

# Karl Marx: Alienation

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a distinct kind of social ill, involving a separation between a subject and an object that properly belong together

questions to bear in mind:

- what is the object of alienation, the thing the subject is alienated from?
- are we talking about a psychological or sociological concept?
- what's wrong with separation? why do subject and object properly belong together?
- what's the cause of separation? capitalism, work, society, ... ?

## 1. Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right:

religion as alienation, borrowed from and expanded on Feuerbach

cause of religion: “*man makes religion*; religion does not make man” (57)

alienation due to religion: “human self-estrangement”, “*inverted world-consciousness*” (57)

in projecting their highest qualities onto gods humans become alienated from these qualities, world appears god-made when it is man-made

cause of alienation: “This state, this society, produce religion, which is an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*” (57)

3 dimensions:

1. expression of the real wretchedness of the world
2. protest against this wretchedness
3. pacifier to deal with wretchedness (opium of the people)

it is “the *task of philosophy*... to unmask human self-estrangement in its *secular forms*, once its *sacred form* has been unmasked” (58)

## 2. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844):

puzzle of capitalism: “the more objects the worker produces, the less he can possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, capital” (87) — why is that? because of alienation

human alienation in its secular form, work as alienation

1. alienation from product of labour:
  1. “the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume” in the sense that there will simply be fewer raw materials available
  2. labour “produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels” — hidden alienation because you only see the worker working on the palaces
2. alienation from productive activity
  1. “externalisation in the activity of labour itself”
  2. work is merely a compulsion to satisfy another need, not itself a need; worker works for another > man becomes “an animal in his human functions”
  3. this is amplified by the division of labour
3. alienation from other producers

1. “each man measures his relationship to other men by the relationship in which he finds himself placed as a worker”
2. but there is also a positive socialisation of labour taking place under conditions of modern labour. people work together.
4. alienation from human nature
  1. free “productive life is species life” of human being.  
“a **‘species-being’** is an individual who has actualised – that is, developed and deployed – his essential capacities” (Leopold 2007, 184)
  2. why? what is unique to man is that he, unlike animals, “produces freely from physical need”  
but is uniqueness relevant? would anything change if we discovered another species producing freely from physical need (Leopold 2007, 226)

alienated labour could be highly remunerated, limited in duration, and relatively secure.

#### cause of alienation?

- division of labour (cf. Lukes 1994) (but already present under feudalism)
- modern division of labour in capitalism where all tasks come to resemble one another ever more due to intensification of economic specialization (cf. Cohen 1974)

### **3. What is human nature?**

a) determined by what human beings require in order to flourish (Leopold 2007):

- basic physical needs: sustenance, warmth and shelter, exercise, hygiene, reproduction, sexual activity, ...
- more importantly, less basic social needs: recreation, culture, education and intellectual exercise, artistic expression, emotional fulfilment, aesthetic pleasure, AND self-realisation through productive activity and community (“complex co-operation in pursuit of the common good” inspired by Aristotle (Leopold 2007, 239))

b) determined by human beings distinctiveness (Mulhall 1998):

“the most economical and insightful way of summing up [Marx’s] conception of that species-being is to say that the human species is the one whose members are (capable of becoming) individuals

- humans are self-conscious beings who can choose to act or to refrain from acting — this gives us freedom/individuality
- humans are a species whose potentiality (and so whose nature) is still evolving — we can perfect our drives (e.g. taste) and develop new practices (e.g. sports, science)
- humans are social: others enable our self-development, our self-development benefits others

how does Marx know about human nature?

- Lukes (1994): from reverse-engineering what a human being would be like under socialism. but why does socialism bring out human nature?
- Mulhall (1998): from finding distinction between human beings and animals. but why would what makes us distinct from animals have any normative import? why build a society that best brings out this distinctiveness?

#### the wrong of alienation

the best society furthers human nature. this picture of human nature as positive resembles Rousseau's conception, it is in contrast with Hobbes' for whom humans are a bundle of drives that need to be tamed.

do we need an account of human nature for an analysis of alienation?

at least for Marx, this is where we get the normativity from: human nature tells us that alienation of the kind 1-4 above is bad

#### **4. Capital**

some think alienation was a concern for only the early Marx, but in Capital we also find mention of alienation, even if not so prominently (and note that sometimes Marx speaks of alienation in a different sense: as selling [veräußern] a commodity)

Marx exposes the rule of the capitalist over the worker:

there is no free contract, but rather "He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning." (280)

what form does this rule take? the form of alienation

"the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule ... of the product over the producer." "What we are confronted by here is the *alienation* of man from his own labour." (990) — is this at heart a problem of freedom, of choosing your own labour?

the comparison with religion reappears: "we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*." — *problem: which is it? alienation or ideology?*

how do we discover alienation?

capitalist "has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it"

"worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as a process of enslavement" (990)

—> this sounds like psychological, not sociological alienation

#### **5. 'Alienation' today**

further questions:

1. is alienation unique to capitalism? will there be alienation under communism?  
not if worker is free to choose their activity, if that activity does not assign to them a fixed role in a social structure, and if (regular) changes in activity are possible (Cohen 1974, section VI)  
but does this really get rid of alienation with its four components?
2. is alienation a tenable concept, even without an account of human nature? (Jaeggi 2016; Kandiyali 2018; distinction sociological—psychological alienation)  
Jaeggi's example of the alienated suburban academic. alienation as "obstructions to volition," non-alienation as appropriation of role/world

what is the positive, non-alienated alternative?

*Comments on James Mill:*

my creations would embody my talents and abilities and I'd enjoy contemplating them.

in production, I'd demonstrate my individuality and I'd enjoy producing. in relation to others, I'd gain satisfaction from your use of my product because I've satisfied your needs and you'd appreciate me as essential to satisfying your needs

by producing for you, I've also made you fully human. Your humanity is both expressed and fulfilled in the consumption of what I produce. (cf. Leopold 2007, 233)

> but which social arrangement actually realises these desiderata?

1. return to a primitive society with little separation of labour. "hunt in the morning, fish in the after noon, rear cattle in the evening, and criticize after dinner" (German Ideology)— seems neither feasible nor desirable
2. Lukes suggests that the kibbutz movement might have come closest in developing the kind of society that Marx envisions as enabling human nature to unfold (1994)
3. "realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases" (Capital, Vol. 3) — but does this fulfil human nature?
4. Cohen suggests that Marx envisions a significant development of industry such that "Labour does not seem any more to be an essential part of the process of production. The human factor is restricted to watching and supervising the production process" (Cohen 1974)

## **6. Recommended Reading**

Marx, Karl. 1844. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.

Marx, Karl. 1976. *The German Ideology*. 3rd ed. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Marx, K. (1994) 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction', in *Marx: Early Political Writings*. 1st edn. Cambridge University Press, pp. 57–70.

Leopold, D. (2007) *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. on Human Flourishing.

Lukes, Steven. 1994. Alienation and Anomie. (see Faculty Reading List)

Cohen, G. A. 1974. 'Marx's Dialectic of Labor.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Spring, 3 (2), pp. 235-261.

Mulhall, Stephen. 1998. 'Species-being, Teleology and Individuality Part I: Marx on Species-being'. *Angelaki* 3 (1): 9–27.