx's economics stands out starkly from the fact that the former has recognized this, while the latter has not. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, p. 53, 4; Joan Robinson, *An Essay on Marxian Economics* (London, 1963), p. 23.
43. *Capital* I, p. 60.
44. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 381. The same idea is put even more succinctly in Marx's claim that "When the difference between various kinds of labor is treated as purely quantitative, their qualitative unity or equality, and therefore their reduction to abstract human labor, is implied" (*Capital* I, p. 80).
45. The minimized distinction between skilled and unskilled labor, which some critics have tried to explode as a major fault in Marx's value theory, receives its proper perspective once we accept that what is being measured is the qualitatively undifferentiated labor of alienation. Marx admits that skilled labor has a greater value than unskilled labor, but says this is based on the greater labor-time necessary to reproduce it. Skilled labor is simply a compound of unskilled labor, the sum of all the unskilled labor that has gone into its creation. Since these two kinds of labor, when exercised under capitalist conditions of production, do not differ significantly in their degree of alienation, Marx can legitimately hold them up for measurement by the same standard.
46. Wage Labor and Capital, *Selected Writings I*, p. 82.
47. Wages, Price and Profit, *ibid*., p. 375. Another important aspect of this

problem is the regulating effect which Marx sees value having on supply and demand which, in turn, transform value into market price (*Capital* III, p. 177, 8).

48. *Ibid*., p. 384. See, too, his statement that: "The assumption that the commodities of the various spheres of production are sold at their value merely implies, of course, that their value is the center of gravity around which their prices fluctuate, and their continual rises and drops tend to equalize" (*Capital* III, p. 175).
49. A similar role is given to competition among capitalists in bringing an average rate of profit to spheres of production which have different rates of surplus-value (*Capital* III, p. 156, 192, 3). To grasp profit, Marx would have us treat the capitalist class as a whole (*Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 285). So much for Böhm-Bawerk's "Great Contradiction," which points to the average rate of profit existing between industries employing widely varying numbers of workers as being incompatible with Marx's belief that only labor produces value. Like so much of the criticism of Marx's economics, this one is directed against a position Marx never takes, simply dismissing all his comments to the contrary. That Böhm-Bawerk's criticism has acquired, through constant repetition, the stature it has is a clear indication of the level on which most Marxian exegesis stands. See Böhm-Bawerk's *Karl Marx*, p. 62 ff. Böhm-Bawerk, it must be noted, is not an "ordinary" critic, but, as a later writer rightly noted, "the lion of the anti-Marxists" (William Blake, *An American Looks at Karl Marx*, New York, 1939, p. 415).
50. See the discussion, in *Capital* III, p. 174 ff.
51. Kugelmann, p. 73, 4.
52. Introduction, *Political Economy*, p. 294.
53. *Capital* III, p. 174. For Engel's comments, see his Supplement to *Capital* III, in *Capital* III, p. 872 ff.
54. *Introduction, Political Economy*, p. 300, I.
55. *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 80, I.
56. *Capital* I, p. 80. This conceptualization of the dual connection between labor and value is contrasted with its absence among capitalist economists. Marx says, "It is the weak point of the classical school of Political Economy that it nowhere, expressly and with full consciousness, distinguishes between labor, as it appears in the value of a product and the same labor as it appears in the use-value of the product" (*Capital* I, p. 80). Because they do not grasp labor as alienated productive activity, they do not feel any need to

make allowance for the distinctive qualities of such labor which appear in its product, value.

57. Marx says: "A use-value... has value only because human labor in the abstract has been embodied or materialized in it" (*Ibid*., p. 38).
58. *Political Economy*, p. 42, 3.
59. Introduction, *Political Economy*, p. 279.
60. *Ibid*., p. 43. Marx comments: "It is one of the chief failings of classical economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of commodities, and, in particular, of their value, in discovering that form under which value becomes exchange-value" (*Capital* I, p. 80, 1). That form is the use-value of commodities.
61. *Ibid*., p. 42, 3.
62. *Ibid*., p. 36.
63. A satisfactory intellectual history would have to trace surplus-value at least as far back as the "*produit net*" of the physiocrats.
64. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 232.
65. See, for example, his criticism of them in *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 40. Besides working with the general form of surplus-value, the other original contributions he believes he made in *Capital* I are demonstrating the double character of labor and uncovering the relations hidden in the "irrational" form of wages (Selected Correspondence, p. 232). However, in the Preface to *Capital* I, Marx indicates that more important still is his treatment of value itself: "The value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money-form is very elementary and simple. Nevertheless, the human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought to get to the bottom of it, whilst on the other hand, to the successful analysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation" (*Capital* I, p. 7, 8).
66. *Capital* I, p. 80. The concepts of "use-value" and "exchange-value" in the works of the other labor theory of value economists—insofar as they are there at all—do not get beyond the simple notions of how an article is used and that for which it exchanges.
67. Joan Robinson expresses the frustration of even the best intentioned economists on reading *Capital*, when she complains: "What business has Hegel putting his nose between me and Ricardo?" (Joan Robinson, *On Re-reading Marx*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 22, 3). Or take Schumpeter, who maintains that if "value" means more than exchange-value, a lot of what Marx says might make sense, but he cannot see what more it could possibly

mean (Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, New York, 1947, p. 23). This is not to say that all misconceptions concerning Marx's economic theories result from ignorance of the theory of alienation and its philosophical underpinnings. A careful study of *Capital* I, II, and III would have spared generations of readers most of the critical works that have appeared on this subject. However, insofar as such study would have enabled critics to grasp the capitalism Marx was describing, they would be seeing reality, whether they knew it or not, through the prism of the alienation theory. For, in the last analysis, *Capital* is sufficient to understand *Capital*. As Lukacs, in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923), long before Marx's early works became available, showed, it is possible to learn about alienation from Marx's later economics. Unfortunately, most critics have been unable to get as far as volume III of *Capital*, where Marx makes over and again the distinctions between value and price, and between surplus-value and profit, and where he puts into place the till then dismissed element of competition. Critics who disregard these pages (and one is tempted to put Böhm-Bawerk among them) cannot be left off the hook so lightly with the excuse that they were not aware of the theory of alienation. However, it may also be the case that not knowing this theory, no amount of repetition by Marx that value is labor and that surplus-value is not profit can register as anything else than inconsistency.

68. *Capital* III, p. 807. To be noted is that the "new formations" of the process of production (taken in the broad sense to include circulation) are internally connected, and are being equated here with "production relations" and "component values." As the expression of the relations of alienated labor as they appear in the product, value takes the form of each particular product, which is then seen to contain these relations "ossified." Because of its internal tie to production, each such form may also be viewed as a "production relation." That is, the actual forms in which value is cast serve as necessary conditions for their own production, and, given Marx's use of concepts to convey relations, become part of what is meant by "production" itself.
69. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 106.
70. *Capital* I, p. 571. Our grasp of the connection between capital and the theory of alienation is aided by the inclusion of the term "alienation" in many of Marx's treatments of capital, as, for example, when he refers to it as "the alienation of the condition of social production... from the real producers"

(*Capital* III, p. 259. See, too, *ibid*., p. 428).

71. *Capital* III, p. 794, 5. For an even fuller definition which was written much earlier, see Wage Labor and Capital, *Selected Writings* I, p. 84, 5.
72. For an excellent discussion of the conditions presupposed by capital, where Marx skillfully weaves together the numerous threads which go into its composition, see *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, p. 97 ff.
73. *Grundrisse*, p. 412.
74. *Capital* I, p. 153, 571.
75. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 302.
76. *Ibid*.
77. If it is a "tautology," as Marx declares, that "there can no longer be wage-labor when there is no longer any capital," it must also be tautological that there can no longer be capital when wage-labor ceases to exist (*Communist Manifesto*, p. 36). As capitalist production relations, each is a necessary component of the other.
78. *Capital* III, p. 806.
79. *Political Economy*, p. 51; *Capital* III, p. 378.
80. *Political Economy*, p. 51. No account of Marx's economics is complete without making at least one reference to that monument of Marxist scholarship for which we must thank Ernest Mandel. One of the many virtues of this large two volume work, which draws examples from all periods and virtually hundreds of societies, is the clear account given of money, both as capital and as a commodity (Ernest Mandel, *Traité d'économie marxiste*, Paris, 1962, Chapters 3, 4, 8).
81. Marx says: "By possessing the property of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, money is the object of eminent possession… Money is the pimp between man's need and the objects, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person" (*1844 Manuscripts*, p. 137). We have broken our general rule of using only late sources for this essay, because this aspect of money as a commodity, which fits logically into the current discussion, is so much better treated in Marx's early writings.
82. *Ibid*., p. 139.
83. *Capital* II, p. 358.
84. *Capital* I, p. 87: "Objects in themselves are external to man, and consequently alienable by him. In order that this alienation may be

reciprocal, it is only necessary for men, by a tacit understanding, to treat each other as private owners of those objects, and by implication as independent individuals." To consider objects external to man is not inconsistent with believing that the two are internally related. "External," here, does not mean the opposite of "internal," in the sense that we have been using it. Elsewhere, Marx maintains: "In order to sell a thing, nothing more is required than its capacity to be monopolized and alienated" (*Capital* III, p. 619).

85. *Capital* III, p. 345.
86. *Ibid*., p. 344.
87. *Ibid*., p. 342.
88. *Ibid*., p. 334.
89. For discussions of alienation which could have come directly out of the *1844 Manuscripts*, see Grundrisse, p. 356, 715, 6.
90. Kugelmann, p. 74. Marx also declares that "it is the work of science to resolve the visible, merely external movement into the true intrinsic movement" (*Capital* III, p. 307). How he applies this distinction can be seen from his claim that: "Surplus-value and rate of surplus-value are, relatively speaking, the invisible and unknown essence that wants investigating, while rate of profit and therefore the appearance of surplus-value in the form of profit are revealed on the surface of the phenomenon" (*ibid*., p. 43). These surface phenomena are revealed for what they are, forms of value, by demonstrating how value evolves into such forms, by tracing out its metamorphosis. Marx states that volume II of *Capital* is his attempt to chart the various forms taken by value in the process of circulation (*Ibid*., p. 807). Though subtitled *The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*, volume III continues the mapping work of volume II. Given all that is covered by the metamorphosis of value, it is evident that we have no more than skimmed the surface of this subject. We have been content, here as earlier, to make clear the link between an aspect of Marx's economics and the theory of alienation, and have not reconstructed any more of the complexity Marx uncovers than was considered necessary to satisfy this purpose.
91. We would refer readers interested in seeing how the above analysis applies to other aspects of Marx's economics, such as the fetishism of commodities, to our forthcoming book, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, where the philosophical basis for our interpretation—to wit Marx's belief in a philosophy of internal relations—is also developed more fully.

92. For an excellent account of the fetishism of commodities, see Lucien Goldman, 'la Reification,' *Recherches dialectiques* (Paris, 1959).
93. The fetishism of commodities is also explained by a reference to what Marx observes in religion. In religion, he says, "the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relations both with one another and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands." *Capital* I, 72. In one particularly explosive broadside, Marx speaks of the fetishism of commodities as "this false appearance and illusion, this mutual independence and ossification of the various social elements of wealth, the personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities, this religion of everyday life." *Capital*, III, 809. Mention has already been made of this development, which is also called "reification" (Verdinglichung), in the discussion of product alienation.
94. *Capital*, I, 72.
95. *Ibid*., p. 74n.
96. *Ibid*., p. 76.
97. *Ibid*., p. 72.
98. *Capital*, III, 801.
99. *Capital*, I, 592; *Capital*, III, 284. Marx quotes with approval the English economist Hodgskin's remark that "*Capital* is a sort of cabalistic word like church and state or any other of these general terms which are invented by those who fleece the rest of mankind to conceal the hand that shears them." *Marx, Theories of Surplus-Value*, ed. S. W. Ryazanskaya and R. Dixon, III (Moscow, 1971), 536.
100. *Capital*, III, 797.
101. *Theories of Surplus-Value*, p. 122; see too, *Capital*, III, 804.
102. *Ibid*.
103. *Ibid*., p. 383.
104. *Ibid*. p. 384. In keeping with Marx's conception of qualities as relations, the same results are given as follows: "the social relation is consummated in the relation of a thing, of money to itself." *ibid*. In the end, it even appears as if "interest were the typical product of capital, the primary matter, and profit, in the shape of profit of enterprise, were a byproduct of the process of reproduction." *ibid*.
105. *Ibid*. p. 798. See, too, *ibid*. p. 803.
106. *Ibid*. p. 809. The "Trinity Formula" provides a fitting conclusion to volume III,

for the task Marx set out to do in *Capital* is now completed (volume IV was projected as a comparative study of other labor theories of value). Value has been successfully traced from its origins in alienated labor through its various forms in the economy to their misrepresentations in the minds of men. The works he hoped to write on other areas of social life remain unwritten, but in the "Trinity Formula," Marx aptly summarizes his conclusions on the economic life of the alienated inhabitants of capitalism. It is only because he does not recognize the problem at which Marx directed these comments that G. D. H. Cole finds volume III "petering out rather than coming to an end." G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, II (London, 1954), 298.

107. *Capital*, III, 810.
108. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 280-1.
109. On one occasion, Marx refers to the relations of social labor appearing to individuals "as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things." *Capital*, I, 73.
110. *Gesamtausgabe*, I: 3, 531.

Copyright © Bertell Ollman 2004-2016. All rights reserved.