

Karl Marx *by Allen Wood*

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Alienation

The Concept of Alienation

For young Marx, alienation is

- (1) of worker from product (because the product is indifferent with regards to their desires)
- (2) human from human (due to the specialized division of labour)
- (3) human from society
- (4) state from realm of production

and maybe, (5) value from life through Christianity.

All these forms of alienation are of the same form-that of alienating activity.

Young Marx seems to think that the worker is (necessarily) alienated from the product because the process of production is one that has the structure of being-alienating. Wood thinks that this structure (of being-alienating) shows up exclusively in the worker's subjective unhappiness (but this does not seem to be substantiated, at least in the paragraph he quoted).

Three central features of capitalistic society:

- i) There exists a complex interconnection between the various ills and irrationalities of capitalistic society.
- ii) What is distinctive about this interconnection is that it is based in a unique labour or production.
- iii) This peculiar form of labour is characteristic of a determinate and historically transitory phase in the generally progressive movement of human history.
- iv) The direction of this movement of human history is determined by society's tendency to expand its productive powers.

Alienation for the mature Marx is 'unnatural separation' or 'domination by one's own creation'. Things like religion give us the illusion of a meaningful, unalienated life. For alienated workers, "Life itself appears only as a means of life... [the human being's] essence is made into only a means to his existence."

For young Marx, alienation was what lay at the bottom of the system of interconnected irrationalities in capitalism. For mature Marx, it was only one of many other evils of capitalism (examples include insecurity, poverty) which mutually reinforce one another.

When man feels his own essence as "outside of" his existence (in some supernatural realm, say), he dwells in a false/unhappy consciousness. This contradiction (a necessary stage in the development of the world spirit) is what Hegel calls alienation; alienation can be overcome simply by realizing that our essence is immanent to our existence.

Feuerbach's critique of Hegelian false consciousness is that Hegelian philosophy itself locates false-consciousness not in real, actual humans but in an abstract supernatural world-spirit (and is hence itself alienating). Instead, he supposes that we must find a theoretical solution in actual living people to understand and affirm them and the species essence.

For Marx, alienation is real and existent; it is not a part of the interpretative structure of the world but in the world itself. Religion and Hegelian 'unhappy consciousness' is not the ground but the phenomena which seeks to mask the alienation in life. So, a critique of false consciousness is only there to sharpen the phenomena of alienation (to motivate us to change it) and does not extinguish it.

The Human Essence

Alienation makes life meaningless: What is the kind of life which is meaningful? "A life led in a manner befitting human essence."

Gattungswesen: Species-essence/species-being. Consists in:

- i) The way in which social relationships between humans occur
- ii) One's understanding of oneself as of the human species (and behaviour relating to this understanding)

Self-consciousness is a 'self-image' constituting of my beliefs about myself and my actions, thoughts and desires.

Each human does not just have a self-conception but is also aware of their relation to the species in two ways: (1) in form of society & (2) conception of their humanity.

In light of this, one may say that alienation is the situation of:

- i) Being unable to satisfy one's 'natural vocation'
- ii) Being unable to affirm, confirm, actualize themselves, i.e., to be estranged from their human essence.

What does it mean to actualize oneself? In part, to 'produce as a human being': To produce in an other-directed manner.

Definition (Human mode of life): One which involves the 'development', 'exercise', and 'actualization' of 'human essential powers'.

We can now understand what it meant to say alienation is *real*: In capitalism, one is inhibited from self-actualization, from the development and exercise of one's human essential powers. This is what leads to *consciousness* of alienation.

If self-actualization leads to happiness, one may say that Marx subscribes to an 'objective' conception of happiness (happiness involves the conformity of my life with *the* good life for me, as opposed to *my idea* of the good life for me), because we could be entirely wrong about whether we're alienated and still be alienated.

This rests on a dual identification:

- a) Human fulfilment with self-actualization
- b) Alienation with the frustration of the development and exercise of our essential powers

Two potential objections:

a) The pursuit for self-actualization is the cause of its frustration.

But Marx only holds that human fulfilment consists in self-realization, rather than keeping it as a goal.

b) That self-actualization, a.k.a. striving for excellence, can be successful and still leave us dissatisfied.

But the equivocation is baseless to begin with; furthermore, this discontentment may not be the same as the one induced by alienation (a communist society isn't a paradise).

Man is an 'objective being': (1) by virtue of dependence on external objects and (2) by virtue of his outward, worldly attitude.

The exercise of human essential powers is at the same time its objectification. The exercise of human essential powers is the establishment of an essential relation between humans and the objects of desire. This exercise is known as 'production'.

In fact, production and consumption are two moments of a single act.

i) Production is consumption (it consumes raw material)

ii) Consumption is production (it produces through the human body)

iii) Production creates consumption (what we desire and need is partly constituted by what we produce)

iv) Consumption creates production (we produce because we need to consume)

Why should production be the essential human function? Marx's theory of history holds that the natural tendency of man is to expand productive powers. This gives us reasonable plausibility to suppose that the expansion of productive powers is desirable and fulfils life. 'Production' is broader than production of material objects and encompasses scientific and artistic activities.

Human Production

What distinguishes human production from animal activity is that the human being knows what he is producing, and that he is producing in such-and-such way by virtue of it. This is what constitutes 'conscious life activity'. Consciousness is not a property of an object but a feature of the human life process (and the human life process is constituted by productive activity).

Another distinctive feature is the creation and usage of tools *as-tools*. Furthermore, we are exceptionally good at exploiting the environment. 'For Marx, the historical development of the means of labour are a clue to the human history as a whole... These developments also bring about other changes in the human essence.'

Adam Smith thinks labour is a restriction of freedom; Marx thinks it is an exercise of freedom, a way of actualizing oneself. However, alienated labour (as opposed to free activity) is a restriction, because it 'is not the satisfaction of a need, but merely the means to satisfy needs external to it'.

The alienation of capitalistic activity is sharpest because the gap between the extent of our human essential powers and the degree to which they are inhibited is the largest (in primitive societies, say, the extent of their essential powers is only sufficient for survival).

‘The actualization of labour is its objectification [labour which has been fixed in an object].’

The actualization of the worker is confirmed by the actualization of his labour in an object. ‘Our products are so many mirrors from which our essence shines forth.’

But objectification cannot be only literally material. ‘All labour does...is embody itself in an ‘object’ if that term is understood...as a state of affairs in the external world.’

Appropriation is the human relation to an object (the making of it into human property).

‘Objectification and appropriation takes place not only in labour and production but in any relation toward the object which is sufficiently ‘human’ to count as an ‘exercise of human actuality’.’

Private property makes us think we appropriate something only when we ‘have’ them (as private property), which is a ‘warped’ view of it. ‘Property means nothing more than the relation of man to the natural conditions of production as belonging to him’.

Alienation and appropriation are often treated as opposites. The failure to appropriate the conditions and products of labour is a major factor of their alienation.

The difference between Marx’s notion of property and that of Kant/Hegel/Locke is that Marx doesn’t think that property, as the relation of man to the natural conditions of production as belonging to him, is one of ‘right’ as proclaimed from an Archimedean point outside; such belonging-hoods arise out of economic relations.

Alienation and Capitalism

The capitalist mode of production enhances the potentiality for self-actualization by large amounts. Yet it frustrates self-actualization in two main interrelated ways: (1) division of labour and (2) domination of social conditions over their creators.

(It should be noted that the real reason behind the downfall of capitalism is not, in Marx’s view, the frustration of self-fulfilment but the fact that the basic physical needs of the majority will fail to be satisfied.)

(1): Because private property is owned by a small class, whose interests are profit maximization (which is itself neutral towards the well-being of the worker), it turns the worker into an increasingly specialized, ‘isolated’ part of a collective labourer. (Furthermore, profit-maximization does not lead to free choices among the capitalist class but to tightly determined economic competition.)

(2): Individual freedom in capitalist society results in the socio-economic relations (determining our actions) being out of our control. ‘In imagination, individuals under the dominion of the bourgeoisie are freer than before, because their conditions of life are accidental to them; but in reality they are more unfree, because they are subsumed under a reified social power.’ Due to this lack of control, the worker’s life-activity no longer can determine his own fate (self-exercise). Self-exercise (positive freedom) is self-determination in a material, social sense. For Marx, freedom requires conscious production of people’s social relations. Labour as self-exercise is a possible society, when society becomes classless, and natural presuppositions (e.g. that present capitalist social relations come from nature) are divested of their natural character and treated as the creation of human beings.

Postscript: Marx makes no commitment regarding what a post-capitalistic society may look like.

Some potential criticisms:

1. Alienation isn't real, and our potential for productive powers are exaggerated (but technological advancements certainly seem to tell us of their increase).
2. Marx has failed to describe the social associations in post-capitalist society which would lead to self-fulfilment.
3. Capitalism is not primarily responsible for alienation, and there can be alienation-free capitalism.

Historical Materialism

Production and Society

Historical Materialism claims that the economic relations (or 'economic basis') 'condition' or 'determine' the social institutions and prevalent forms of social consciousness ('social superstructure').

This is often construed as a form of determinism. However, two issues with this are:

A) It's not clear just what sort of facts are supposed to count as 'economic' ones.

B) Engels says explicitly that the social superstructure can autonomously have causal effect on the economic basis. 'A reciprocal action of two unequal forces.'

Engels says: Political factors may be the major influence in determining the 'form' of historical events, but the 'content' of historical events is always determined by the economic basis 'in the last instance'.

Wood suggests that the economic basis may merely play the most major role in conditioning/determining the social superstructure.

Marx suggests a four-level hierarchy of social structures:

A) The productive powers

B) The forms of intercourse and consumption

C) Civil society

D) Political state

Clearly, a society's production depends on its productive powers. All production is determined by productive powers in the sense that they condition the particular division of labour (among the workers). For ex: In a bakery, the people must decide to come into a relationship of baker, oven handler, dough-maker and so on and so on (*sniff*) to produce baked goods. In this sense, the productive powers determine the relations between the people and the productive capacities and the relations between the people (forms of intercourse) must harmonize.

There is a distinction to be made between two 'forms of intercourse': Natural ones (such as the division of labour) and social ones (such as capital to wage labourer). There is a correspondence between the two, and the former are more basic than and can be used to explain the latter.

The reciprocity of productive powers and forms of intercourse: Productive powers require certain relations to exist in order to be exercised efficiently; at the same time, the existence of certain productive powers may favour certain patterns of relations.

Marx does not claim that every aspect of social relations is explainable in material terms; merely that material production is the most significant imposer of constraints.

A 'technological' theory of history would claim that the productive forces (alone, in the strong sense & in combination with something in the weak sense) explain the social relations of production. But of course, Marx does not propose a strong technological theory of history for the social relations also depend on the historical circumstance (pre-existing relations) in which the productive forces are acquired.

Marx often includes cooperative relations as part of the productive powers. However, this does not constitute a conflation of *explanans* and *explanandum*, because these 'cooperative relations' may well be logically separable into features which are social (such as alienation) and features which are productive powers. If this is taken into account, then we cannot neatly draw the line between the productive powers and social relations without considering the context (and hence, weak at most as a technological theory).

Productive powers and productive relations are mutually constraining. However, the latter are, to some extent, within the control of humans, unlike the former, which they are never free to choose. This is a strong reason Marx believes productive powers are more basic than productive relations, along with the conviction that productive powers always 'win out' against adversarial productive relations.

Productive powers determine economic structures at a given time; but more importantly, they also explain the historical development of economic structures.

Historical Materialism has 5 main considerations:

- (1) The employment of productive forces involves a constraint on the possible social relations.
- (2) The productive forces are largely efficiently utilized.
- (3) Productive forces are relatively stable and can be regarded as the independent variable (between the force, relation pair).
- (4) There is a basic tendency for human productive powers to expand.
- (5) No set of relations (in a class or pre-class society) can accommodate indefinite expansion of powers.

The narrative that Marx espouses as an explanation for the development of capitalism from feudalism and socialism from capitalism is:

Productive powers inevitably grow until they can no longer conform with the existing social relations. Any further development conflicts with the social relations. The productive forces win the conflict and social revolution takes place.

It should be noted that, although productive powers have an inevitable tendency to expand and overcome productive relations, they can be greatly inhibited by exceptionally stable superstructures or stochastic disasters.

An important quirk of this narrative is that the 'effect' (establishment of new production relations and superstructures) temporally *precedes* the 'cause' (exercise of expanded productive powers). This indicates the teleological (rather than causal) nature of this explanation.

Why does Marx think productive powers always 'win out' against adversarial productive relations? He believes in the 'indomitability' of human nature and the 'fundamental rationality' of human beings collectively. (Footnote: Not so convincing...)

Classes

Social relations are more basic than property relations (the latter being part of the superstructure). Social relations are more basic than laws (i.e., property relations), and the latter are merely the 'juristic form' assumed by them for expressions.

There are two things justifying this view:

- 1) Society is not made of individuals alone, but is the sum of the relations between them; and these relations are definable without reference to the motives of and sanctions upon the individuals behind them.
- 2) Social relations can explain property relations and laws by determining them as the most efficient way in which they can be expressed; if social relations themselves are defined in juristic terms, we are left without any non-circular explanation for the origin of property relations.

History is the cumulative sum of individual actions with conscious motives, but individuals are not always aware of the historical consequences of their actions. This (often unconscious) coordinated behaviour relates to the formation of *classes*.

What is a class?

- 1) The struggle between certain sections of people proves to be explanatorily helpful for the superstructure and historical development of society. These sections constitute the various classes.
- 2) By large, individuals in a class share some common interests due to being in a similar situation.

Classes are not mere quantitative relations between people. They arise out of social relations.

Classes do not merely represent individuals with common interests (often, they are in conflict with one another). Instead, classes 'arise' out of production relations when they engender organized political and ideological movements promoting class interests (in spite of individual interest, involving some level of self-sacrifice, which is representative of the alienating nature of class society).

The social group (not individuals) must recognize its interests as that of a 'class'. However, people are often mistaken about their participation in the social group or their associations to certain political movements/organizations.

A movement represents a class in virtue of its actual behaviour and not its professed goals. Roughly speaking, a class's interests involve the defence or change in a set of production relations.

"The history of all previous society is the history of class struggles." Class oppression is not necessary for the acquisition of productive forces, but it is an especially important form of antagonism. However, antagonism is necessary for development (according to Marx, an adherent of the Hegelian dialectic). The manner in which one class overcomes outmoded production relations lay the groundwork for the overcoming of that very class, as the new set of relations will be outmoded in the future.

Materialist Explanations

Historical materialism is ultimately an empirical thesis. It is “plausible but not self-evident” that the tendencies Marx posits are the most potent ones. (Of course, the claim is not that economic factors are the *only* ones; rather, it is that they determine the ‘content’ of history, such as the fact that a leader like Napoleon would have sprung up, whereas the ‘form’, such as the fact that the Napoleon-like leader was indeed that particular individual, is determined by various extra-economic factors.)

It is a contrived matter to figure out which empirical facts support or disprove the thesis. Nevertheless, this patently does not make it some ‘metaphysical’ theory.

Material explanations are *teleological*, rather than *causal*. This means that it explains aspects of a system in terms of how it contributes to a fundamental tendency the system possesses. In the system of society, the tendency is to expand and use productive powers. Ideological superstructures and revolutions are explained as occurrent in order to accommodate the expansion of productive powers.

Teleological explanations are commonly misunderstood as efficient cause explanations. An illustrative example:

- 1) Causal explanation: A plant grows because it takes in minerals and water and metabolises.
- 2) Teleological explanation: A plant grows because it has the tendency to become a tree.

As a result of this misunderstanding, people also often think incorrectly that the tendencies must arise from the deliberation of some conscious or occult agent (which would take the place of the efficient cause).

Nevertheless, one *can* ask for a causal account of the process as well. And in fact, “The indications are that Marx and Engels do regard all teleological tendencies as causally explicable in materialistic terms.” Nevertheless, there is no reason to think of teleological explanations as ‘unscientific’; even if a causal explanation was offered, the teleological one illuminates the system in its own novel way. (A good example of a teleological principle in modern science is, perhaps, the principle of least action.)

Marx repudiates teleological thinking which is supernaturalistic, or which views society as moving towards some concrete goal, but not teleological thinking in general.

Thus, Marx is not an economic determinist, since Marx precisely wants to explain the causal influence of extra-economic factors using the tendencies posited. Furthermore, even if Marx says there is no single predominant *efficient cause*, there certainly can be such a tendency.

Materialism, Agency and Consciousness

“If Marx’s belief that people in class society are so dominated is a species of determinism, then it is not the causal determinism of a necessary law of nature, but a determinism that is historically contingent, and it is one of Marx’s chief practical aims that it should cease to operate.”

Another argument one may make to say that historical materialism is deterministic: Since Marx thinks certain historical developments are *inevitable*, he must be committed to causal determinism. But this implication does not follow at all (consider the example of the theatre seat in the text).

Marx himself may *also* be a determinist (although it is suggested that both he and Engels are compatibilists), but the point is that historical materialism, as a doctrine, is not in itself deterministic.

'Ideology' has three senses:

- Historical Idealism – Broadly put, the historical idealists are people who believe that change in thought (acts of critical thought) are the driving force for social change. The issue with this is two-fold: idealist theses have materialist explanations (repudiated by them) and the obvious impossibility of social change without material change.
- Functional Ideology – A belief, theory or form of consciousness whose prevalence can be explained materialistically by the way it contributes to social and historical tendencies.
- Ideological Illusion – A consciousness which is ignorant of its own social and historical significance.

Ideological illusion is a subset of functional ideology. Historical idealism can be a functional ideology, if we can explain what tendencies it contributes to. Historical Idealism is also ideological illusion in the very same step.

An argument which attempts to show why all functional ideology must also be ideological illusion:

Say X is functional ideology. The existence of X can be explained by its social role. If X is rationally justified, the materialist explanation of X is superfluous. Say X is not a ideological illusion. The materialist explanation of X is not superfluous. By modus tollens, X is not rationally justified. Therefore, a rational agent cannot hold X. This is a contradiction; and so, every functional ideology is an ideological illusion.

The grounds for why an individual believes in X and the justification for X are distinct. There is no such contradiction.

Historical materialists can rationally hold:

(1) their belief in HM is epistemically justified (2) their acceptance of HM serves class interest (3) that this serving of class interest explains the prevalence of the acceptance of HM and (4) without social movement, they would not have come to know that HM is true.

HM is functional ideology but not ideological illusion.

Many authors believe that ideology and science are mutually exclusive. There is no reason for this to be true (consider the example of eugenics). Science can (and has, in the past, been) functional ideology and ideological illusion.

Marxism and Morality

Marx on Right and Justice