

# THE CONCEPT OF ALIENATION IN THE EARLY WORKS OF KARL MARX

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## Abstract

The main analysis of alienated labor was developed by Karl Marx in his early work *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844. Marx differentiates between four dimensions of alienated labor in capitalist modes of production: The alienation of individuals (workers) from the product, from economic activity, from their species-being, and the alienation of individuals from one another. Together with the description of four forms of alienation, Marx provides approaches for an anthropological definition of humans, who can be summarized in the conception of humans as 'representational species-beings'. According to Marx, the individual is a creature who acts in relationship to his own species and to human society. Under the conditions of private ownership and exchange, the individual alienates himself from his species-being and his fellows, whom he views solely as a means of achieving personal objectives.

Following the analysis of alienated labor, Karl Marx provides in his early works initial indications of his ideas on a superseded alienation. In the case of human modes of production, where private ownership is positively superseded, Marx lists four different forms of affirmation, which are conceived of in the sense of recognition relationships and also relate to the anthropological definition of humans as 'representational species-beings'.

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**Keywords:** Karl Marx, Alienation, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Political Economy

## Introduction:

The concept of 'alienation' has had a long tradition in the history of Western theology and philosophy (Oppolzer 1997). In his early work, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, Karl Marx analyzes alienation from an historical, anthropological, and socio-economic perspective. In his alienation analysis based on alienated labor in the capitalist economic system, Marx demonstrates how the alienation of

individuals, in particular the worker, is tied to historically-specific economic systems and ownership structures, how these relationships are reproduced by alienated labor, and how they co-exist in a reciprocal relationship.

The objective of this paper is the analysis and explication of the notion of 'alienated labor' in the early works of Karl Marx, as well as the description of possible ways of superseding alienated labor. Primarily, this paper focuses on the following works:

- a) Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, written while Karl Marx was in exile in Paris in 1844.
- b) Notes on James Mill's "Elements of Political Economy", also written in 1844, which was used to analyze the concept of non-alienated labor (production) suggested by Marx.

Part 2 of this paper analyzes the historical development of alienation and demonstrates how the concept is applied in philosophy, in particular in the philosophy of consciousness according to Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and the religious critic, Ludwig Feuerbach. Karl Marx takes the concept of alienation in his early work, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, from the theological-philosophical tradition and reshapes it productively (Thompson 1979, 24). Part 3 sketches the developed reasoning of Karl Marx in the Manuscripts and portrays their genesis and transformation from the philosophy of German idealism (especially Hegel) and the religious criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach ("The Essence of Christianity"). In this way, the various dimensions of alienated labor carved out by Marx are investigated, the status and role of analysis of alienated labor within the Manuscripts is described, and the essential nature of humans as 'representational species-beings' is explored in greater detail. This concept is developed by Marx as an anthropological determination of humans and is essential to the understanding of alienated labor and ways of superseding it. In part 4, an attempt is made to develop possibilities for superseding alienated labor as conceptualized by Marx in both the above-mentioned works, based on the analysis of alienated labor and the description of the communist society.

## **The Philosophical Principles of the Concept of Alienation**

### **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The self-alienated spirit**

Under the heading "The self-alienated spirit; the formation" in The Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geistes), Hegel describes the dialectic action of the human process of formation:

*"But the self-conscious being of this world and the reality of self-consciousness are based on the action of the said being divesting itself of its personality, hereby creating its world and behaving towards it as if it were a*

*stranger in such a way that it now has to take possession of it." (Hegel 1998: 363)*

Formation ('Bildung') is understood by Hegel as an action of self-emptying and appropriation, and thereby as a necessary process. The spirit forms an alienated, duplicated world, separated from itself, which it possesses through (conceptual) labor. This action, which is characterized by the contradiction between the pure and effective consciousness, can go awry and persist in an alienated form. In contrast to Marx, Hegel differentiates between the externalization and the alienation of self-consciousness (Boey 2006: 195). Indeed, Hegel uses a universal notion of labor and views labor as essential for humans, something that Marx adopts and remodels in his Manuscripts. According to Marx, however, Hegel recognizes only "abstract, intellectual" (Marx 1968a: 574) labor (Mészáros 1973). Within the analytical framework of alienated labor, this paper will further expatiate on the notion of labor as conceptualized by Karl Marx and build on the writings of Hegel.

### **Alienation in the context of the religious criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach**

The subject matter of Ludwig Feuerbach's religious-critical work *The Essence of Christianity (Das Wesen des Christentums)* is both the essence of religion, in particular Christianity, as well as the essence of humanity (Feuerbach 2013). Ludwig Feuerbach traces religion back to the essential differences between humans and animals. According to Feuerbach, animals are neither religious nor consciously aware in the strict sense, whereas humans practice their species functions by thinking and speaking, and behave not only in a self-centered way but are constantly in a relationship with their own species. In religion, the human objectifies his own supra-individual (i.e. species-specific) essence and thus creates a god for himself. God argues Feuerbach, is the projection of essential human attributes by humans (Schmieder 2004), so theology becomes anthropology and religious criticism becomes humanism and enlightenment:

"The essence of God is nothing more than human nature or better: the essence of humanity, purified, free from the restraints of the individual human-being." (Feuerbach 2013)

Through the objectification of human nature in God, a separation of the individual takes place. In this context, the intellect as a real species-asset is both the origin and also the essence of human projection and thus the essence of religion, while everything individual and special about humanity remains in humanity. Since the "subject in the reality of the species [finds] no satisfaction" (Schmieder 2004), it separates and projects itself onto its God. According to Feuerbach, however, the reverse tendency is also true: Through religion, the "inner conflict of the species" is initially achieved and the essence of humanity is divorced from humanity (Schmieder 2004). Karl

Marx picks up on Feuerbach's thesis of projection in the context of the socio-economic analysis of 'alienated labor' in the Manuscripts and develops the concept of humans as 'representational species-beings'.

## **The Concept of Alienation in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts**

### **The position of the analysis of alienated labor in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts**

In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts written in 1844, Karl Marx links criticism of the national economy, in particular the economic approaches advocated by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Jean-Baptiste Say, with the criticism and restructuring of key approaches in the philosophy of German idealism, especially the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach. Marx bases his analysis on the historical-specific situation of capitalist modes of production and demonstrates the principles and contradictions in national economic theories. In the first Manuscript, in which his analysis of alienated labor also occurs, Marx begins with an analysis of the laws of development of wage labor, capital, and basic pensions. Based on the division of labor prescribed in the national economy (as, for example, in the case of Adam Smith or David Ricardo), existing private ownership, and the division of labor, capital, and land, Karl Marx analyzes the development of remuneration, capital, and basic pensions. On account of the capitalist orientation towards profit rate and the accumulation of capital, only the two forms of capital, wage labor and capital remain in the long term. As a result, society disintegrates into two classes - owners and workers - who remain uncompromisingly opposed to one another. While the workers create ever more wealth through ongoing production, they also create their own suffering, becoming themselves a commodity to be traded on the labor market. Capital, however, increases with ongoing production and accumulation, inclining towards monopoly structures. It is at this point that Marx's analysis of alienated labor becomes relevant:

"The national economy is based on the reality of private ownership. But it does not explain it." (Marx 1968a: 510). In the paragraph 'Alienated Labor', Marx analyzes the correlation between private ownership and alienated labor, coming to the conclusion that private ownership is "the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labor" (Marx 1968a: 520). In the following two sections, four different dimensions of the Marxist concept of alienation are described and their relationship to that image of humanity which Marx develops in the Manuscripts and presupposes for his analysis is established.

## **Four forms of alienated labor and their relationship to capitalist modes of production**

Marx differentiates between four different dimensions of alienated labor: The alienation of worker from the product of his labor, alienation from the activity itself, alienation from humanity as a species-being, and alienation from other individuals. In the upcoming sections, the four different dimensions of alienated labor are portrayed in brief. There then follows an in-depth analysis of the third alienation form and the anthropology connected to it, since this plays a vital role in the further investigation.

### **Alienation from the product**

"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" (Marx 1968a: 512). Through the alienation of workers by the products of their labor, the laborer generates an alien, objectified world for himself and becomes internally impoverished. In order to survive, the worker must produce goods through the utilization of the property of others and thus (re)produces a goods-shaped objectification of the world and his own (goods-shaped) objectivity. Instead of an appropriation of the product, alienation on the part of the worker follows as the product is objectified. In this context, Marx picks up on the projection theory of Ludwig Feuerbach and translates this within a socio-economic context. As with religion, where humanity no longer holds on to what they place onto God, so it is in the case of the worker who, as production increases, retains less and less for himself and creates his own external, alienated world (Held 2009: 137-148).

### **Alienation from economic activity**

The second dimension of alienation describes the alienation of the laborer from the act of production or economic activity. Here, it is necessary to differentiate between two distinct forms of alienation from economic activity. The first form describes the external character of labor, which is not part of human nature and does not generate spiritual and physical energy. This type of labor is intrinsically alien to the worker and is not practiced or affirmed during leisure periods. To the worker, it is "forced labor" (Marx 1968a: 514), an agent without an end in itself: "It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it." (Marx 1968a: 514) The second form of alienation from economic activity deals with the separation from private ownership and wage labor. Since labor belongs to the owner rather than the laborer, the economic activity of the laborer is abstract, determined by others, and not liberating. Here too, Marx compares the alienation of labor to the alienation in religion where human

independence is confronted by an external, divine or diabolical activity (Marx 1968a: 514).

### **Alienation from species-being**

For Karl Marx, the human is a species-being. In contrast to animals, humans act not only in their own interests, but also towards their own species. To Marx, the human is a social and working being, created as a representational species-being. Labor and productive life - freely practiced - is for Marx not merely a means of self-sufficiency but essential genus lifestyle (Thompson 1979: 24). As labor evolves into simply a means of self-preservation and supply of food, the laborer becomes alienated from his species and the genus lifestyle becomes merely "an agent of individual life" (Marx 1968a: 514).

### **Alienation of the individual from other individuals**

The fourth dimension of alienation is a direct consequence of the other three dimensions of alienation, in particular the third form of alienation: "In fact, the proposition that man's species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature" (Marx 1968a: 514). Labor, human potential, and the genus lifestyle become the means of self-preservation. Just as human interrelationship becomes a means rather than an end in itself, so are individuals alienated from one another. As a result of alienated labor, the relationship of humans towards products, production, and other humans is self-reproducing (Marx 1968a: 514).

In the following section, there is an analysis of the Marxist conception of humans as representational species-beings as well as their social implications.

### **Conceptions of representational special-beings in the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts**

The paragraph in the Manuscript covering alienated labor provides an analysis of various dimensions of alienation. In addition, Karl Marx also offers an anthropological definition of humans, which is crucial for both for the understanding of his concept of alienation and for outlining possible ways of overcoming alienation (Quante 2013: 69). According to Marx, human beings are a species who react to one another and objectify these both practically and theoretically. The anthropological concept of humans as 'representational species-beings' contains two essential aspects:

- a) The human being as a productive creature who objectifies himself and his species in an exchange with nature.

- b) The human as a social being whose self-conscious being is always social, even when he is alone (Marx 1968a: 538).

In the following section, these aspects are elaborated on in greater detail:

According to Marx, the individual is a physical being in a constant exchange with nature. Like animals, man depends on nature for his existence and in both cases nature is a means of self preservation. However, in contrast to animals, the human relationship to nature is universal. Nature is not solely a means of self preservation, it is the "inorganic essence of man" (Marx 1968a: 516) with which the individual is in a state of continuous exchange. Productive human labor in the sense of shaping and exchange in nature is, argues Marx, not a way of immediately satisfying need, as in the case of animals. Adaptation of the world and its shaping are, for humans, essential in the terms of their species-being (Marx 1968a: 516-517). Labor thus becomes not a means of satisfying need, but is thought of as an essential defining factor in humans. The notion of labor goes much further than an expression applied to the national economy, where work exists only in the form of waged labor and has no purpose of its own. In this paragraph, Marx develops a comprehensive notion of labor, defining humans as creative (Fromm 1969: 49), sensual, and artistic beings who freely and willingly reproduce nature and themselves (Thompson 1979: 27). To Marx, labor is the active relationship of humans to nature, comprising the organization of the world and of human beings (Fromm 1969: 49).

Since labor, under capitalist modes of production and the laws of exchange and private ownership, becomes a mere means of self-preservation, Marx argues that humans become alienated from their own species and reduced to an animal-like existence.

The individual is not only a productive, self and nature-objectifying being, he is also always a social being and therefore reliant on social institutions for his "realization" (Quante 2013: 79). Work and pleasure, says Marx, are always simultaneously social, and not individual. Every form of human expression, he says, is a form of social expression, so in essential aspects the individual is socially designed.

The material of activity such as language and cultural creations are given to humans as social products while the individual self-conscious being is 'social activity' in the sense of its reference to and exchanges with society (Thompson 1979: 27). To Marx, society is not an abstraction, detached from individuals and the lives of individuals. In terms of the species-being, the individual and society are considered by Marx to be a single entity, separated from one another only by alienated forms of labor under history-specific conditions and forms of ownership (Marx 1968a: 538).

## **The Supersession of Alienated Labor Superseding private ownership and alienated labor in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts**

In his first Economic and Philosophical Manuscript, Marx describes four forms of alienated labor and their relationship to the institution of private property. Division of labor, private ownership, and alienation exist in a reciprocal relationship. Labor in a collaboratively organized world, according to the laws of exchange and private ownership, reproduces both alienation of the worker from the product, economic activity, species, and individual, as well as from private property itself. In his third Manuscript, Marx attempts to devise possible ways of superseding private ownership and alienated labor. According to an analysis of possible irregularities in superseded private ownership, where private ownership was formally superseded and distributed (raw communism, state communism) and despite everything individual (i.e. species-specific) being negated, no actual appropriation takes place, Marx describes the positive supersession of private property and alienated labor in a communist society. Under the "prerequisite of positively superseded private property" (Marx 196 a: 537), the individual produces "for himself and for other individuals" (Marx 1968a: 537). The activity is now no longer a means of achieving a purpose, but carries a purpose within itself; it is no longer an individual activity alone, but always a social one as well. For this reason, the items - the products of labor - are also simultaneously individual and social products. The contradiction between the individual and society, like that between nature and society, is invalidated by private ownership; society in its non-alienated form is the "perfected unity in essence of man with nature". In line with the definition of humans as representational species-beings, the positive supersession of private ownership and alienated labor relates to the two aspects of human activity and society which are reconciled to one another. Through non-alienated labor, the individual acquires nature and his 'general being', educates and fulfills himself in work and in the objects of his labor, and at the same time confirms the genus life of humanity (Marx 1968a: 538-541).

### **"Suppose that we had carried out production as human beings": Karl Marx's theory of human production**

The remarks in this section relate to those made by Karl Marx in 1844, shortly before the publication of his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, in his published text Notes on James Mill's "Elements of Political Economy" (Marx 1968b: 443), frequently referred to as the Mill Notes. In this text, Marx, in contrast to the Manuscripts, conducts a more concrete description of superseded alienation and non-alienated modes of production in the form of an assumed 'human' production. In the Mill Notes,

he differentiates between four different forms of 'affirmation' when presupposing human production ("Suppose that we had carried out production as human beings") (Marx 1968b: 462), which as in the Manuscripts can be sub-divided in keeping with the concept of humans as 'representational species-beings' into the components of human labor essential for the human species (labor, objectification) and of the social reference of humans (in the sense of acknowledging himself and others as social beings) (Schmidt am Busch 2011: 77-78).

In the following sections, the four different forms of affirmation are described and explained in more detail.

### **The affirmation of one's own individuality**

The first form of affirmation relates to both economic activity as well as the product of economic activity. In both respects, the active human affirms his individuality through their objectification: "In my production I would have first objectified my individuality, its specific character" (Marx 1968b: 462). The individual as a 'natural human being' objectifies himself under human production conditions, by objectifying his powers, abilities, and characteristics. Since there are specific human powers, abilities, and characteristics, which are utilized, developed, and formed, in both economic activity and in the product the individuality of the producer is objectified. As described above, Marx perceives humans as creatures of nature, existing in exchanges with nature and appropriating these productively. The free appropriation and transformation of nature is essential for humanity. Under these prerequisites, the described objectification of individuality can be understood as its affirmation: In a human mode of production, free from self-interest, objectification is no longer a means of self preservation and thus a negation as would be the case with private ownership, but the means to an end for the active human being.

### **The affirmation of the human needs of others**

The second form of affirmation relates to the affirmation of the other or others, specifically to the affirmation their human needs. Under human production conditions, individuals no longer produce (objectify) so as to satisfy their own needs by selling their labor or the products of their labor on the market. Through the production of goods, which satisfy the assumed or articulated needs of an individual or group of individuals, the needs of those other than the producer are affirmed. The incentive for the production of goods is no longer self-interest and the 'having', but directly satisfying the human needs of others. Marx writes about this second form of affirmation in his Mill Notes:

"In your enjoyment or use of my product, I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature." (Marx 1968b: 462)

The needs of others, which are subject of production under human conditions, are developed by Marx as moments of individuality and of human nature. The need for things, says Marx, is an aspect of the human condition. The manufacture of goods to satisfy need is thus for the producer of the goods an objectification and affirmation of human nature (Schmidt am Busch 2011: 95-102).

### **The affirmation of others as species-beings**

Concerning the third form of affirmation, Marx writes: "In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the direct enjoyment [...] I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species, and therefore would become recognized and felt by you yourself as a completion of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love." (Marx 1968b: 462)

With the presupposition of human production, a confirmation of human species-being takes place in both production and consumption. In this case, both the individual species and the species-being of others are affirmed. According to Marx, as described above, it is essential for humans to be species-beings and to conform to their genus. Through the manufacture of products to satisfy the essential human needs of others, the economically active individual affirms the species-being of other humans and also acts as an agent for his own species-being by satisfying the human needs of others. Karl Marx assumes that the needs of humans under human production conditions are always carnal (i.e. essential) needs and that these adjust according to production conditions and private ownership structures (Schmidt am Busch 2011: 104-111).

### **The affirmation of the active individual as a communal being**

The fourth form of affirmation refers to the confirmation and realization of one's own communal nature. In human economic activity and the objects produced by it, the active human experiences pleasure "[...] in [his] individual activity [he] would have directly confirmed and realized [his] true nature, [his] human nature, [his] communal nature." (Marx 1968b: 462)

With a human mode of production, in the economic activity and the objects produced, the individual affirms not only his own individuality (the first form of affirmation) but also his human nature in the sense of a social

creature (communal being). To Marx, both beings - producer and consumer - are linked to one another under human production conditions, i.e. they are social beings with a mutual interest in the welfare of the other. In this way, since human modes of production no longer exist for individual satisfaction alone but for the direct satisfaction of the needs of others in terms of the individual and the species-being, an affirmation of the one's own communal nature takes place in production and in the products of that activity (Schmidt am Busch 2011: 112-114).

### **Conclusion:**

The objective of this paper has been an analysis and explication of the notion of 'alienated labor' in the early works of Karl Marx, as well as the description of possible ways of superseding alienated labor.

In part 2, the historical development of the notion of alienation was portrayed in sketch form, in particular how the concept was used in the paragraph The Self-Alienated Spirit; The Formation in The Phenomenology of Spirit by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and in the religious criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach. The analysis is confined to a few briefly portrayed approaches, which Karl Marx deals with and remodels in his alienation analysis.

The analysis of alienated labor developed by Marx in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts was presented in part 3. Marx differentiates between four dimensions of alienated labor in capitalist modes of production: The alienation of individuals (workers) from the product, from economic activity, from their species-being, and the alienation of individuals from one another. Together with the description of four forms of alienation, Marx provides approaches for an anthropological definition of humans, who can be summarized in the conception of humans as 'representational species-beings'. The individual is described by Marx as an active natural being whose species freely proves its worth in the wild, is creative, and objectifies itself through productive labor and in the products of that labor. Under the conditions of private ownership and exchange, economic activity, manufactured goods, other individuals, and the species-being are only channels for satisfying one's own needs indirectly, i.e. in an anonymous market. The second aspect of the representational species-being relates to the social nature of humans. According to Marx, the individual is a creature who acts in relationship to his own species and to human society. Under the conditions of private ownership and exchange, the individual alienates himself from his species-being and his fellows, whom he views solely as a means of achieving personal objectives.

Following the analysis of alienated labor, in his third Manuscript Karl Marx provides an initial indication of his ideas on a superseded alienation.

The first part of part 4 provided a description of approaches for the supersession of alienation according to the Manuscripts. A more detailed description of human modes of production is offered by Marx in his Notes on James Mill's "Elements of Political Economy". In the case of human modes of production, where private ownership is positively superseded, Marx lists four different forms of affirmation, which are conceived of in the sense of recognition relationships and also relate to the anthropological definition of humans as 'representational species-beings'. In this paper, the forms of affirmation have been described and individually classified with the use of secondary literature (Schmidt am Busch: "Anerkennung" als Prinzip der Kritischen Theorie) and the primary sources.

This paper has concentrated on defining the concept of alienated labor from the early works of Karl Marx and attempted to unravel the notion of alienation through the direct application of two of his early works (the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts and the Mill Notes). During the process, other concepts have been explained, but some such as the philosophical-historically relevant terms 'labor', 'appropriation', 'recognition', or 'nature' have been used in the context of the analyzes, and have not been further philosophical-historically analyzed. Furthermore, later texts by Karl Marx and their references to the concept of alienation have not been considered with the context of this study.

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