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Estranged Labor Learning

Summary

This article is in praise of the labor of reading profound and rich texts, in this case the essay on ‘estranged labor’ by Karl Marx. Comparing in detail what Marx wrote on estranged labor with current social practices of learning and education leads us to comprehensive ideas about learning – including the social practices of alienated learning. We then emphasize the importance of distribution in the institutionalized production of alienated learning. And we end this article with critical reflections on the importance of alienation for the relationship between teaching and learning in the social practice of scholars.

In 1844, Karl Marx wrote “Estranged Labor,” an essay with a radical philosophical and political claim: labor, prices, profit, and ownership do not exist as things independent of historical circumstance. Rather, they exist only in relations between persons and their productive work. To make matters worse, claimed Marx, the same is true of the words and categories we have available to understand, confront, and reorganize these building blocks or any other relations that define and control our lives: the very content of our minds “takes for granted what it is supposed to explain” (Marx, 1844:106).² Together, the two claims have it that the world is both complex and hidden, terribly so and politically so, even to us, its builders.

To make the case, Marx delivered a phenomenon that, upon examination, could convince readers that every named thing in human life is tied to every other named thing in ways that (1) feed current arrangements in the political economy and, worse, (2) keep the logic and consequences of the arrangements obscure, hidden from their participants, and reflexively constitutive of prob-

¹ This paper is a product of co-learning so intricate that questions of authorship feel inappropriate. The usual criteria – who did what, who did first, who did how much – are the very stuff of estranged learning. For making a claim we must attend to, Karl Marx is the lead author, and the present paper is intended to be read in between two readings of Marx’s essay on “Estranged Labor.” Ole Dreier, Rogers Hall, Gill Hart, Rebecca Lave, Meghan McDermott, and Philip Wexler offered warm and helpful advice, and Seth Chaiklin’s relentless critique forced us to phrase the limitations of our effort. In Tokyo, Naoki Ueno generously arranged the first public presentation of our struggles with the text. Our appreciation to each and all.

² Hereafter citations of “Estranged Labor” are limited to paragraph numbers (1-75).

lems participants might want to solve. Marx makes the case with a neat reversal of common-sense assumptions about the relation of labor to profit. Here are the four sentences of Paragraph 7:

- The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size.
- The worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates.
- With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men.
- Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.

Counterintuitive? Yes. Arresting? No less. The harder someone works, the more the very same someone is rewarded. So goes Adam Smith's (1776) optimistic prognosis, and so now goes the cultural mainstream.³ But Marx sees, and so does anyone who looks beyond immediate rewards, that many of the hardest at work get the least pay, rarely enough to make more than the necessities that bring them to work for another day: "labor produces for the rich wonderful things, but for the worker it produces privation" (paragraph 17). And then Marx sees further. Even those who are seemingly paid well are only paid off momentarily, until it is their turn, until their inalienable rights are also sold off, until alienation becomes the primary fact of their lives. People, all people in a

3. The opening words of *The Wealth of Nations*: "The annual labor of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes, and which consist always either in the immediate produce from other nations, or in what is purchased with that produce from other nations. According therefore, as this produce, or what is purchased with it, bears a greater or smaller proportion to the number of those who are to consume it, that nation will be better or worse supplied with all the necessaries and conveniences for which it has occasion" (Smith, 1776: lix).

capitalist society, labor only to have their products taken from them, alienated, literally alienated, turned over to others, and legally so. This is neither the spirit of capitalism nor the Protestant ethic as Max Weber (1904) stated them. If alienation is ubiquitous in the human situation, and most destructive under capitalism, there is reason for doubting where we stand, how, and why. There is reason for supposing that learning in schools might also be a commodified and alienated practice.

Theorizing economy as abstracted and isolated from ongoing activity was troublesome for Marx in 1844. Theorizing learning as abstracted from situations of use and desire was similarly troublesome for Charles Dickens a decade later, as in the classroom of Grandgrind and M'Choakumchild:

"You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery. You cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use," said the gentleman, "for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste." (1854:11)

Learning seems long away from the school grind choking these children. Yet the people characterized by Dickens have built an institution just for learning, and there they insist children repeat on demand the facts of learn-

ing. They were hard on children who did not do it well. Factory life, “in all things regulated and governed,” delivers a narrow range of fact for learning and a narrow range of categories for thinking about learning. Gradgrind’s theory of learning no doubt “assumes what it is supposed to explain.”

And what about now? The illusion of measured learning makes substantial what is not and reifies it into numbers that align children within hierarchies that replicate injustices in the distribution of access and rewards. Institutionalized education has done to the productive learner what Marx revealed was done to productive labor: schools have commodified learning to the point that every learner must worry more about what others know than about what might be learned if people worked together. The contemporary state offers schools in which every child, like every capitalist in the larger world, has to do better than everyone else. Similarly, every learner, like every laborer under capitalism, is alienated from his or her own learning by virtue of the dominant concern for what every person does and does not know relative, and only relative, to each other.

Marx opposed a double-entry account book version of the human situation – the version that records how much money comes in, against how much money goes out, with as much as possible left over for profit. Dickens agrees: the same “just the facts” bottom line version strangling labor could strangle learning as well. Imagine Marx’s response to the pretest/post-test, double-entry account book version of the human mind that we use today to strangle children in schools.

On the chance that reading Marx as if he were writing on estranged learning can suggest what he would say about contemporary schooling and give us as well a new slant on the political economy of learning, we have been rereading “Estranged Labor” and keeping track of the changes that follow from our

initial alteration. Our method, to use Seamus Heaney’s (2000) phrasing, pays careful “duty to text,” loaded with our own concerns, of course, but careful to take Marx seriously on his own terms.⁴ The rewrite starts as simply as dutifully: Whenever the word labor occurs, with occasional exceptions, it is replaced by the word learning. Marx’s argument and imagery stay intact, and we get to approximate his opinion on an issue of moment over a century later. “Estranged Labor” uses about 5,000 words grouped into approximately 75 paragraphs (depending on the edition), and we have found it productive to spend more than an hour on many paragraphs translating from the English of political economy to the English of learning theory. This method of “reading” has led to a deepened understanding of Marx’s essay with unanticipated ideas about the relations between estranged labor and estranged learning. It has helped us critique – in parallel and simultaneously – theories of political economy and theories of learning, and it has led to questions about how ideas of learning, intelligence, creativity, genius, stupidity, and disability have developed in tandem with ideas about production, consumption, exchange, and distribution.

Because we allow our analytic path to develop in detail along with Marx’s text, the reader might need an account of where we are going. Simply put, in critiquing the theories of political economy available in 1844, young Marx unwittingly wrote a quite devastating critique of the theories of learning available in 2002. This is possible because education has been institutionalized under advanced capitalism as an integral part of the

4 Translating from one topic to another demands more than a subjectivism: “the self-consciousness of one facing a text in a distant language, should not be confused with subjectivism, as some have suggested, for it is just the opposite – a respect for another voice, not an obsession with one’s own” (Becker, 1989: 138).

political economy. In *Capital*, twenty-three years later, Marx gave a strong hint of the relation between the two spheres of production:

“If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation”. (1867: 677)

The same critique applies to the workings of both economy and education because they are two facets of the same history, two versions of institutions rooted in alienated relations of production, consumption, distribution and exchange, one officially of goods, the other officially of ideas, and in both cases, two sides of the same coin, the filthy lucre of commodified manual and mental labor.⁵

In addition to what we might learn about Marx, about learning, and about Marx on learning, there is a historical continuity behind our re-reading. It is close to how Marx himself proceeded. He read voluminously – Smith, Hegel, Feuerbach, Hess, Proudhon – and would enter into his notes systematic changes in their phrasing. Even the older Marx, in *Capital* (1867) and the *Ethnological Notebooks* (1880-1881), manipulated textual detail. Lobkowitz gives a glimpse of Marx at work around the time of “Estranged Labor”:

5 We are not the first to reread “Estranged Labor” in other institutional registers: For a congruence, variously conceived, between Marx on estranged labor and language, see Volosinov (1929) and Rossi-Landi (1968); on estranged labor and science, Sohn-Rethel (1976); on estranged labor and sexuality, MacKinnon (1982).

“Commenting upon Hegel’s text paragraph by paragraph, and sometimes word by word, more often than not he became lost in a thicket of verbal arguments instead of trying to survey Hegel’s political philosophy as a whole. Still this piecemeal procedure brought forth some remarkable results”. (1967:249-250; see also Struik, 1964; When, 1999).

Sometimes Marx would keep track of his editing, sometimes not.⁶ A good example of his making analytic use of his changes comes from the following commentary, in *Theories of Surplus Value* (1860, Book 2: 349-50), on a paragraph from Adam Smith (1776, Book I, Chapter IV: 61) which Marx underlines as he reads (here in italics) and adds, first, a running commentary in parenthesis inside Smith’s paragraph, then a comment on the paragraph, and finally a rewrite of Smith side by side with Smith’s own words:

“As in a civilized country there are but few commodities of which the *exchangeable value* arises from labour only” (here labour is identified with wages) “rent and profit contributing largely to that of the far greater part of them, so the *annual produce of its labour*” (here, after all, the commodities are the *produce of labour*, although the whole value of this produce does not arise from labour only) “will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater quantity of labour than what was employed in raising, preparing and bringing that produce to market.”

Marx’s comment on and rewrite of Smith’s paragraph:

6 An example of not making his edits visible: in a “translation” from French to German of Peuchet’s essay on suicide, Marx (1945) “bends [the] text a bit, here changing Peuchet’s phrase ‘fundamental defect’ to ‘deficient organization’ and thereby making the critique more social and less moralistic. At another point, without indicating that he has done so, Marx adds a phrase of his own, writing that ‘short of a total reform of the organization of our current society,’ any attempt to lower the suicide rate ‘would be in vain’” (Anderson, 1999: 13).

“The produce of *labour* [is] not equal to the *value* of this produce. On the contrary (one may gather) this value is *increased* by the addition of profit and rent. The produce of labour can there-

fore command, purchase, more labour, i.e., pay a greater value in labour, than the labour contained in it. This proposition would be correct if it ran like this:

Smith says:

“As in a civilised country there are but few commodities of which the *exchangeable value* arises from *labour only*, rent and profit *contributing* largely to that of the far greater part of them, so the annual produce of its labour will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater *quantity of labour* than *what was employed in raising, preparing, and bringing that produce to market.*”

According to Marx himself, it should read:

“As in a civilised country there are but few commodities of which the *exchangeable value* resolves itself into *wages* only and since, for a far greater part of them, this value largely *resolves* itself into rent and profit, so the annual produce of its labour will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater *quantity of labour* than what had to be *paid*” (and therefore employed) “in raising, preparing, and bringing that produce to market.”

This is roughly the genre of translation we are offering. There is a version of science ideally done this way, but not enough of it. Apprenticeship to text may be far easier than duty to children in school, but they are identical in their respect for complexity, their delight in cooperative learning, and their appreciation of surprise.

We are engaged in reading and learning about alienated labor, alienated learning, and relations between them. We try to show what it is like to rebraid the text after introducing one significant change of topic, and then to move forward by trying different ways of recasting what follows to deepen the rewriting. We have read this text together and with students many times. Still, it would be a mistake to think of the rewrite as a concluded, polished, definitive “translation” displayed for the reader’s consumption. It is not our intention to be supposed experts at Marx, nor are we offering a predigested account of our knowledge at work. Instead, if we can share our work bench, readers might follow the *process* of reading and rereading, and work with our re-writing in their own way, on their

way to working further on “Estranged Labor” and other texts.

The first two parts of the paper stay closer to how we did the work and the textual changes that developed along the way. Marx should not be read quickly, and our play with his text certainly insures that the reader has to slow down. In Part I, we offer the first paragraph of Marx’s essay and explain how we worked out a sense for the demands of the text and its possibilities, for what Becker (1995) calls deficient and exuberant readings of the text. In Part II, we move to an only slightly quicker account of Paragraphs 2-4 for a gloss of Marx’s argument, and we apply our changes to institutional education in general and the diagnosis of learning disability and the ascription of genius in particular. After working through the thorny thickets of paragraphs 1-4, readers might benefit from a view of the forest. “Estranged Labor” elaborates a theory of alienated labor in four successive steps encompassing the first half of Marx’s essay. Part III of “Estranged Labor/Learning” does the same, rereading the main points of that theory in terms of alienated

learning. Part IV is a selective rereading of the second half of Marx's essay. At one point Marx proposes an exercise for the reader, and we take up the challenge. He suggests that relations internal to the keywords of political economy can be derived from alienated labor and private property. For our exercise, we focus on education as a distributional phenomenon and – still engaged in a process of re-reading “Estranged Labor” as “Estranged Labor/Learning” – explore how alienated distribution can be derived from alienated learning and private (educational) property. Our intervention challenges common ways of reading Marx and brings his work to bear on a current concern. It is serious work done twice. At the end of the paper, we draw together what we have learned about alienated learning and consider its relations with our practice of reading.

Part I: Alienated Categories

In the beginning is Marx's first paragraph:

“We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed private property, the separation of labor, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land – likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc. On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production;⁷ that the necessary result of competition is the accu-

⁷ As written, Marx describes a direct relation: the more richly the world's possibilities are produced by workers, the more workers are deprived of them; usually, he makes the same point by describing an inverse relation: as workers produce more and more for those who pay their wages, they receive less and less of what they are producing for themselves. We comment only because this phrase has brought our reading to a halt repeatedly.

mulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that finally the distinction between capitalist and land rentier, like that between the tiller of the soil and the factory worker, disappears and that the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes – the property *owners* and the propertyless *workers*.”

Now we can develop our own first paragraph. Once we have turned the topic from labor to learning, we must alter the first sentence:

“We have proceeded from the premises of... “

Many substitutes are possible: educational psychology, most specifically; educational ideology, most politically; the educational establishment, most generally. Our choice is to use the most general reading, and if the text insists on a tighter formulation, that can be made obvious as we move through the paragraph. So we have our first line, and the second line is generic enough to require no change:

“We have proceeded from the premises of *the educational establishment*. We have accepted its language and its laws.”

Now it gets difficult. Marx gives us:

“ We presupposed private property, the separation of labor, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land – likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.”

As a substitute for private property, one of us suggested “controlled and standardized knowledge (curriculum)” and the other suggested “inherent intelligence”:

- a. We presupposed *standardized knowledge* (curriculum) ...
- b. We presupposed *inherent intelligence* ...”

This is a difference that seems to make a difference, the first focused, as Marx would ap-

preciate, on an institutional phenomenon, the educational banking system (Freire 1969), and the second focused more on the individual account, or seemingly so, and available for institutional analysis only after careful thought. The differences hardly make themselves felt in the rest of the sentence:

“ We presupposed standardized knowledge (curriculum),
the separation of learning, academic success, and natural capacities,
and of grades, credentials, and earning potential – ...
We presupposed inherent intelligence,
the separation of learning, knowledge, and assessed potential,
and of learning, degrees, and success – ...”

If we continue to follow the two choices – curriculum vs. intelligence – through subsequent paragraphs, they do not organize readings as divergent as we anticipated. Although inherent intelligence at first invites other psychological terms to populate its semantic tree, it gives way to a picture of the institutional arrangements that make an exaggerated attention to measured intelligence, reportable, recordable, and consequential. We can use *standardized knowledge* (in the first line of translation a.), which constrains only slightly our choices for the second line. We cannot resist combining the translations of “rent of land”; instead of “natural capacities” (in the second line of a.) and “assessed potential” (in the second line of b.), we opt for *assessed capacities*, for there are two uses of the word “assessment” in modern English: one for measuring land value, the other for measuring the value of a person’s mind. The fit is difficult to ignore.

The remainder of the sentence stands on its own:

“– likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.”

In education as in political economy, the division of labour is ubiquitous in its relevance. Competition is everywhere. The concept of exchange value, by which everything is theoretically exchangeable for everything else, for example, knowledge in exchange for career line and/or profit, speaks to the heart of what most people seek when they go to school (and certainly what people must attend to when they leave school). So now we have three sentences rewritten:

“We have proceeded from the premises of the *educational establishment*. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed *standardized knowledge (curriculum)*, the separation of *learning, academic success, and assessed capacities*, and of *grades, credentials, and earning potential* – likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.”

We have translated “capital” into *academic success* and “profit from capital” into *credentials*. Both, of course, are won in competition: academic success is always achieved over others, and credentials are less about what they allow their owners to do than their non-owners not to do. This is consistent with Marx’s haiku-like definition of capital in the *Manuscripts*:

“Capital,
private property
taken from other people’s labor?”
(1844: 79, poetic license ours)

Good news: with variation, changes made in the first paragraph can last through the essay. The variations are interesting to trace, but are mostly self-explanatory. In the following charts, we separate the terms we had to change (as we began analytically to pull apart, first, labor and learning and, second, political economy and education) from a few terms we did not have to change because they apply equally to both of these thoroughly enmeshed spheres of production.

Chart I:

Paragraph 1: Initial rewriting of Marx's concepts of political economy into educational terms (variations from later paragraphs are listed in parentheses)

political economy and its classical theory → educational establishment and its theory
 (educational theory, learning theory)
 private property → controlled and standardized knowledge (curriculum and tests)
 labor → learning
 capital → academic success (achievement), all at the expense of others
 land → capacities (access)
 wages → grades
 profit of capital → credentials, appropriated from others
 rent of land → assessed capacities
 capitalist → knowledge accumulator (scientists and scholars)
 land rentier → knowledge distributors (teachers and testers)
 his, (man, him, he) → their (humankind, people, she and he)

Chart II:

Paragraph 1: Concepts applicable to both domains (variations from later paragraphs are listed in parentheses)

division of labor
 competition (meritocracy, showing-off)
 exchange value
 production
 commodity
 monopoly (nobility, knowledge)

Nota bene: The conceptual shifts are not one-to-one. The concepts in Marx's text are mutually defined, and so it must be for the educational terms. The changes must be read from top to bottom as well as from left to right. The appearance of a one-to-one correspondence across terms would require the assumption of a one-to-one, and likely distorting, fit between political economy and education. The power of the rewrite lies ulti-

mately in the relations among and across both sets of concepts as they have been historically established and fitted to different spheres of activity across quite different time lines. Although we stress similarities across concepts that serve both theories of political economy and theories of education, what does not translate is just as revealing, as when we argue, in Part IV, that production in education might be more akin to what Marx

calls distribution in political economy.

The rest of the first paragraph turns into education as it might get articulated in a class-based democracy:

“On the basis of *educational theory* itself, in its own words, we have shown that the *learner* sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the *learner* is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of *academic success* in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that finally the distinction between the *knowledge accumulator (scientist and scholar)* and the *knowledge distributor (teacher and tester)*, like that between the *kinds of learner*, disappears and that the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes – the credentialed and the non-credentialed.”⁸

Part II: Alienated Problems and Alternatives

For the next three paragraphs, Marx develops his argument: Experts on political economy can populate the world with supposed entities abstracted from the sensuous give and take of daily life and then struggle to write laws for how the entities interact, but they cannot explain how the entities have developed historically along with the partial perspectives that make them look real. For most modern thought, reality has been irremediably perspectival, but for Marx all perspectives are also irremediably political. Objective reality not only depends on where one is standing, but where one is standing in relation to everyone else, whether measured by lineage, money, or access to power.⁹ Might the same be true for a critique of theories of education? Might where one stands in relation to everyone else be measured as easily by grades earned as by lineage, money, or access? For Paragraphs 2-4, we present the economic arguments of “Estranged Labor” and the educational arguments of “Estranged Labor/Learning” side-by-side for an easy to view contrast:

⁸ A note on the concept of production: In “Estranged Labor,” the internal relations of “production” that give it its meaning are labor under capitalism, workers’ relations with what they produce in the workplace, workers’ relations with capital and capitalists, and relations between alienated labor and private property. We explore comparable relations among learners, their self-formation, learning, the commodified products of learning in schools, learners’ relations with teachers, schools, and the educational establishment including its theorists and apologists. We compare the latter to the classical political economists, exploring with respect to educational theory Marx’s critique of political economic theory. Later in the paper we consider production/distribution relations as a matter of alienated labor and learning. We are aware that exploration of the relations between political economy and education potentially raises distinctions between production and reproduction, distinctions of which we are critical. To maintain a critical perspective, we must remember that relations between labor and learning, political economy and education, the learning implied in estranged labor and the labor in estranged learning, are multiple and entangled.

⁹ Objective reality: “all that is appropriate to, noticeable within, and marked by the self-directed, or practical, actions of collectivities in situations of conflict” (Brown, 1986:15).

Paragraph 2

(2) Political economy starts with the fact of private property, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulas the *material* process through which private property actually passes, and these formulas it then takes for *laws*. It does not *comprehend* these laws, i.e., it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property. Political economy does not disclose the source of the division between labor and capital, and between capital and land. When, for example, it defines the relationship of wages to profit, it takes the interest of the capitalists to be the ultimate cause, i.e., it takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. Similarly, competition comes in everywhere. It is explained from external circumstances. As to how far these external and apparently accidental circumstances are but the expression of a necessary course of development, political economy teaches us nothing. We have seen how exchange itself appears to it as an accidental fact. The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are *greed* and the war amongst the greedy – competition.

(2) *The educational establishment* starts with the fact of *standardized knowledge*, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulas the *material* process through which *curriculum* actually passes, and these formulas it then takes for *laws*. It does not *comprehend* these laws, i.e., it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of *standardized knowledge*. *Educational theory* does not disclose the source of the division between *learning and achievement*, and between *degrees and assessed capacity*. When, for example, it defines the relationship of *grades to credentials*, it takes the interest of the *knowledge accumulators* to be the ultimate cause, i.e., it takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. Similarly, competition comes in everywhere. It is explained from external circumstances. As to how far the external and apparently accidental circumstances are but the expression of a necessary course of development, *educational theory* teaches us nothing. We have seen how *teaching/learning exchanges* and *knowledge distribution* appear as accidental fact. The only wheels which *educational theory* sets in motion are *ambition* and the war amongst the *ambitious* – competition.

Substitutions become more complex in Paragraph 3. The argument is more layered, and each substitution must be paired across levels of analysis. In Paragraphs 1-2, Marx could say we had terrible problems and little analytic vocabulary for confronting them, an argument that holds for education as well as political economy. In Paragraph 3, Marx claims that the resolutions we devise to our historic problems are not only inadequate, but systematic products of, and thereby reflexive-

ly constitutive of the very same problems. In defining a problem and articulating a possible solution, it is possible to lose sight of the conditions that created the problem and will move forward with the proposed solution:

“Precisely because political economy does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of competition to the doctrine of monopoly, the doctrine of the freedom of the crafts to the doctrine of the guild, the doctrine of the division of

landed property to the doctrine of the big estate – for competition, freedom of the crafts and the division of landed property were explained and comprehended only as accidental, premeditated and violent consequences of monopoly, of the guild system, and of feudal property, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.”

It is a difficult paragraph. In Chart III, we offer a schematic of how Marx develops the argument in three of parts of four steps each:

Chart III: The Logic of Paragraph 3:						
Problem	invites	Apparent Solution	because	Apparent Causes	masking	Real Conditions
Doctrine of Monopoly	↔	Doctrine of Competition	←	Accident	← // ←	Necessity
Doctrine of Freedom of Guilds	↔	Doctrine of Freedom of Crafts	←	Premeditation	← // ←	Inevitability
Doctrine of Big Estates	↔	Doctrine of Division of Landed Property	←	Violence	← // ←	Naturalness

It is tempting to read Marx’s argument from left to right, across the rows one column at a time, as if the problem and solution pairs, say Monopoly Competition, could be understood, mistakenly, as caused by Accident, whereas the real connection is one of Necessity. Because we can not always tell the difference between Necessity, Inevitability, and Naturalness and do not always see reasons for traditional political economists choosing between Accident, Premeditation, and Violence, we have merged these categories considerably. So we have three problem and solution pairs, each accounted for, inadequately, by Accident, Premeditation, and Violence, whereas each might be better accounted for by Necessity, Inevitability, and Naturalness.

1. In an economy of monopolistic control, access to competition must look like a wonderful alternative. But monopolies are the systematic outcome of competition run amuck. Monopolies make competition visi-

ble and attractive. It is not noticed that the institutionalized competition that led to monopolies *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more competition.¹⁰

2. In an economy of repressive guilds, access to free crafts must look like a wonderful alternative. Guilds are the systematic outcome of access to a market run amuck. Guilds make free crafts visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the market freedoms that led to repressive guilds *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more freedom.

3. In an economy of big estates, access to a more equitable division of landed property must look like a wonderful alternative. Big

10 So long as there is no disruptive transformation in the terms of debate, prescriptions for “new solutions” inevitably end up reproducing old problems, albeit in new trappings. We read “*necessarily, inevitably, and naturally*” (the italics belong to Marx) in hegemonic terms, not as a statement of absolute determination.



estates are the systematic outcome of the relations of private property run amuck. Big estates make individual land holding visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the rules of land ownership that led to big estates *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more private ownership.

Now we can rewrite Marx to see if it gives us an account of a reasonable, but invidious pairing between educational problems and educational solutions, all produced in ways that confuse “*accidental, premeditated and violent consequences*” with “*necessary, inevitable and natural*” ones. As Marx gives three examples, we give three examples. Marx’s examples – struggles to replace monopolies with competition, guilds with free crafts, and large estates with a more equitable division of land – are quite distinct from each other. Our educational examples – struggles to replace access to knowledge by elites only with a meritocracy, replacing education by privilege with equal access to education, and transforming an enforced conformity to a cultural cannon with self-cultivation – seem less distinct. As much as we are pointing to the continuities from political economy to education, the differences are also instructive. Marx was talking about large social changes across many centuries, whereas we are focusing on much smaller changes within a specific institutional setting across the last century.

“Precisely because *educational theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of *meritocracy* to the doctrine of *elite knowledge*, the doctrine of *level playing field* to the doctrine of *privileged access*, the doctrine of *cultivation of the self (individualism and multi-culturalism)* to the doctrine of *a forced allegiance to a cultural* – for *meritocracy, level playing fields, and self-cultivation* were explained and comprehended only as *accidental, pre-meditated and violent consequences of nobility, of privileged*

access, and of a forced allegiance to a cultural cannon, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.”

1. The enforcement of a meritocracy may well look better than inheritance by a nobility, but neither challenges the principle of unequal access. The systematic outcome of competition among elites run amuck, displays of inherited knowledge make competition visible and attractive, if only because they developed together, as part of the same economic circumstances. It is not noticed that the institutionalized competitions that led to inherited entitlement *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more competition.

2. Equal access to education certainly sounds preferable to access to expertise by privilege, but it leaves hierarchy eventually in place. The systematic outcome of access to a market run amuck, expertise by privileged access makes meritocracy visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the institutionalized freedoms that led to repressive expertise *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more expertise.

3. A focus on self-cultivation (self-realization, self-actualization, self-efficacy) simply wallows in decency in contrast with an enforced celebration of elite culture, but, no matter how hard fought for, individual rights are hollow until paired with control of the conditions for staging selves in relation to each other; in education, a focus on the motivated cognitive self seems an improvement over “*race*” and “*gender*” as explanations for school success and failure. Even if successfully claimed, it can still leave everyone relatively mired in place until the conditions for redefining knowledge, intelligence, and success are more in the service of the poor and disenfranchised than in the service of the already rich and knowledgeable. The systematic outcome of commodified selves run

amuck, enforced conformity to a cultural cannon, makes a private cultivation of the self visible and attractive.¹¹ It is not noticed that the cult of well-groomed self-expression that led to the successful individual as the center of social relations *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more attention to personal desire.

The logic of Marx's argument in Paragraph 3 lends itself to a more extended reading of problem and solution pairs popular in contemporary education. For example, two products of contemporary educational theory are learning disabled children and geniuses. The first is about seventy years old. The second has a longer history (Latin: *genio*), but has referred to a single person consistently of great ability for only about 300 or 400 years.¹² If the terms have developed along with the rise of capitalism, they should fit into Marx's critique of terms from political economy.

And sure enough, Learning Disability (which is, so they say, smart, but not quick to learn reading and writing) could develop as

an alternative to a school system that was rendering so many children officially stupid, a theory of multiple intelligences could hold out hope for school failures, and appeals to self-esteem could be opposed to the hard truth that in a system in which everyone has to do better than everyone else there is only so much self-esteem to go around (McDermott, 1993; Mehan, 1993). Paragraph 3 translates easily into disability discourse:

“Learning Disabilities in Paragraph 3:

Precisely because *learning theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of *learning disability* to the doctrine of *stupidity*, the doctrine of *multiple intelligences* to the doctrine of *one general intelligence*, the doctrine of *self-esteem (individualism and multi-culturalism)* to the doctrine of *institutional discipline* – for *learning disabilities, multiple intelligences, and self-esteem* were explained and comprehended only as accidental, pre-meditated and violent consequences of *theories of stupidity, general intelligence, and institutional discipline*, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.”

Similarly, genius can be read as a possible solution to the problem of how to talk about persons who think in new ways in a system articulated about, gauged by, and limited to celebrating performances by a chosen few on tests with a culturally pre-established content in a predigested format. Through the middle ages, the category of genius overlapped considerably with madness, and creativity was easily confused with special breeding and high birth. A few centuries later, the same people were more likely to be thought of as ingenious, exceptional, and creative individuals. This seems like a great improvement until the search for creativity became routinized into a search, by way of IQ tests and the like, for children who know what has been predefined as knowledge by adults. The limits of the first system of categories (genius as madness) invites solutions

11 On this point, see an excellent discussion by Wexler (1983, 1993).

12 See Murray (1988) for historical biographies of the term “genius” in use and DeNora and Mehan (1993) on the relation between genius and learning disabilities. A rough reconstruction of genius, starting with Huarte (1575), distinguishes:

- a medieval and renaissance genius as the medium of moment for rare gifts from supernatural sources, often tied to madness, mystical states, and drunkenness;
- an eighteenth century genius, still rare, as a kind of person across context and circumstance,
- a turn of the nineteenth century genius, less rare, as a social role, with every generation as its representatives,
- the romantic nineteenth century genius, as role and goal, sought after, trained for, and dependent on others to realize and celebrate.

In the late nineteenth century, the very idea of genius begins to fragment and becomes:

- an inheritance and soon thereafter a genotype,
- a stereotype in invidious racial comparisons,
- an identifier of what most people are not, and therefore a source of unproductive alienation.

(genius as conformity) that get reworked to fit new relations of production, consumption, exchange, distribution, and representation. If intelligence cannot be measured by how much a person knows the answers to standardized questions, but is better tested by what a person does when no one knows what to do, then high degrees of intelligence, of genius, should be virtually unrecognizable and certainly untestable by non-geniuses working at testing services. The world of tests offers no new terrain for brilliance, and if it did, who would be able to grade it?

“Genius in Paragraph 3:

Precisely because *learning theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose historically, for instance, the doctrine of *genius* to the doctrine of *madness*, the doctrine of *exceptional individuals* to the doctrine of *privileged access*, the doctrine of *creativity* to the doctrine of *high birth and good breeding* – for *genius*, *exceptional individuals*, and *creativity* were explained and comprehended only as accidental, premeditated and violent consequences of *madness*, *privileged access*, and *high birth*, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.”

Paragraph 4 nicely sums up the situation from the point of view of political economy and educational theory:¹³

(4) Now, therefore, we have to grasp the essential connection between private property, greed, and the separation of labor, capital and landed property; between exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of men, monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the money system.

(4) Now, therefore, we have to grasp the essential connection between *standardized knowledge*, *ambition*, and the separation of *learning*, *achievement*, and *access*; between *teaching* and competition, between *diagnostic assessment* and the devaluation of *children*, between *knowledge and showing-off*, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the *educational banking system*

¹³ The theoretical “essential connections” of paragraph 4 should not be construed as fixed in functionalist terms, for those very essential connections in practice – like those we are discussing in relation to schooling – slip, twist, get mangled and transformed, often sustained by efforts to address what they are supposed to be, but are no longer.

Part III: Alienated Learning

Alienation, Marx tells us in four steps, is created, first, in labor's products (paragraphs 7-8) and, second, in the process of laboring (paragraphs 20-23). Third, it follows from the first two that alienation characterizes human relations with nature and with the self (paragraphs 25-36). Finally and together, these relations result in the alienation of everyone from everyone else (paragraphs 36-42). These four aspects form the armature of the concept of alienation in "Estranged Labor."¹⁴

Just as estranged labor is not about the unusual predicament of a few workers, estranged learning is not limited to a few individuals who might learn in peculiar or agonized ways. Instead, Marx's essay is a disquisition on the organized, structured character and effects of political economic relations, the only game in town, by which everyone goes about making their lives and fortunes through their own labor or other people's labor. Alienation lays an indelible shape on all aspects of their lives, including learning.¹⁵ It will have its effect on:

- (1) what workers produce through daily efforts,
- (2) the processes of doing so,
- (3) their collective relation to nature and to their selves, and
- (4) their relations with each other.

¹⁴ There is an order to the way Marx analyzes estranged labor. He proceeds dialectically from abstract accounts of how labor functions in capitalism and gradually rises to a concrete historical comprehension of real persons suffering estrangement. Marx gives flesh to the concept of alienation as he moves from:

– the abstract political-economic fact of alienation in production (in the first sentence of paragraph 7:

"The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size.")

– to an analysis of the relations that compose the concept of alienation in (roughly) the first half of the essay,

The analysis of alienated labor provides a logic for analysis of the products and practices of learning and equally of how learners can be alienated from themselves and each other.

Aspect I. Paragraph 7 plunges directly into the first of the four conceptual relations, the alienation produced in the *product* of labor:

"The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities."

The last sentence contains not one, but several relations internal to the initial observation that "the worker [learner] becomes all the poorer the more wealth [learning] he produces..."

– then turning to brief observations on the relations of alienation in real life,

– interspersed with a discussion of other relations that must be elaborated to discern alienation in a wide range of social events, for example, learning (on Marx's own descriptions of method, see paragraphs 43-51; also, Marx, 1847: 112-137; 1857: 112-137; see also Hall, 1973; Beamish, 1992).

¹⁵ We do not grapple in this essay with distinctions between the terms "estrangement" and "alienation," but see the work of Torrance (1977).

labor produces commodities
 labor produces labor
 labor produces the laborer as a
 commodity

learning produces commodities
learning produces *learning*
learning produces the *learner* as a
 commodity

Just as the result of alienated labor is embodied in the things produced, so the object of alienated learning becomes material in the things learned – as lessons with exchange value. Just as a product becomes a market thing, so learning becomes a school thing; and just as labor itself becomes a product, so being a pupil or a student is a thing one becomes. Similarly, learning becomes embodied in a credential, and being credentialed is a thing to become. This bundle of objects confronts the alienated learner as “something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (paragraph 8), and “the learner becomes all the poorer the more learning he produces” (paragraph 7). The learner becomes all the poorer the more he becomes subject to the whim of the educational system. Poverty is as much a condition of the mind as of the account book. Three years after “Estranged labor,” Marx reiterates just how poor a thinker can be: “The same men who establish social relations comfortably with their material productivity, produce also the principles, the ideas, the categories, comfortably with their social relations. Thus these ideas, these categories, are not more eternal than the relations which they express. They are historical and transitory products” (1847: 119).

We have left the commodity concept untouched to this point (see Chart II), for it lives almost as obviously in the educational sphere as elsewhere in relations of capital. But what kinds of commodities does alienated learning produce? We have several registers available: The first can be found in any school office where homework, school assignments, test performances, test scores,

grades, report cards, student records, and educational credentials, academic degrees, and assessed potential all get recorded. A second register can be found most easily among parents or school counselors who reify alienated categories of learners from official and other professional perspectives. There is also a budget line attached to each of these categories, and these make us understand learners as commodity producers who produce themselves as objects of the expert labor of the educational system – as, say, the gifted, the slow, the disadvantaged, the learning disabled, the emotionally disturbed, etc. A third register is perhaps the most ubiquitous and develops a most invidious distinction between commodified products of learning and things that are interesting. Just as Marx (paragraph 20) says of the laborer:

“He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home”,

we can say of the learner:

“He feels interested when he is not learning in school, and when he is learning in school he does not feel interested”.

The distinction lies at the pivot where the use value of exploring the as-yet-unknown parts company with its exchange value. We can now rewrite Paragraph 7, keeping in mind that “learning” here refers to the alienated character of learning under capitalism:

“The *learner* becomes all the poorer the more *learning* is produced for others to assess, compete with, diagnose, and remediate, the more the *learner’s* production increases in power and size. The *learner* becomes an ever cheaper com-



modity the more commodities he creates. With the *increasing value* of the world of *commodities* proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation of learning in everyday life*. *Alienated learning* produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the *learner* as a commodity – and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.”

The point: the *product* of laboring to learn is more than the school lessons learned. Over time, laboring to learn produces both what counts as learning and learners who know how to do it, learners who know how to ask questions, give answers, take tests, and get the best grades. Making what counts and making those who seek to be counted, these together compose the product of learning-labor.

This works for Paragraph 8 also:

(8) This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor’s *product* – *confronts it as something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labor appears as loss of *realization* for the workers; objectification as loss of *the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.

(8) This fact expresses merely that the object which *learning* produces – the *learner’s product* – *confronts it as something alien*, as a *power independent* of the *learner*. The product of *learning* is *learning* which has been embodied in a *test score or promised credential*, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of *learning*. *Learning’s* realization is its objectification. In the sphere of *learning theory* this realization of *learning* appears as loss of *realization* for the *learners*; objectification as loss of *the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.

Marx clarifies what he means by objectification (paragraph 11-16).¹⁶ Human praxis is a matter of doing and being in relations with objects – things and people – external to the person. But the reification of labor and learning under capitalism results in estrangement and loss to learners and other workers, as learning is turned into the product of educa-

tional theory, school organization, teaching, testing, and credentialing. Learners are diminished by their own industry. What they are given to learn is not theirs but the school’s product – including objectifications of the learner by more powerful others. Marx reiterates (paragraph 16) the view of traditional political economy that expresses the

¹⁶ Marx treats objectification as inherent in human praxis and also argues that the historical character of objectification under capitalism – alienation – has a political-economic character that creates and expresses profound social dislocation in the name of surplus value. We emphasize contemporary relations of alienation, though we are aware of interpretative debates over the history and bounds of the concept with respect to objectification.

alienation of the worker in a mystified way – it speaks of the worker as becoming barbarous.¹⁷

So the school speaks of students as becoming barbarous. Not farfetched, consider a recent newspaper front page article:

“School Lockers are Making a Comeback. ...after receiving relentless complaints from parents and students, officials in the Pasadena Unified School District have begun unsealing lockers that had been shuttered since the 1970s. ‘There was this perception that each locker was a den of iniquity’ said Bill Bibbiani, director of research and testing for Pasadena Unified. ‘But there are better ways to handle problems than to treat each locker as if [it is] a hole-in-the-wall gang hide-out.’” (*Sunday Los Angeles Times*, Orange County Edition. September 2, 2001)

The solution on offer from the school district is an expensive system of surveillance cameras and lockers that can be locked down from the principal’s office. The parents complain, with data in hand, that it is their children’s backs that are suffering from carrying heavy books around all day – a case of descriptive accuracy and analytic obtuseness. Political economy, official and parental views, and educational practice conceal alienated labor/learning. Marx argues that this concealment is brought about and sustained by a refusal to draw front and center the direct relation between workers and production, between learners and their learning.

17 The text: “The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his object thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more *ingenious labor* becomes, the less ingenious becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature’s bondsman.” (paragraph 16)

“*Educational theory* conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of *alienated learning* by not considering the direct relationship between the *learner* and production (*of learning*).” (paragraph 17)

This conclusion is obvious, but easy to ignore under current arrangements: to understand learning, in all its complexities, keep the investigative eye fixed – if you can imagine this – on learning.¹⁸

Aspect II. The second aspect of alienated learning follows from the first. Active alienation is manifested in processes of production, that is, in the activities of production.

“How could the *learner* come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity... In the estrangement of the object of *learning* is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of *learning* itself.” (paragraph 20)

What constitutes the alienation of learning processes? Alienated learning is “external to the learner,” not freely undertaken. In his work, the learner does not “...affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.” (paragraph 22) It is activity experienced as suffering. Alienated learners are only themselves when they are not learning – think of common distinctions between “real learning” and “real life” (Lave, 1988). Such learning does not satisfy a need: it is coerced, forced, and a means to satisfy needs external to it. If it belongs to learners, it is second hand, on loan from others. It is a loss of self.

18 Dreier (1993, 1997, 1999) points to the “desubjectification” of family therapy and similarly the curriculum in schools as foci that evade attention to learning.

Aspect III. Alienation reduces collective life to the individual and utilitarian: Estranged from nature and the most productive life activities, estranged labor – and no less estranged learning – changes the life of the species into a means, merely the means, of satisfying the need to maintain physical existence, and further it becomes only a means to *individual* life.

“First it [labor under capitalism] estranges the life of the species and individual life, and secondly it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract and estranged form.” (paragraph 27).

Marx’s dense discussion of the alienation of humankind from nature and from themselves (their “own active functions” and their “life activity”) develops as he contrasts the relations of people and animals to nature, in theory and in practice, and as matters of consciousness and activity. Relations of humans to nature are multiple, mutually constitutive, and contradictory. Marx’s vision is dialectical: All of nature is theoretically included in human consciousness. In practice, nature is part of human life and activity. ... Nature is his direct means of life, and the material object and instrument of his life activity. Man lives on nature, man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature and thus nature is linked to itself.

Without exploring all dimensions of Marx’s argument, it is possible to trace his path from collective social and spiritual relations with nature to the isolated individual caught in a web of utilitarian relations. Marx takes the “life of the species” – in a wonderful phrase, “life-engendering life” – to consist of “labor, life activity, productive life.” Alienated labor disrupts collective life and its relations in/with nature. By working upon the objective world (the active species life), people prove themselves part of the species

being. Through labor, through production, nature appears as their work, their reality. The object of labor is the objectification of specifically human collective life. The argument thus arrives at human life as a practice of objectification.

Now consider the specifically, historically, alienated character of objectification under capital. “In tearing the object of his production away from man, estranged labor tears him from his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species” (paragraph 33). Marx explains in this way how alienation from nature and society derives from the alienation of workers from their own products (the first aspect of alienation). Then he shows how estrangement from nature and society derives from the alienation of productive activity (the second aspect of alienation). Aspect three follows from the first two: In degrading spontaneous free activity to a means, estranged labor makes species life a mere means to physical existence. The consciousness which people have of their social being generally and collectively is transformed by estrangement into life as only a means.

Read in terms of “Estranged Labor,” alienation at work reverses the relation between collective and individual life, and collective life becomes the means to pursue individual life rather than the other way around. Read in terms of “Estranged Labor/Learning,” alienation – at school (and no less at work or at home) – reverses the relation between collective and individual life, and schools become the means to pursue careers and not the way to contribute to collective well being.

Aspect IV. Finally, the fourth aspect of relations of alienated labor:

“An immediate consequence of the fact that *learners* are estranged from the product of their learning, from their life activity, from their

species being is the estrangement of person from person. When *learners* confront themselves, they confront *other learners*. What applies to a *learner's* relation to his work, to the product of his *learning* and to himself, also holds of a *learner's* relation to the other *learner*, and to the other *learner's learning* and object of *learning*." (paragraph 38)

Marx directed us to the relations of competition, ambition and monopoly in the opening paragraphs of "Estranged Labor." This final aspect of alienation suggests *how* learners enter into their own alienation, coming to see others, what they know, what they might know, etc., as fearsome comparative dangers that make failure a possible, even necessary, consequence of struggles to acquire school learning (McDermott, 1993, 1997; Varenne and McDermott, 1998). The puzzle of learning as a competition is pursued further in the next section.

Observations: If learning is alienated in the comprehensive ways labor is alienated, Marx's text allows for three immediate conclusions: First, the problem of alienated learning, like alienated labor, is ubiquitous. Second, it is not enough to understand learning problems, like other production problems, as simply an absence of knowledge or even a well situated absence of knowledge, but necessarily as a mystification, a false focus, a problem that hides more than it makes available to reform. And, third, if "remedies" are devised, but only for those mystified problems, such "solutions" are never enough and, often, not even a little bit helpful.

(1) Alienated learning is endemic: Marx's analysis distinguishes between apparently free labor and a darker underlying reality of alienated labor, and greatly expands the scope of analysis required to characterize labor in practice. The same is true if we follow Marx's analysis of the four aspects of the relations that compose alienated labor to arrive at an equally relational conception of alien-

ated learning. This conceptual complexity must surely be counter-intuitive for learning theory (which reduces learning to the mental labor of the learner on brief occasions when knowledge is transmitted, internalized, or tested) and even for the social analysis of education (which often ignores learning altogether). Marx is specifically critical of the distanced and privileged attempts of classical theorists to pretend away the alienated character of social life and, as a result, to capture it only in a mystified way that conceals the real social processes that produce it. This overcoat certainly fits a critique of learning theory.

(2) Alienated learning is so situated in the social system of production that it is hard to find, describe, and confront: Economic categories are troublesome if allowed to refer to abstract entities when instead, says Marx, their very existence, or better, their function in the organization of experience, is fragile, dependent, situated, contextual, emergent (all that is easy enough to say) and (and here's the rub) estranged, alienated, and mystified in the relations among people and their activities in the political economy. We can say the same for categories of learning, which, by current practice, are treated institutionally as objects – a stockpile of objects, really: attention, memory, problem solving, higher order skills, and so on – and not as activities well tuned to the relations among people and their world. So we say, over and against the mainstream, that learning is dependent, situated, contextual, and emergent; all this has not been easy enough to say and must still be said, relentlessly so. But it is only the first half of a critique of learning theory as currently institutionalized. A second half can use Marx to stretch even theories of situated learning into theories that (and here's the rub) confront learning and its market place as estranged, alienated, and mystified, that is to say, confront learning

and even its apparent absence as two versions of a single educational commodity on sale.¹⁹

(3) Quick and partial solutions are distorting: Marx takes to task the impulse to produce an immediate or literal remedy. The poverty of labor, for example, cannot be fixed up by a simple increase in wages.

“An enforced *increase in wages* ... would therefore be nothing but *better payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity.” (paragraph 61; emphases by Marx)

Similarly, in a system in which success is defined by the failure of others, in a system in which everyone has to do better than everyone else, there is no way for everyone to achieve school success (Varenne and McDermott, 1998). In a now classic analysis of a balanced equilibrium for keeping the people on the bottom from ever climbing too high, Berg (1971) gave us a picture of the race between groups from the bottom of the social hierarchy doing well in school, on the one hand, and ever increasing demands for school success as a criterion for access to jobs, on the other; every achievement on the school front, says Berg, has been countered by an equal measure of unattainable requirements for employment.

Similarly, calls for more “authentic” curriculum and learning activities for school learners often leave the world unchanged relative to what children either have to learn in

19 “There is an absence, real as presence,” warns the poet, John Montague (1984). An absence real as presence: yes, made up, but consequential; made up, but requiring a hero to confront it; made up, but in a world defined by what we are not, alienated what it takes away. The poor are too often defined by what they cannot do, by what they do not know, by what they cannot say (McDermott, 1988; Ranciere, 1991). The poor are forced to carry their alienation not only in their wallets, but in their heads and on their tongues. Apparent learning and its absence make each other real and consequential.

school or at least show off as having learned in school in ways that employers can use (Cuban, 1993). Systematically complex and contradictory relations between the school worlds of children and adult work places underscore Marx’s skepticism about cosmetic fixes for the systemic ills of wage labor.

Marx honors his own prescription in “Estranged Labor” to stick squarely focused on relations of labor (learning), in order to understand how their practices produce the sphere of political economy in all its multiple structures, relations and complexities. Just as Marx (paragraph 59) says of political economy, that it:

“...starts from labor as the real soul of production; yet to labour it gives nothing, and to private property everything.”

so we can say of the school theory of learning, that it:

“...starts from learning as the real soul of education; yet to learning it gives nothing, and to professional education everything.”

Rereading “Estranged Labor” insists that we notice that relations of learning are as thick and complex as relations of labor.

Part IV. Alienated Distribution

In the last half of the essay, Marx turns from an analysis of the concept of alienated labor to consider how the “concept must express and present itself in real life” (paragraph 43). At the same time he begins to look at the same relations, until now understood as *internal* to the concept of alienated labor, as they inhere in the relation *between* labor and private property, between self-alienation and the way this un-free activity is produced in the service or dominion of others, between workers and men of means.



When we began rewriting “Estranged Labor,” we left the main theoretical terms of Marx’s analysis alone and found that even this minimalist approach yielded interesting ideas about learning under conditions of formal education. But towards the end of “Estranged Labor,” Marx challenges the reader to develop new categories of political economy built up analytically from a base of alienated labor and private property.

“Just as we have derived the concept of private property from the concept of estranged labor by analysis, so we can develop every category of political economy with the help of these two factors; and we shall find again in each category, e.g., trade, competition, capital, money, only a definite and developed expression of these first elements.” (paragraph 65).

If we start with a critique fashioned from the perspective of alienated labor and its ties to private property, promises Marx, we might be able to pursue “a definite and developed expression” of alienated learning in educational production, distribution, exchange and consumption.

We could explore the relations of learning in any one of the concepts of political economy and education, though “Estranged Labor” itself is not a powerful auger: The essay focuses overwhelmingly on relations of production. Exchange is mentioned four times (only in the introductory paragraphs), consumption once, and distribution not at all. Curiosity suggests the last holds promise. A more serious consideration is that modern state school systems have made distribution of learners’ futures their primary concern, if not analytically or even rhetorically, then experientially and symptomatically.

Care is required. Marx had something more profound in mind than taking on distribution or any other political economic relation out of context, one at a time, or in a simple sequence (as learning theories seem dis-

posed to arrange in line: pre-given knowledge, then transmission, then internalization followed by learning transfer). In the essay, “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy,” he dismisses as “a sequence, but a very superficial one” the political economists’ conceit that:

“Production, distribution, exchange and consumption ... form a proper syllogism; production represents the general, distribution and exchange the particular, and consumption the individual case which sums up the whole.” (1857: 130)²⁰

He shows us how trivial the sequence is by promptly scrambling its order (in a fashion still agreeable to the classical political economists):

“Production is determined by general laws of nature; distribution by random social factors, it may therefore exert a more or less beneficial influence on production; exchange, a formal social movement, lies between these two; and consumption, as the concluding act, which is regarded not only as the final aim but as the ultimate purpose, falls properly outside the sphere of economy...” (1857: 130)

The *force* of the 1857 essay lies in Marx’s argument that production and distribution, production and consumption, the other relations in pairs, and all of them together, are deeply interrelated in multiple ways and mutually constitutive of one another.

Charged with understanding distribution in terms of alienated learning and private property, we are reminded that distribution and production are formative of one another,

²⁰ In 1857, Marx wrote an introduction to a planned six volume work that he would never finish (the three volumes of *Capital* being less than his plans for a first volume). In English, the “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy” appears as an Afterward to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and as an Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1858-59). In both cases, it carries the title of its content: “Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation).”

that the division of productive labor is a distributed part of the production of wages, goods and profits (to be distributed). We can now sharpen our project to reflect this view: How is it, we may ask, that alienated learning, and stocks of knowledge and other property of the education establishment, find definite and developed expression in the laborious production of educational distribution?

It is not a new idea to approach the analysis of schooling in terms of basic political economic concepts. It has been done with sophistication as a matter of exchange and with great rhetoric as a matter of consumption. Exchange first: Two notable ethnographic accounts of learners in high schools, one in England, one in the U.S., locate a central relation between the students and teachers as a relation of exchange. Willis (1977: 64) explores clashing expectations over the exchange of respect by students for knowledge from teachers. Eckert's (1989) analysis of a high school in the Midwest hinges on the exchange of students' compliance to reasonable scholastic demands from teachers in return for the right to configure their social life in the school setting away from the family purview.

Now consumption: It is fashionable of late for educational policy to style students as consumers. Signs are everywhere. A recently appointed Superintendent to an upscale California district gave her place in the system to a local newspaper:

I'm like the CEO of a company, and the company I'm running is education. Her teachers produce education, and the children consume it. Her job is quality control: You can never stay on status quo – it's either moving up or down. I want to continue the cycle and build on success.

At the other end of the cycle of success are parents who can sue the school system if the proper education (positively assessed knowledge and displays of success) are not deliv-

ered in time for the children to move up and out. In education the consumers are organized.

That brings us to distribution, or rather first to an educational establishment view of education as distribution. Recall that in Chart I, when we summed up initial word shifts from political economy to education we replaced "private property" with standardized knowledge, curriculum, assessments, and inherent intelligence. We replaced the products of Marx's "men of means" – their political economy and its theory – with the educational establishment and its learning theory. Derived from a privileged position, we would expect a mystified account of alienated learning and indeed that is what they produced. In the hands of educational theorists, distribution is treated as a simple, abstract, uncontested process. "Naturally" access to education is differently distributed, just as inherent intelligence is assumed to be distributed. Schooling in a meritocracy helps sort and distribute its alumni into previously constituted social categories of class, race, ethnicity, etc. For some, this is the purpose of education, to distribute the right persons to the right places. For others, it is the beginning of a critique. Either way, distribution dominates most every consideration in educational institutions. Consider "special" education, aimed at nurturing people at both ends – disabled and gifted – of every continuum of assessed performances. Or consider Latour's critical analysis that links common assumptions about the dissemination of science with the necessity, inside such a diffusion (distribution) theory, for a first generator, a genius discoverer or inventor (1987, 1988; Fujimura, 1996). Schools for children and research laboratories are alike in their attention to the production of distributions of "knowledge." The *differences* in their practices contribute to the importance of distribution in

educational theory and practice. To cite crucial phrases in “Estranged Labor”: each “takes for granted what it is supposed to explain” (paragraph 2) and treats the distribution of educational excellence – no, make that the distribution of the *attribution* of educational excellence – as the “*necessary, inevitable and natural consequences*” of birth-right and hierarchies of access and not the necessary, inevitable and natural consequences of their own activities in relation to production, distribution, exchange and consumption.

Further, as this theory goes, “real learning” is distributed on the other side of a divide that segregates schools from “real life” (a mystified claim that hides alienated everyday school practices while attesting to them). Perhaps the most mystifying and in the end the most alienated and alienating assumption is specifically a matter of distribution. This is a widely and deeply felt distinction that separates the production of official knowledges (e.g., science, literature, national curricular frameworks), always elsewhere, from their distribution throughout school practices. “The production of knowledge stocks” is carefully distinguished from what boils down to their apparently non-generative, unchanging distribution as they are “transmitted” through schooling, “learned,” and “transferred” beyond. These renderings of learning and distribution do not heed the admonition to fix the investigative eye on learning, and they do not lend themselves to a *relational explanation* of processes of alienation, understood as learners’ alienated learning labor and its mutually constitutive ties to distributive practices.

For a reticular, relational view of distributive practices, we can try, instead, to develop a conception of learning and schooling as a matter of the production (or labor) of distribution under conditions of alienated learning. Relations of distribution take on differ-

ent – greater – significance in this context. Where we begin with a conception of learning as alienated, its distribution loses the abstract appearance of smooth circulation, or simple transportation. It no longer stands as a neutral process of allocation, transmission or diffusion, as if according to a necessary and natural plan. We begin to think more of distributive practices that alienate, estrange and appropriate learning, the products of learning, processes of learning, and learners themselves.²¹ This makes it possible for us to think more systematically about how alienated learning participates in the self-valorization of capital.

In short, the distribution of alienated learning is at heart a matter of *political economy*. The organization of distribution partly defines working lines of power and contestation and how they lie in relation to alienated learning, including: estrangement, appropriation, struggles to keep, struggles to take away (variously: children, credentials, knowledge – and learning), attempts to “impart,” and official processes of assessment. Once viewed as alienated, distribution is a matter of political struggle over societal “stocks of knowledge,” credentials, gene pools, genius stocks, brains, and minds, all laid down in unequal relations between what Marx calls those of means and those without. Further, the social relations that allow the translation of “private property” into educational establishment terms as “societal stocks of knowledge” depend on, as well as shape, the alienated character of distribution processes. *The institutionalization of predefined and fixed stocks of knowledge available for transfer and assessment both depends on and produces the estrangement of learning from learners in institutional set-*

21 Such an analysis could be read alongside Foucault (1975) and Rose’s (1989) theories of normalizing disciplinary practices and schooling as a distributive endeavor.

tings. If schools did not insist that learners engage in day to day competition to acquire what is called the core curriculum, the basics, cultural literacy, etc., it would not be possible to sustain the illusion of inherent intelligence, credentials to be earned and a societal stock of knowledge to be transmitted. Its distributional potential is the defining feature of every item placed in the curriculum and especially on tests. School lessons are the sites for exercising stock options in a system of assessed “learning.” If it is not assessed, it does not count in the distribution wars. The alienated learning of children in school and the propertied illusion of official knowledge make each other. *Learning-for-display in a world of positions distributed up and down a hierarchy of access and privilege is the more salient issue for participants to keep in focus.* That is why learning “in its relation to truly human and social property” (paragraph 69), just like labor, is hard to keep in view, and hard to keep at the core of education as its “real soul.”

Institutionalized education cannot afford to keep learning in view, for it has always the more pressing task of reproducing what alienated men of means must guard as, and believe in as, the societal stock of knowledge and expertise. Alienated labor and learning produce and protect the alienated concept of private property and society’s knowledge. Together, they produce the material and intellectual wealth of the established order. This is why children must go to school not to learn, but to not get caught not knowing required parts of standardized knowledge. Estranged learning is estranged because it is always done for others who use it for their own purposes. We know now what those purposes are. They use it to keep themselves (and their children) in place in a hierarchy of others, a hierarchy held together in part by a theory of learning that denies the relevance of the distribution system while making each

participant’s placement its most important product. Such circumstances of learning are caught up in what we have come to think of as a teaching crisis in which teachers and other “haves” are impelled to extract, distract, appropriate and take on themselves the learning of learners who thereby are deprived of that relation themselves.²²

The exercise Marx proposed at the end of “Estranged Labor” has brought us from a critique of production by way of alienated labor to a confrontation with distribution by way of alienated learning. We like to think that Marx might have said the same thing about teaching and learning, and we get some confirmation from the short quote we offered from *Capital*. A longer version of that quote and our rewrite move us closer to what Marx might have said:

“Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus-value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That

²² Margaret Mead long ago reminded us that not all societies live with a teaching crisis:

Miscarriages in the smooth working of the transmission of available skills and knowledge did occur, but they were not sufficient to focus the attention of the group upon the desirability of teaching over against the desirability of learning. Even with considerable division of labor and with a custom by which young men learned a special skill not from a father or other specified relative but merely from a master of the art, the master did not go seeking pupils. (1943)

Similarly, a quick look at people in contemporary states learning languages, technologies, games, and job skills shows that most learning problems are created by schools in the service of the political economy.

the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation. The concept of a productive worker therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the worker as capital's direct means of valorization. To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune..." (1867: 644).

Here is our translation into the sphere of alienated learning and distribution:

"Learning under capitalist production is not merely about the production of knowledge; it is, by its very essence, about the production and distribution of assessed knowledge. The learner produces not for himself, but for his or her place in the system. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to learn. He must produce knowledge appropriate to his situation. The only learner who is productive is one who produces test scores for the school, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization and redistribution of the educational hierarchy. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, students and teachers are productive when, in addition to belaboring their own heads, they work themselves into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation. The concept of a productive learner therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of learning and its useful effect, between the learner and what is learned (and can be shown to have been learned), but also a specifically social relation of education, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the learner as the school's direct means of valorization. To be a productive learner is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune..."

Observation: One reason for publishing this exercise develops from our effort to understand how to conduct research and to teach in ways that squarely reflect our understand-

ing of "learning." This practice of "reading" has given one answer: It does not treat scholarly work as a stock of knowledge property, nor reading as a means of acquiring it or transmitting it, but rather as a way to work generatively with it. This is surely a form of appropriation, but one that cannot lose sight of the producer of the work so appropriated and the continuing relation between them. The duty to text, and the respect referred to earlier, are neither first and foremost competitive relations nor ones that should intensify alienation from scholarly colleagues. Thus the pleasure of such engagements.²³

This leads, however, to another point. If we allow ourselves this pleasure but call it scholarship and not learning, we reveal the alienated position we occupy in a world in which we insist there is no relation between our labors and the labors of learners in schools (between something called "knowledge production" or "high culture" and something called "schooling" or "training," or "the reproduction of knowledge"). This insistence is in one sense correct – it affirms (and in doing so participates in) divisions under contemporary capitalism between an elite cultural establishment and the institution of schooling. It affirms divisions between elite practices of research, expertise, and management and the activities of "lay people," or those so managed, including learners in school. But it is incorrect as an analysis of learning as a "life-engendering

²³ Calling attention to the constitutive importance of reading as part of scholarly practice and as a major mode by which academics, among others, relate to the work of colleagues past and present, contrasts with the alienated, commodity-oriented character of critical diagnoses over the last fifteen years of the ailments of ethnographic writing. Reducing traditional anthropology to the illusion of writing authoritative ethnographies reduces it to its commodified moment and remains silent about the complexities of practices that reveal the interdependent relations of fieldwork, writing, reading, and rereading that are the generative basis of any new learning.



life” practice (paragraph 30), of learning “in its relation to truly human and social property” (paragraph 69), which would surely include scholarly practices in the same theoretical sweep as learning everywhere else. We may now ask, what does the analysis of alienated learning tell us about scholarly processes of reading, and vice versa?

Conclusion

If Marx is correct that the very contents of our minds are working against us, where can we get new materials to reshape them and, because it is never enough simply to change minds, to put them back into the fray, into the reorganization of the society of problems to which we adhere? A conceptual undertow relentlessly threatens to pull us back to the mainstream where children are primarily minds ready to be filled according to capacity, where teachers are transmitters of what everyone knows must be known, and where schools are a neutral medium for sorting out the best and the brightest according to fair tests, the same for one and all. Reinforced by our ethnographic work, we have long known that children are innocent players in a world of competing forces, that teachers are good people trying to work around those same forces, and that schools – a significant portion of the gross domestic product of modern nation states – are only a possible tool in the reform of those forces. To stay alive to these alternative formulations, and to give them analytic rigor and political punch, we must constantly develop new materials and procedures.

Working our way through “Estranged Labor” has given us an account of estranged learning. We have developed a new momentary place to stand and a new set of tools with which to confront mainstream assumptions. It has allowed us a conceptual advance, namely, to see, once again but in a

new way, not just learning, but the nation’s very ideas about learning as part of a wider system of cultural, political and economic forces that organize and define education and its problems. Good for us, and hopefully we can find ways to make the insights cumulative. But the method also has us excited. Work with good texts, like work with records of human interaction, like ethnographic fieldwork, if done carefully, if done slowly and visibly, can be an endless source for confronting and restaging the contexts of learning.

Most texts cannot withstand the kind of scrutiny we have paid to “Estranged Labor,” and few texts have enough internal energy and complexity to deliver messages to concerns far from their defined topics. Those that can make the reach are worth working with over and over. Every time we thought we had finished our analysis of “Estranged Labor,” a new use and a new lesson seemed to emerge.

We can close with a final example. We wanted to write a conclusion in which we said why we had continued to work with Marx’s text. As happened often over the months of putting this rewriting together, after an hour of discussion, we returned to the text, to read again how Marx ended his essay. He did it twice, once in the penultimate three paragraphs, and again in a last line, and we can use them both. The penultimate three paragraphs, with a little rewriting, can give us our conclusions.

“First it has to be noted that everything which appears in the worker as *an activity of alienation, of estrangement*, appears in the non-worker as a *state of alienation, of estrangement*.” (paragraph 71)

Our first instinct was to rewrite the paragraph, substituting learner for worker and teacher for non-worker. Good enough, and it makes the case of the paper once again. But

there is a stronger ending in it, for we are often non-workers, busy non-workers, of course, but intellectuals and liable to fall into “*a state of alienation, of estrangement.*” We cannot trust ourselves to think our way to the ideas we need to change our lives. We need help. One kind of help is to work on rich texts that force us systematically to relocate our work with the work of others, the work of teachers with the work of learners, the work of people alienated in one way with the work of people alienated in other ways. The next paragraph is no less helpful to our conclusion.

“Secondly, the worker’s real, practical attitude in production and to its product (as a state of mind) appears in the non-worker confronting him as a theoretical attitude.” (paragraph 73)

This time, substitute learner for worker and researcher for non-worker, and we can make the point of the paper again. The learner going to school faces not only difficult learning tasks, but a theoretical attitude – a theory of learning – that can turn the learner into a problem. The next substitution makes the point of our conclusion. We are the researchers, and it is difficult to escape the theoretical attitude that pays our salary as well as turning others into learning problems. We need help. In this case it came from hard work with “Estranged Labor.” In our earlier research, it came from hard work with films of children in school or tailors learning their trade in Liberia. There is order everywhere – in texts, in human interaction, in various cultures – and while these orders are always symptomatic of various problems, they can always be used as well to reorder our theoretical attitudes and the relations that support them.

The third paragraph of Marx’s first conclusion pushes us further in our attempt to say why we have worked so long on “Estranged Labor/Learning.”

“Thirdly, the non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself; but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker.” (paragraph 74)

It is time for us to do to ourselves part of what is done to learners all the time. It is time to submit ourselves to a theoretical attitude that can knock us off our moorings and show us where we stand in relation to others. It is time to locate ourselves in the alienated learning we have been hawking around the world. Rewriting “Estranged Labor” has subjected our own work, and our learning, to the larger critique Marx developed in 1844. It is not all that we have to do, but it has been reorienting. For a final comment, we cannot do better than to repeat Marx’s last paragraph:

“Let us look more closely at these three relations.” (paragraph 75)

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