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Species being in the twenty first century

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ABSTRACT

In this article I focus on what is implicitly the more humanist aspect of Marx's work. That is, species being and alienation. I do so informed by a commitment to pluralism and based on a background in social ontology. I argue that species being and alienation continue to provide insight into the nature of the modern world. They are integral components to Marx's exploration and constructive critique of capitalism, and help to make sense of how potential is shaped for a social entity who can be harmed and who can flourish. However, the way in which one relates to Marx as still relevant regarding these matters can cover a range. I then set out how species being provides useful insight in the twenty-first century at a time of anticipated major social and economic change.

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1. Introduction

Marx is one of those significant figures for whom anniversaries come around quite frequently. Each provides a fresh opportunity to assess his legacy. In the introduction to a

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1983 collection commemorating 100 years since his death, David McLellan (1983, p. 8) wrote that Marx stood in counterpoint to work that was:

First, in the vertical sense of being produced inside a narrow specialization by scholars who know more and more about less and less, and secondly in the horizontal sense that they spring from a preoccupation with the surface phenomena of society so easily available for observation and quantification.

This quotation ought to resonate quite strongly with anyone familiar with disciplinary social science and especially economics today. However, Marx was not an economist, any more than he was a sociologist or philosopher.¹ He has been read by all of these and through the perspectives of all of these. This creates problems because his work cannot be contained by these categories and yet remains relevant to all. It has many strands. The 200 year anniversary since Marx's birth in 1818 provides another opportunity to consider his legacy, in particular as claims about his continued relevance.

In this article I focus on what is implicitly the more humanist aspect of Marx's work. That is, species being and alienation. I argue that these continue to provide insight into the nature of the modern world. They are integral components to Marx's exploration and constructive critique of capitalism, and help to make sense of how potential is shaped for a social entity who can be harmed and who can flourish. However, the way in which one relates to Marx as still relevant regarding these matters can cover a range. In order to make the argument, I first set out some of the considerations that affect how one approaches Marx's work and then argue towards the continued relevance of Marx's concept of species being. I do so informed by a commitment to pluralism and based on a background in social ontology (Morgan 2015, 2016; Morgan and Patomäki 2017).

Species being provides useful insight in the twenty-first century at a time of anticipated major social and economic change. Recent and expected technological breakthroughs in machine learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, sensors, connectivity, cloud computing, nano-technology, 3-D printing and the Internet of Things (IoT) have led to concerns regarding the future of work. Much of this is encompassed in a growing literature focused on new capitalism, whose dominant focus is technology as opportunity and whether in fact we will work. Little attention has been paid to how this will affect our being (Moore 2018; Moore and Piwek 2017). Overall, the article is intended to be

¹ He lived in an age before disciplines were crystallized and in which philosophy was coextensive with science, especially in its German variant. Marx refers to *Capital* as a triumph of German *Wissenschaft*.

evocative, encouraging further engagement with Marx. It covers a range of issues, rather than an in-depth engagement with the various issues touched upon.

2. Contemporary relevance and the Marx conundrum

Reference to Marx is like little else in the social sciences. It comes with baggage. Yet when it comes to Marx, what is still important and relevant cannot simply be asserted. It must be justified. This is no easy task. As Sayer notes, there is a balance to be struck, one should not ‘argue for an interpretive free-for-all. As Max Weber once remarked, Marx is not a taxicab one can drive where one will,’ (Sayer 1987, p. ix). Concomitantly, the phrase *According to Marx* is rarely atomised and innocent. It is conditional in various ways. It invokes a sense of laying authoritative claim to a legacy, a broad position or worldview, but one with many possible strands from which the claims can be drawn.

At least two considerations seem germane. First, looking backwards, what restrictions are placed on, and what foci emerge from where one looks for “Marx”? The range spans:

- Works published during his later life or just after his death that one can reasonably assume he intended to be representative of his mature position, including those works in collaboration with, edited or completed by, Engels: Marx’s *Capital* volume 1, more disputably volumes 2 and 3, and Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* and his incomplete posthumous *Dialectics of Nature*;
- Earlier manuscripts recovered and published after Marx’s death, which presumably shed light on the development of his position: young Marx, Marx in transition, e.g. *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1965 [1845/1932]), *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973 [1858]) etc;
- Subsequently published correspondence that might shed light on Marx’s reflexivity: how he thought about his own developing thought (e.g. Marx and Engels 1936);
- Biography that may shed light on how Marx was shaped by the life he lived: ranging from the authorized, if purposive, represented by Mehring (1936) aided by Rosa Luxemburg, to the more salacious and scatological, represented by Wheen (1999), mediated in time and concerns by Berlin (1939), and many others; and

- The many and varied strands of Marxism: structural, analytical, dialectical, revisionist, as well as integrations into various waves of thought; feminist, eco, post etc.²

Clearly, selection can readily become contestable selectivity and matters of exegesis can quickly reduce analogically to quasi-philological conflict. The immediate point to make, however, is that context matters and that the reader needs to be aware and be made aware that *According to Marx* is a phrase that shouts even when it whispers. So, ‘reader be aware’ can also be contracted via portmanteau to ‘reader beware’.

Second, looking backwards affects also how one looks forwards, in terms of where and to what one chooses to apply the work of Marx. Clearly, how one selects and constructs what is significant from Marx affects and is affected by what one does with it. Purpose and process are connected. However, this does not necessarily imply the free-for-all that Sayer (1987) criticises. Rather it can be consistent with the kind of social reality Marx’s work explored and expressed. Marx argues for a socio-material reality in process where humans create the conditions in which they live, but where they are always subject to limits and constraints, based on what has already accumulated through activity as a structured relational system that then affects what is enabled. This is a trans-historical claim for a historically conditioned social reality embedded in a material world.

One can then argue for the relevance of Marx’s work both (but not necessarily together) as a set of trans-historical claims (a framework of history) and as particularly insightful ways of exploring or conceiving given aspects of contemporary society. One can do so whilst recognizing that both are mediated by the fallibility of theory and of application, which applies as much to Marx as it does to the work of any other. This is a point that no Marxist can reasonably deny since such denial would be contradictory in terms of how Marx conceived the world. That is, a world interrogated via critique of prior concepts and ways of framing problems, and intrinsically dealing with evidence regarding a changing world that may render all or part of conceptualisations false, incomplete or redundant—and these are not the same.

The statement above regarding constraint and enablement is most recognisable in quotable form from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1950 [1852/1869], p. 225).³ Contemporary

² Gramsci provides a useful set of considerations on how to read Marx (Gramsci 1971, pp. 382-386).

³ For a range of contexts in which Marx addresses the agent-structure problem see Jessop (2002).

social theory refers to it as the agent-structure problematic. It is arguably intrinsic to (though hardly exhaustive of) Marx's work, a point perhaps most clearly expressed in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, where Marx reflects on the method that would later come to inform *Capital*. However, it is this kind of claim that reveals how much is left to justification and this is never free from dispute where Marx is concerned. For example, Callinicos's (2004 [1987]) *Making History* is both a critique of the methodological individualism of a major strand in analytical Marxism and a critical exploration of an agency-structure approach to historical materialism (see also Joseph 2006; Brown et. al 2002; Creaven 2000). The well-known regulation theorist Bob Jessop also takes up a version of the agent-structure problematic, inspired by Marx (e.g. Jessop 2009). In terms of the problematic all are attempting to reconcile various binaries that have emerged in Marxist critique (previously summarised by Gouldner 1980 as determinism-voluntarism, individualism-structuralism and so forth). Ultimately, there are no simple answers here regarding how one looks forward and back.

However, I would suggest that the world keeps making Marx relevant. One does not need to be a Marxist to appreciate this (see Jo and Lee 2016). Even critics of Marx or those who think they are, based on hostile accounts of his work (Popper, Hayek and so forth), would find it difficult to deny that recurring crises in capitalism, and also fundamental issues regarding how the human is socialised and potentially barbarised, immediately invoke Marx as a reference point worthy of consideration and engagement.

3. Marx's relevance in terms of the contingency of the lived conditions of capitalism

The following from the *Communist Manifesto* could have been written and published today for the first time as a pithy Blog comment on contemporary globalization and insecurity (particularly if one substituted elite for bourgeoisie):

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society ... Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones ... The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. (Marx and Engels 1950 [1848], p. 36)

By the time *Capital Volume 1* was published Marx had a particular sense of what the ‘conditions of life’ for a human within capitalism were:

Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the worker into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his lifetime into working-time (Marx 1954 [1867], p. 645)

Following this passage Marx introduces the claim that capitalism involves a tendency to immiserate the working class.⁴ The concentration of wealth amongst a few is associated with the degradation of the many (elsewhere also stated as competition between capitalists eventually pushes wages to subsistence). This, of course, was written before universal suffrage and the response of capitalist societies to world wars, the spectre of totalitarian state ‘communism’ and the articulation of social democracy. It was written prior to widespread legal trade unions, wage councils, minimum wage legislation, welfare states, automatic stabilisers, enforceable safety standards, expanded education, female emancipation, social mobility, broadened middle classes and consumption-centred economies (which require workers and households with the income—and debt access—able to consume). The phrasing of Marx’s quote (its historical flavour) is expressive of and *seems* tied to the worst aspects of early industrial capitalism, whilst it seems also to fail to anticipate the effectiveness of reformism within capitalism to alter the conditions of capitalism.⁵

However, this by no means renders Marx irrelevant. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century Marx was in quite a different position from Karl Polanyi writing in the mid-twentieth century. He could not observe an emerging ‘double movement’ (Polanyi 1945). However, one might also note Polanyi did not anticipate a subsequent and new market fundamentalist

⁴ As with much else, the broad claim is disputable if one means more than a tendency since Marx also notes in the *Grundrisse* that there is a need to create more demand for commodities and to stimulate working class consumption, and that a new middle class arises as society develops.

⁵ Whether this implies political factors rather than a political economy are responsible for the rise in working class consumption is a point of dispute (contrast Postone 2017 with the translator of *Grundrisse*, Nicolaus 1967, 1968)

countermovement. This in itself should encourage us to highlight and extrapolate from something that Marx saw as crucial.

Change is not achieved without people organising and making things happen. Reforms and changes to capitalism are not givens of a system or gifts that were simply given, they were *concessions* that were fought for based on clearly articulated ideas (the Chartists to name one of many sources). Equally, those concessions, can be removed, subverted or undermined: welfare systems can be dissolved, trade union activity curtailed, education rendered instrumental and hierarchical, glass ceilings can remain unbroken, social mobility can be reduced, middle classes hollowed out, and *de facto* disenfranchisement through political capture can take place. Neoliberalism has involved just this (and more).⁶

History, as Marx also noted, does not repeat itself in the same way. Marx's account of capitalist immiseration may be in the past, in the trivial sense that the description can only be of what there was to describe and so is 'of its time', but the conditions, historically updated and recontextualised, are also the present of many, and may be the future of more if not prevented. And this includes via the restless spread of capitalism through the dark side of globalization if one takes Harvey's (1996; 2001) 'spatial fixes' approach and looks also to the 'Global South'. One might argue then that Marx remains relevant because his work highlights that progress is conditional and contingent—a point, of course, which rejects the deterministic reading of Marx's historical materialism as self-contradictory.⁷

Moreover, one should not neglect that Marx's work is not simply evocatively descriptive but is intended to be explanatory of how processes are shaped and limited. The shifting back and forth within the reform of capitalism leaves in place basic power relations of ownership and organization. However, one must also be careful in stating what 'within' might mean.

4. The 'within' of capitalism

⁶ Drawing attention to the social or state categorisation of the middle class here is not intended to divert attention away from the economic categorisation of a working class, but rather to note one of the major recognized trends in modern developed capitalist countries.

⁷ Though one must also acknowledge that there is legitimate debate regarding this, since it is not difficult to select quotes from Marx that are ambiguous or from which one might infer determinism—notably in terms of structure (base) and superstructure; for example, in the opening passages of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1971 [1859]). However, one should also note that the introduction to the *Critique* was not the original intended version but a compromise to pass the Prussian censors (for context see Carver 2015).

The shifting 'within' calls attention to the problem of distributions (labour share, capital share etc) and what is done in order to achieve those distributions. It is the 'within' that underpins the very need to continually contest the territory of reform (and so concession is an appropriate term to use). It is thus tellingly truistic to state that Marx remains relevant because of capitalism. The processes of capitalism remain a subject of interest and concern in terms of both actual lived conditions and the perpetuation of a system that seems to constitute the politically imposed limits of contingent change regarding those conditions. Subsistence may have a brutish material floor in all societies (and the indignity of food banks are a contemporary testimony to this), but it is also relative within any socio-economic system based on what that system requires a person to be able to access in order to participate, and in terms of what the developments of that society makes possible (the contemporary benchmark of what is needed, as well as the forward-directed aspirational qualities a system ingrains). Concomitantly, because of corporations and modern ownership structures it may not be easy to always identify a capitalist, but it is always possible to see domination, exploitation and appropriation based on capitalist relations of ownership and organization.

Many may no longer be comfortable with the language of class analysis (or such terminology as the 'bourgeoisie'), but they can appreciate the empirical reality of an increasingly sharp distinction between the 1% and 99%, and they can appreciate that this is not epiphenomenal. It is part of processes shifting back and forth within the way capitalism is configured. It is worth remembering that Marxists and other political economists maintained a focus on rent and a critique of mainstream economics' inability to differentiate wealth creation and capture long before the global financial crisis created an interest in financialisation and Piketty created widespread concern with the return of the rentier.

For example, in a now mainly forgotten work from over 35 years ago Ben Fine stated: The modern principles of economics have systematically and successfully excluded many of the elements of analysis that have been so advantageously present in the history of economic thought. Model building has become the mark of the trade so that the economy is represented as an ideal machine running more or less successfully... In modern times there is not even a place for a specific theory of rent at all. (1982, p. 133).

As Marxists, regulation theorists and other political economists have continued to argue, the financial crisis has not just been a financial crisis but a systemic crisis created by the internal dynamics of the structure of contemporary capitalism (see e.g. Boyer 2013; but note Pivetti 2015). It is not an accident, but rather a consequence of how the economy has been organised. The repositioning of the more socially and economically progressive aspects of

capitalism by neoliberalism as anachronistic, alien or superseded have enabled the conflation of rent-seeking with entrepreneurial dynamism and the identification of the state with oppression and the market with freedom. This is despite that the market has essentially been the delegation of decision making to an alternative set of oligopolistic power centres that shackle rather than free markets.

It is also worth considering why many are no longer comfortable with the concept of class. It is not just because of the historical tragedies of Stalinism, Maoism etc, it is not just because public discourse constantly claims we live in classless societies, and it is not just because other sources of identity formation are important (which they are). It is because the concept of a working class has been rendered negative within the contemporary world. In popular discourse being working class is no longer a positive identity of belonging, solidarity and dignity through work. Rather it is a transitional status for those who have not quite yet made it to the middle class: those of lower economic status by income and employment, or by conflation, a denigrated underclass perpetually dependent on welfare.

In an era of individualised responsibility and consumption signalled status, to be working class readily creates a category articulated through a dehumanising language of losers (carrying a pejorative whiplash). It is one of the significant achievements of neoliberalism that it has fragmented the perception of class for the many who have more in common than they have in difference. It has simultaneously encouraged identification with (and a voting constituency for) those who have little or nothing in common—as both Brexit and the election of Trump indicate in different ways (Pressman 2017; Worth 2017; Morgan 2017a, 2017b). The significance of the economic aspects of how society is united and divided has been obscured by the social differentiations. Both are important.

Moreover, drawing attention to the lived conditions of capitalism highlights an important facet of Marx's thought, which sheds light on the need for 'nuance' in thinking about what 'within' might imply. A human system is relational, produced and reproduced through activity. It can change in both its underlying or emergent principles of order or operation, its configurations, its tendencies and its outcomes. Change can thus be superficial in some ways and transformative or fundamental in others, it can be quick or slow, cumulative or eruptive, integrating or disintegrating, intended or unintended. All these have been observed through human history, and, to reiterate, this is no more than to suggest human social existence is a matter of process.

A system in process created by conscious, conceiving, planning entities is clearly not one where 'within' can mean reduced to. That is, it cannot reduce to what process cannot be;

static, regular and so forth. And it cannot reasonably reduce to this as though creatively conscious beings were irrelevant to and irrelevant for the very system they are creatively conscious 'within'. It must encompass what humans are and are capable of, which manifests in a social reality of process. This is not a point of abstruse theory as a matter of conceptual consistency. It has further and important consequences (and these become clearer when we move onto species being). Whilst it is not inaccurate to suggest there have been politically imposed limits of change, often captured by the term reform or the concept of 'reformism', change has also clearly involved critique, organization and ideas that are reflexive regarding capitalism and the potential for both progress in and alternatives to it. This is no more than to suggest trade unions, new political parties, and social movements have arisen. They do so in times and places, but are not simply dominated expressions of some unitary all powerful 'capitalist' hegemony. In any case, it is fundamental to Marx's argument that transformation requires a class dynamic to change, a consciousness of the power of collective organization (for Marx, a 'class-for-itself' implying some kind of creative separation), which is able to conceive of the limits of capitalism and the potentials for an alternative. These are vectors for change. In Marxism, this leads to debate regarding the role of ideology and the contestation of ideas; issues of critique, Gramscian wars of position and various other lines of argument.

Drawing attention to Marxism highlights that this too can be part of the complexity of process. For example, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2005) are attempts to reimagine Marxism on a global scale in a new era, which differentiates the power of capital from the nation state and the power of collectives from the traditionally conceived industrial working class. Their work was highly influential in the early part of the first decade of the twenty-first century when the World Social Forum and cosmopolitanism were prominent. Hardt and Negri (2000) are both critical of and draw upon strands of postmodernism, post-structuralism and Enlightenment thinking. For example, *Empire* claims that labour is immaterial and value is now 'virtual'. They draw on Deleuze and Foucault to make the case for a bio-political production of the subject, where language integrates each into a parasitic Empire that itself adds nothing. Yet ultimately nothing seems to escape Empire because it is hybrid, shifting and lacking in essence, and yet, paradoxically, and Hardt and Negri (2000) declared themselves comfortable with paradox and contradiction whilst rejecting dialectics, one can position emancipatory social movements to achieve this escape. As theory, Hardt and Negri's work creates numerous problems (see Morgan, 2003, 2006), but also illustrates Marxism (including neo and post) is both a critical dialogue with Marx's legacy (no less than

the agent-structure problematic) and a response to a changing world. This follows readily from points made in the previous contemporary relevance and the Marx conundrum section.

One enduring aspect of Marx's work and of Marxism is the expression of our experience of the systemic weirdness of capitalism. This weirdness provides one reason why species being remains an important concept.

5. The systemic weirdness of capitalism

The quotation previously provided from *Capital Volume 1* is not just intended to be descriptive of lived conditions, it is also part of a conceptualisation of the consequences of the system of organization of capitalism. The specific reference is to how capitalism fragments and estranges the human, rendering them an appendage of a machine. However, the broader significance might better be understood by reflecting on the full implications of Marx's exploration of capitalism with reference to the phrase 'at the cost of'. Perhaps the most profound insight that emerges from reading Marx is that capitalism creates an inversion: the needs and concerns of the human are subordinated to the requirements of the economic system, rather than the economic system exists to serve and develop the needs of the human. This, of course, is not to suggest that the economic system fails to meet some needs of the human and fails to address some concerns of the human, rather it is to suggest that how and whose needs are met and how concerns are addressed are shaped through capitalism.

It is important to recall that Marx recognized the incredible feats of capitalism and the scope and potential it created, and that the scope and potential has only increased since then. Innovation, advances in technology and transformations in social organization have created a world of material abundance, extended life expectancy and entirely new vistas for ways of living (especially from a 'Global North' perspective). At the same time, capitalism remains a system that divides, destroys, privileges, operates indifferently, and ultimately dehumanises in ways that we constantly recognise in our own lives and in those of others, much of which seems arbitrary in one sense (accidents of birth, geography and life chances), but in another sense, caused by enduring processes. For example, adversely posed (monopolising) competition; devolving decision making to instrumental systems based on the bottom line, pricing, and profitability, and the direct and indirect self-interested influence of the wealthy-and-hence-powerful and so forth.

It is important to recall that capitalism is not capitalists or corporations *per se*, it is a totalising system that includes (if perhaps via fractions in Poulantzas's sense, see Jessop

1991) the state and increasingly supra-state organization (and Marx intended this to be more clearly reflected in *Capital* as a project—there are ‘missing books’ he intended to write). As with ‘within’, totalizing is a similarly conditional term. One can differentiate between the commons, the household, various organizational forms and the formal capitalist economy, one can dispute the degree to which technology and innovation is a product of only the formal capitalist economy, and one can explore circuits of capital, regimes of accumulation, social reproduction, as well as relations and changes at various scales and through many geographies. Again, this has created scope for Marxism (for example, debate regarding dialectics in Albritton and Simoulidis (2003), or Arthur’s work 2004)

Still, when someone cannot pay for medical insurance in a privatised system in the United States (US), that is an outcome within capitalism; when an Accident and Emergency unit is closed in the National Health Service in the United Kingdom (UK) because the government has decided it cannot be afforded that is also within capitalism. This is truistic but it is not banal, unless one simply denies that systems matter (however, see Elder-Vass 2016). We rarely stop to consider just how weird it is that the knowledge, skills and resources exist to do something and yet we say that it cannot be done because a system that operates according to the distribution of tokens carrying notional monetary value tells us we cannot do that something. The ‘cannot’ is really a ‘should not’ or ‘will not’ because of the system that creates criteria for decision-making and which allocates power to decision makers. This is rarely any starker for us than when we think of capitalism as a system that affects who lives or dies.

Not only does Marx’s work encourage us to see the systemic weirdness of capitalism (its ‘phantasmagoria’) he also tried to capture and incorporate into that analysis the significance of the experience of that system in its weirdness. This is captured primarily in the concept of alienation. The term (as *Entfremdung* or estrangement and *Entäusserung* or externalization, both meaning to alienate) is first introduced and developed in Marx’s writings in the mid-1840s, but continues to appear in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* (see also Wood 1984).

6. From alienated capitalism to species being

Alienation is a multi-faceted concept with various dynamics. In an immediate sense alienation is a consequence of the division of labour and this begins with the division of tasks within a single organization, but extends to the division or disaggregation of society; a human

is separated from and unable to identify with the product of their own work or activity. In a broader sense they become estranged by work and activity and how these are organized, realised and given meaning, and in so doing they become estranged from some important constituent *of the self* through their social relations, and simultaneously and mutually estranged in their relations *with others*. Concomitantly, the social world is experienced or perhaps confronted through separation. It becomes a place of objects in the negative sense of indifferent, implacable, ineluctable, inevitable, meaning-as-meaningless, dehumanised and so forth.⁸ Ollman neatly summarises the way Marx positions 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. Centred on the actual 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 product, his fellows, inanimate nature and the species. (Ollman, 1971, p. 131)

Given Marx's many references to the brutality of the factory system and the reduction of the worker to a degraded, 'appendage of a machine' estranged from his 'intellectual properties' there is a temptation to mistakenly frame alienation solely via the historical specifics of the labour process and particularly through the tendency towards deskilling. This can result in a reductive view of alienation that overly associates it with one way in which it might arise. Marxism has a long tradition of debate regarding the labour process and deskilling, initiated by Braverman's (1998 [1974]) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman's work was focused on the period in which Taylorist scientific management dominated a mass production variety of industrial capitalism. This in turn has led to varieties of critique based on subsequent technological and organizational changes to historical capitalism.⁹ However, what endures is a focus on the human who is shaped in many ways and where alienation has both a specific and a general relevance (see also Pratten 1993).

⁸ This is different than comprehending the human objectively where one is able to abstractly conceive of the social world as a consequence of human labour—the subjectivity of the objective (Marx 1981 [1844/1927], pp. 132, 136).

⁹ In the introduction to the new edition Foster responds to the critique, emphasising that Braverman's argument is not intended to reduce to a simple claim that deskilling and degradation are always and everywhere the case (Foster in Braverman 1998 [1974]).

More importantly, for the continued relevance of Marx, although alienation is an initial attempt to express how capitalism is experienced it is not merely impressionistic—a state of mind that a person simply thinks their way out of. It is something produced or constituted through society, at the core of which, of course, is the way work *is* organized, since this is central to the whole of society. In so far as alienation is constituted it can also be changed or transformed or overcome. However, exploring this requires a concept of the human that is compatible with a social world that she makes but not just as she pleases. So, the concept of alienation requires also some concept of the human who can produce an alienated social reality but can also work to overcome it. This way of thinking emerges mainly out of Marx's engagement, and the circumstances of that engagement, with Feuerbach.

For Feuerbach, man's being was transposed onto an alien being through Christianity and this is transmitted to civil society and the claimed unity of the state. The young Hegelian position that developed around this focused on universal suffrage and true democracy. It also positioned the majority population as ill-educated masses who were either passive or an actual impediment to constructive change—requiring an elite to lead them and emphasising a change in self-consciousness as sufficient to achieve a transformed and newly unified society. This is the ideational context Marx found himself addressing, but from which he produced something that transcended this context.

Having arrived in Paris in 1843, Marx began to reject the young Hegelian position. He met Engels, began to read classical political economy, and gained first-hand experience of broad-based grassroots working class self-organization. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1981 [1844/1927]), 'Feuerbach' and 'the Theses on Feuerbach' in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1965 [1845/1932]), the *Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1956 [1845]) and later in the *Grundrisse*, Marx and Marx and Engels rejected idealist varieties of philosophy as misleading (see also Callinicos 1983). They also provided a critique of philosophy in general as insufficient to account for society and insufficient as an ideational resource to change society—one must change how it is materially organized and so change the conditions in which people lived-as-experienced (social) reality. This was something that ordinary people themselves did, it was not something done on their behalf.

One might argue, then, that one of the enduring legacies of Marx is his material account of the human consistent with his account of a socio-material reality in process. So, applying the phrase *According to Marx*: the human is a being with natural characteristics and powers shared with all living creatures, but also species powers or being (*Gattungswesen*).

Unlike Feuerbach, however, Marx (and Engels) emphasised a material account of the world in which ‘Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process’ (Marx and Engels 1965 [1845/1932], p. 35).¹⁰ As a species humans are creatures who are necessarily self-conscious, active, planning, creative and co-operative (sometimes competitive but in ways that can require mutuality, dependencies, reliance and perhaps trust). They are able to change their own lived circumstances and the broader material environment precisely because of the nature of their being, which includes sociality.

As such, humans possess powers, capacities and potentials in the Aristotelian sense, but these are not all fixed atemporal essences, since how society develops through time creates grounds for further realisations of human potentiality (see Sayers 1998; Meikle 1985).¹¹ Conversely, the human is a natural material entity able to suffer and flourish, but does so on and through the way society is constituted, in so far as this creates the conditions in which they live and think. She can experience specific and general harms to her natural material self, as well as develop social forms in which that developing self could achieve more but also be prevented from doing so.

Thus, Marx distinguishes between the observed brutality of capitalism in specific historical ways and the more general systemic weirdness of capitalism that distorts, subverts, impedes or prevents the recognition and/or expression and development of species being, *and* the species being that is itself being shaped. For example, in the *Grundrisse* Marx critiques classical political economy for theorising labour as merely ‘negative’ or ‘sacrifice’, with the implication that humans desire only ‘tranquillity’ as leisure—a frame of reference that would later become disutility in the opportunity cost underpinnings of work and compensation in mainstream economics (Marx 1973 [1858], pp. 610-613). That said, it remains possible to

¹⁰ ‘[and where] when reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence,’ (Marx and Engels 1965 [1845/1932], p. 36).

¹¹ Marx states in *Capital*: ‘Labour is in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate ... He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces ... By this acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature ... [In general he engages in] human action with a view to the production of use-values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase ... As the taste of porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you of itself what are the social conditions under which it is taking place [these need to be set out and explored]’ (Marx 1954 [1867], pp. 183-188). Note Mulhall also links species being to Kant (Mulhall 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

critique Marx's distinctions based on the consistency and coherency of concepts (see Wood 1984; Ollman 1971). However, equally there are ways to address such critique.

7. Ollman on Marx and what follows

Ollman acknowledges that Marx's work is problematic as philosophy if taken in parts, since his 'theories are not interrelated, as this is ordinarily understood, but rather include' (Ollman 1971, p. 231). However, he also argues that: 'Alienation can only be grasped as the absence of unalienation ... 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' (Ollman 1971, p. 132). Ollman makes the point that what communism is or will be is never fully fleshed out in Marx's work and this creates a problem of ambiguity for alienation and the prospects for non-alienation. And yet capitalism's systemic weirdness is comprehensible. Still, in a formal philosophical sense, there is something unsatisfying about the dependence of one concept on another, where that other is never quite clarified. Though Marx is not a philosopher and is critical of the philosophy of his time this does not in and of itself render his work immune to critique using philosophical forms of argument.

However, it is questionable that alienation requires substantive content regarding 'unalienation' (as communism) in order for the term to itself be significant as more than 'reproach'. Arguably, this concern reduces three different aspects into a single claim. One can know that the system in which one lives is creating specific and general harms, and one can know that it is failing to encourage or develop capacities or potentials of the human (as social being), and so one can reasonably state that the system distorts, subverts, or leaves incomplete (extending to absences or lacks) something about the human. To know in this sense is sufficient to meaningfully claim one is alienated, subject to how alienation is defined. It necessarily implies because of the existential state constituted within a particular society that capacities and potentials can be more developed and experienced harm can be reduced, so the human can be *less* alienated.

Alienation is thus not an absolute concept. If it were absolute in the relevant sense then an alienated society would be deterministic and so impervious to human directed change through activity (or entirely arbitrary because of that activity). It is an open question thereafter whether in fact any society can be a basis for fully non-alienated existence, and yet the concept of non-alienation does not become meaningless because of that incompleteness. It is meaningful in so far as we can conceive what we do not fully comprehend in its

substance—which humans do all the time. It is also implicitly meaningful in so far as humans have experienced progress in their own state of alienation. So, in a formal sense there may be a binary (alienated/unalienated) but there is also a moving state of being alienated. If this were not so it would imply all societies in which alienation was experienced were of the same status.

So, one can make much of the need for clarity expressed as substantive content of an unalienated existential state and society, but to do so can actually be problematic in terms of how being is experienced and societies change (that is, the actual characteristics by which alienation and species being are first identified). Put another way, one can know that one is alienated, one can know that one can be less alienated, and so non-alienated has meaning or sense. However, one need not know what a pure unalienated state is in a substantive sense. Rather, the term has sense as a contrastive that implies meaning as the notional possibility derived by extension (through the intuitive, imaginative, creative aspect of species being). This, of course, does not prevent non-alienation being a state that could be achieved, it merely suggests that clarity is a matter of how one specifies what it means to attribute meaning to a term. Analogically one might say the problem is no more devastating than the problem of truth in a conditional world where knowledge claims are fallible, and yet truth seeking is a necessary commitment to ensure that knowledge is not subverted as a goal oriented activity.

The point may seem obscure or innocuous, but it is not. To reiterate, we are real, needy material beings (emotional, social, dependent and so much more both physically and psychologically; see Sayer 2011). Alienation tracks species being and species being and alienation both situate our capacity to flourish and suffer. This is *not* the same in every society and social and economic change can have fundamental impacts on how we flourish and suffer. However, *Capital* is not about just any society. It is an attempt to provide an empirical and explanatory account of the capitalist system. This in turn creates two different ways in which one might situate species being to *Capital* as Marx's main work.¹²

First, one might argue that alienation becomes a background concept in *Capital* and species being becomes the background concept that makes sense of the capacity for alienation to occur. Without species being, *Capital* would not make much sense, since there would be no concept of the (creative-cooperative) human who could produce the

¹² It is perhaps worth noting that this implicitly takes *Capital* to be the interpretive hinge for everything else and its significance. This is a 'all roads lead to *Capital*' convergence point of view that tends to colour how all other works are judged.

organizational complexity and technological achievements of capitalist society and no human who could have any practical commitment to either reforming or transforming that society because of the adverse experience of how one lives within it. Second, one might equally argue that the concept of alienation becomes something more specific in *Capital*. It becomes indicative of the way relations between persons become relations between things, linked to the commodity and alienated labour power, which is intrinsic to the theory of surplus value.¹³

These two different ways also speak to two routes one might take in exploring the continued relevance of Marx and of species being and alienation. First, one might more closely adhere to Marx's focus in *Capital* and then seek to dispute and justify interpretations of Marx as claims in Marxism through context for this text. In terms of species being and alienation this leads to work on how Marx's thought developed, which in turn shapes an emphasis on the second of the two ways of situating the terms in the previous paragraph. The main focus is history, context, interpretation and exegesis (see, for example, Chitty on Sayer 2014). Second, one might focus more on the general insight that humans possess species being and that there is a systemic weirdness to capitalism.

One may not need Marx to make the case for species being in general nor in order to note that there is a systemic weirdness to capitalism. But Marx did make the case; and this focus too can be more or less Marxist, but it can also extend to acknowledgement 'of', as much as development 'in' Marxism. Across this spectrum the focus can be more forward and outward directed, looking for new inspirations to make sense of contemporary capitalism. For example, in addition to Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005) referred to previously, since Marx's time, psychology, psychoanalysis and many other branches of science and social theory have developed prompting new dialogues (for example, the work of Badiou (2006) and Žižek (2015) as forms of new materialism).

Clearly, this brings us back once more to points made in the above contemporary relevance and the Marx conundrum section. In any case, I by no means wish to denigrate either focus or to suggest they are entirely distinct (see Balibar 2007 [1995]); I am merely suggesting that they can be and have been different in emphasis. More fundamentally, *all* the foci attest to different ways that the relevance of Marx in general and/or species being in

¹³ As Walton and Gamble (1972) note, in early Marx economic and political categories are philosophical whilst in *Capital*, philosophical categories are economic and political. However, unless one defaults to alienation as an absolute term capitalism is still subject to variation in states (there are varieties of capitalism and mixes of cooperatives, types of corporations, social democracy, relational goods etc).

particular have been pursued. This brings us to a final section with an emphasis on how capitalism continues to make Marx relevant. Species being provides useful insight in the twenty-first century at a time of anticipated major social and economic change.

8. Species being in the twenty-first century

The early twenty-first century has witnessed growing concern regarding a new industrial revolution, a new era in capitalism and a fundamental transformation in the way we work. This has been driven by recent and expected technological breakthroughs in machine learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, sensors, connectivity, cloud computing, nano-technology, 3-D printing and the Internet of Things (IoT). The main approach to this confluence has not exactly been technological determinism, but it has been highly restrictive. Debate has focused on whether the pervasive nature of technological change will lead to displacement effects on labour that overwhelm any potential for technology to be assimilated in ways that alter work, as well as leading to wholly new varieties of work. That is, whether technology will lead to large net substitution or complementary effects. Different models and methods have led to very different forecasts.

For example, Frey and Osborne's (2013) displacement focused model claimed that 47% of US employment was at high risk, the Bank of England's replication of this model for the UK in 2015 claimed 37%, whilst Arntz et. al's (2016) modification of these models reduced this to 9% on average for the OECD. Also in 2016 Klaus Schwab and Richard Saman at the World Economic Forum estimated, based on a survey of 350 Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) in 15 main economies, that an overall seven million jobs would be lost compared to two million created. In all cases, authors recognize that their forecasts are highly contingent on adoption, adaption and future policy.

However, in addition to the World Economic Forum, the Global Institute arm of the McKinsey consultancy under James Manyika has done much to shape the terms of analysis. The dominant terms of analysis have focused on seizing opportunity; how firms and governments need to invest now in order to gain a competitive advantage and in order to realize the benefits of the coming revolution. This, for example, dominates the policy advice in the solicited UK *Made Smarter Review 2017*. This *Review* makes the bold claim that the UK could experience a net increase in employment of 175,000 by 2025. However, this is explicitly stated as not a "forecast", it is a 'best possible outcome' based on immediate investment, new policy initiatives and everything falling into place.

Across all the main interventions the underlying principles of policy emphasize the need to support corporations in embracing new technology and in facilitating the upskilling of the workforce. However, the ultimate context is one that devolves responsibility to the individualized worker in competition for employment, a discourse that translates seeking work into employability as though this itself solved the problem of future unemployment. This sits awkwardly with the uncertainty surrounding the net effects of new technologies on employment, and this has led to interest in robot taxes, universal basic income and other policies. A great deal of the context of this shifts back and forth between a tech optimist ‘taking the robot out of human work rather than putting her out of work’ and the more pessimistic claim that a capitalism that *denies* work to the many is not quite the same as a capitalism that *liberates* the many from work. In any case, very little attention has been paid to how new technology might be adapted and utilized in ways that absorb aspects of capitalist processes and practices, including management systems.

Species being is a reminder that there is a human who can flourish or be harmed and the systemic weirdness of capitalism fundamentally means that human well-being is not an explicit concern of capitalism in general, though it has been a focus of kinds for management systems. It is, therefore, important to pay attention to the ways in which developments within capitalism may not be beneficial and may in fact be alienating. Over the last three decades the modern discourse of work has become a management system expression of neoliberal tenets. The discourse emphasizes personal responsibility, and offers the prospect of empowerment in association with choice, autonomy, and flexibility. Here, the concept of well-being in general is shaped, often subordinated, and ultimately subverted. It is positioned as achievement through incentivized personal career tracks; work harder in employment A or decide that employment B is preferable and do what is required to transition. Well-being becomes an idealized self-realization, a personal journey through the world of work. This stands in unstable association with individualised choices regarding work-life balance, shadowed by assumed trade-offs between income and leisure that provide a background justification for the logic of argument.

However, as critical management studies scholars and some economists (mainly non-mainstream) have argued this separates out much of the political economy or real context that pressurises choices (Fleetwood, 2014; Spencer, 2009; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). The range is great and much of it is familiar. In association with a general trend of income stagnation or slow growth and financialized economies that create debt-dependence, the perpetual need to work and the insecurity of employment that is inscribed in new

employment relations encourages staff to do more and different things in potentially unhealthy ways: unrecorded hours, personal investment in human capital for the benefit of the firm, conformity to unrealistic standards, the intuited requirement to perform a corporate identity based on the latest system rhetoric and performance metrics, the understanding that many metrics of the firm, including well-being and satisfaction, are structured as targets the firm must create and must meet, but where it is the metric that matters; all of this can be experienced as formalistic, inauthentic, anxiety-inducing, uncaring and beyond the control of the individualised worker. This is despite that care, choice, consultation and empowerment as explicit matters of concern for well-being are “principles” that are integral to much of the management system approach to modern work. The reality readily becomes harmful and actively encourages workers to collude in their own exploitation, which itself becomes a source of bitterness and cynicism.

Clearly, the concepts of alienation and species being remain highly relevant here, not least because creativity can be bent towards achieving knowingly alienating ends. Moreover, though the management system tendencies are not new, the new technological environment that is being anticipated may create new potentials that the dominant new industrial revolution approach is not doing enough to address. There is more at stake than just whether we will work and whether the potential labour of the future is going to have the skills that will make her ‘fit to work’ (enabling her to reap benefits). How she will fit into work is more than simply a matter of learning to get along with robotics, AI etc where the new work environment will be more interactive and in some physical sense ‘safer’ (as well as, based on claims, more efficient and so ecologically ‘sustainable’).

For example, wearables and self-trackable technologies (WSTT) are being heralded as important components of future work systems. The basic concept should be familiar to many from the use of Fitbits and similar devices. However, imagine this concept applied to the whole person integrating all aspects of life based on integrating two components. First, biometrics, tracking sleep, nutrition, blood pressure, and so forth. Second, socio-metrics tracking and logging all interactions in the workplace with further links to all web-connected activity beyond the workplace and worktime. This is the new field of people analytics. It combines real time data with algorithms that are set according to targets or goals and that include components such as inferred state of mind (using, for example, tone of voice and biometric readings). The stated aims of the field are enhanced well-being for the worker and improved productivity and efficiency for the employer. Clearly, there is great scope for potential conflict here.

The relation to work is psychologically complex and the experience of management systems is already one where workers have in some ways been co-opted into performing what they know to be harmful practices, whilst formally validating the system as anything but harmful, not least because its very language is rooted in claims to positivity and well-being that are not easily individually contested. Some variants, of course, can seem manifestly problematic, such as recent undercover exposé reports of WSTT use in warehouses to regulate retrieval times for inventory. But it would be dangerous to associate harm solely with egregious examples as though it was only via aberrations that problems arise. There is the potential for something more subtly systemic to emerge. Decisions of when to go to bed, what to eat, who to associate with, how to act, what to say and much more may become future data points.

Regulation via data protection, consent and decent work criteria can potentially mitigate some problems, but problems may still arise because workers will feel that it is necessary to consent, participate, conform and strive and so artificial standards may become norms and technologies may be acquiesced to (rather than genuinely approved of) in a situation of restricted choice and perceived powerlessness. WSTT create new ways for the whole of life to be drawn into the work relation, a possibility that quintessentially invokes alienation as a concept. WSTT are by design invasive and (self)-disciplining and by systemic positioning clearly potentially oppressive. Phoebe Moore (2018) and a few others have already begun to explore these issues, but there is great scope for more research in the coming years. There may be many circumstances where ‘Taking the robot out of human work’ may come to seem ironic. The systemic weirdness of capitalism may be about to become weirder still.

9. Conclusion

The 200 year anniversary since Marx’s birth in 1818 provides another opportunity to consider his legacy. In this article, I have argued that capitalism keeps making Marx relevant. However, the way in which his work remains relevant has various inflections. There is a Marx conundrum and one can contest the usage of *According to Marx*. Moreover, one can situate work as an acknowledgement ‘of’, as much as a development ‘in’, the work of Marx and Marxism. All of these are possible in terms of alienation and species being. Furthermore, species being provides useful insight in the twenty first century at a time of anticipated major social and economic change.

As a final point, one of the few polities still laying claim to Marx's legacy is China and it is worth noting that the Chinese state is one of the more enthusiastic advocates and implementers of various forms of technology that are referenced as part of the fourth industrial revolution. This includes some of its more disturbing aspects. China is currently piloting social credit scores with an intention to roll out a national system in 2020. Citizens are rated based on activity across a combination of categories, from paying bills to participating in online commentary. High scores lead to preferential treatment for commercial services via online platforms and for public services (for adults and their children), whilst low scores or flagged scores may be used to delay or deny access. So, debt-discipline, wealth and expression of appropriate ideas and conventions may become necessary in order to do everything from buy a house, shop online, travel, secure a hospital appointment or get one's child into a preferred school. There is great scope for WSTT to integrate into these practices.

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