



Marx's Interpretation and Positive Subsumption of Alienated Labor and Private Property: Based on the Text of the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844"

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Abstract. The theory of alienated labor is a key idea in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Building upon the "alienation" theories of Hegel and Feuerbach, Marx further developed the concept of "alienated labor," which in turn generates private property, shaping and being shaped by capitalist production relations. In the context of alienation and private property, the worker is in a state of enslavement, while the capitalist becomes the personification of capital, and human essence becomes alienated. To achieve the return to human essence, it is necessary to affirm the negation of the negation of alienation and private property, which Marx refers to as the abolition of alienation and the "positive negation" of private property, ultimately leading to the establishment of communism and the liberation of humanity.

Keywords: Alienated labor, Private property, Connotation, Positive negation

1 Introduction

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844[1], Marx focuses on the process of the generation, development, and positive sublation of alienation, namely "alienated labor - private property - communism." Human labor and essence become alienated, private property arises and accumulates. However, these two socio-historical categories of alienation and private property ultimately lead to their positive sublation, resulting in the realization of communism, where real, social human beings are liberated, and human essence is restored.

2 The Concept and Origin of Alienated Labor

Marx combines the philosophical concept of "alienation" with economics and introduces the concept of "alienated labor[2]". Before revealing its connotation, he first distinguishes between objectification of labor and alienation. "The product of labor is labor fixed in a certain object, materialized as an object; this is the objectification of labor. The realization of labor is the objectification of labor[1]". That is, the realiza-

tion of labor is its objectification. Alienation, on the other hand, refers to "the object produced by labor, i.e., the product of labor, as an alien entity, as a force independent of the producer, standing in opposition to labor[1]." Only under capitalist conditions, "the more objects the worker produces, the fewer objects he can possess, and the more he is dominated by his own products, i.e., capital." In this case, objectification manifests as "the loss of the object and enslavement to the object," while possession appears as alienation and externalization[1]. According to Marx, alienation specifically manifests in four determinations.

2.1 "Alienation of the Object"

Originally, in Hegel's philosophical system, alienation and objectification were unified. In his view, when a slave faces natural objects, they can change the objects through labor, objectifying, alienating, and externalizing their essential powers onto the objects, thus becoming the "master[3]."

For the economists of political economy, their neglect of the direct relationship between the worker and the product of labor leads them to "treat what should be explained as a premise.[1]" They use the simple concept of competition to explain the relationship between the property-owning and propertyless classes, describing the worker's gradual degradation into a state of abasement, deformity, barbarism, weakness, and stupidity, ultimately becoming a slave to nature.

In Marx's view, in the realm of production, "the worker's relationship to the product of his labor is a relationship to an alien object[1]." "The worker puts his life into the object; but now this life no longer belongs to him, it belongs to the object. Therefore, the more the worker engages in this activity, the more he loses the object[1]." The object to which the worker gives life, as a hostile and alien force, stands in opposition to the worker and represses him. In a similar manner, religion at the time was also experiencing alienation. The more a person dedicates himself to God, the more he is subjected to God's control. This is the "alienation in result[1]."

2.2 Alienation of the Human Being: Alienation of Labor, Self-Alienation of the Laborer and Non-Laborer

"Alienation is not only manifested in the result, but also in the production process, in the production activity itself[1]."

In the wage relationship, the worker has sold their labor to the capitalist in exchange for money, and thus labor no longer belongs to the worker; it becomes an "external thing." Furthermore, workers who do not own the means of production are forced to sell their labor, and their labor is not voluntary but coerced. When workers labor, they do so not to meet the needs of productive work, but to satisfy their survival needs, using labor as a means. Therefore, the worker "does not affirm themselves in their labor, but denies themselves; they do not feel happiness, but unhappiness; they do not freely exercise their physical and mental abilities, but instead, torture their body and destroy their mind." For the worker, labor does not belong to them, as they produce goods owned by the capitalist under the capitalist's control. In labor, the

worker also does not belong to themselves. Therefore, once forced labor ceases, the worker will "flee from labor as if fleeing from a plague[1]."

In labor, the laborer must first be a "worker" and only then a person who needs to survive. This is the alienation of the laborer.

Under the capitalist's enslavement, the worker, while engaging in labor—an activity that should express human characteristics—becomes more like an animal. Yet, in activities outside of labor, such as eating, drinking, and reproduction, which are abstractly no different from the functions of animals, the worker feels more human. The worker's life, physical strength, and intellect are stripped away and no longer belong to them, turning against the worker's own existence. This process diminishes, degrades, and animalizes the worker, leading to self-alienation.

At the same time, the alienation of labor and the laborer does not mean that capitalists, who are in a non-laboring position, are immune to alienation under capitalist production conditions. In the market, it may seem that capitalists enjoy the freedom to buy, sell, trade, and compete, but this is still a narrow freedom, one that serves the accumulation of capital. It is a false freedom, constrained by the profit-seeking nature of capital, the laws of commodity exchange, and the fetishism of money. Essentially, the capitalist is merely the personified form of capital, participating in the construction of the capitalist system and its structural forces, while also being ensnared and dominated by this system, and by capital's relentless pursuit of accumulation.

2.3 Alienation of Human Generic Essence

"Man treats himself as a universal and thus free being[1]." Human production and life are a form of "species life," characterized by the fact that humans "create the object world through practice[1]", thus making the entire natural world broadly serve as material for human life and an inorganic body. Through labor, humans objectify their species life in nature, and distinguish their life activities from those of animals.

However, alienated labor, on the one hand, causes the natural world, as the object of labor, to become alienated from and detached from the human being; on the other hand, it alienates the human being's own life activities and functions from the human being. As a result, both human species life and the characteristics of "species beings" are alienated and detached from humanity, and thus, the human generic essence itself becomes alienated from the human being.

2.4 Alienation of One Person from Another

The direct result of the three forms of alienation is the alienation of one person from another. "When a person is opposed to themselves, they are also opposed to others[1]."

The labor and the products of labor must ultimately belong to an entity, and for this entity, labor serves it, and the products of labor are there for its enjoyment. As human productive forces develop, causing nature to be increasingly dominated by humanity, "the miracles of God increasingly become superfluous[1]." This entity gradually shifts from being divine to being human. Initially, this entity was unified with the subject of

labor, but when the three forms of alienation come into play, labor and the products of labor become detached from the worker. The worker's labor serves the enjoyment of this new entity, which is the capitalist—an entity that, like the worker, is human, yet alien, hostile, and powerful. Through alienated labor, the worker continuously produces forces that are alien and hostile to them, and also continuously produces alien, hostile relations of production that oppress them. In human society, alienation between people occurs.

3 Alienation and Private Property

3.1 The Contextual Meaning of "Private Property"

"Private property is the product, result, and necessary consequence of alienated labor, that is, the worker's external relations to nature and to themselves." Marx derives the concept of private property from the concept of alienated labor, "from the concepts of alienated man, alienated labor, alienated life, and the alienated human being[1]." It is clear that here, "private property" does not refer to the objective reality of specific privately owned property, but should be understood within the concept of the "movement of private property," that is, under the concept of the gradual establishment of capitalist social relations of production.

In Marx's view at this time, "private property" essentially represents a specific type of relationship under capitalist social relations of production. "Private property, as the material and generalized expression of alienated labor, encompasses two relationships: the relationship between the worker and labor, their own products of labor, and non-workers, as well as the relationship between non-workers and the products of labor created by workers[1]."

3.2 The Relationship Between Private Property and Alienation

3.2.1 Alienated Labor Produces Private Property

"Through alienated labor, the individual not only produces a relationship between themselves and the object of production and the act of production as alien and hostile forces, but also produces the relationship between others and their own production and products, as well as their relationship with these others[1]." Marx then provides a more detailed exposition of the "alien and hostile forces of the object of production" in this context: "The worker's relationship to labor produces the capitalist—or whatever other name people give to the master of labor—his relationship to this labor[1]." In line with Marx's discussion of "private property," the "two relationships" mentioned earlier, private property, as the form of wealth, is not created by free labor, but is continually generated through the externalization and alienation of labor[4].

3.2.2 The Interaction Between Private Property and Alienated Labor

Private property is the means by which labor externalizes itself; it is the realization of labor's externalization. Under capitalist production conditions, private ownership of

the means of production and the capitalists' control over labor and the products of labor lead workers to constantly produce products that are alienated from them. Through the unpaid appropriation of workers' surplus labor, capital continues to grow and enhance its control. For the worker, this means that in labor, they continuously produce alien and hostile forces, objects, and relationships. This process is the continuous externalization and alienation of labor.

In short, the relationship between alienated labor and private property is that "the worker's relationship to labor produces the capitalist's relationship to this labor," that is, "a specific relationship between man and object (alienated labor) gives rise to a specific relationship between man and man (private property)[5]."

4 Marx's Theory of Communism and the Overcoming of Private Property and Alienation

From May to September 1843, Marx conducted systematic research on the history and politics of England, France, Germany, and other countries in Kreuznach. After studying the history of the French Revolution, Marx first recognized the limitations of the bourgeois revolution. His studies and understanding of private property, alienation of labor, fetishism, and other issues led Marx to begin recognizing a society without property classes or class distinctions. He began to move beyond utopian communism and rapidly turned towards the idea of communism in which "the political state disappears in a true democracy[6]" .

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx also critiques and overcomes private property and the alienation of labor based on this.

4.1 Utopian Communism and Marx's Critique and Transcendence

Proudhon examines private property from the perspective of its object, advocating for the abolition of "capital" as a form of private property and supporting ideas like "wage equality." However, in Proudhon's thinking, capital, private property, and labor are analyzed in isolation from one another, without addressing the root of private property: the externalization and alienation of labor. Therefore, his opposition to private property is merely a "superficial" and utopian solution, not a fundamental one.

As the communism that emerges from universal private property. In this form of communist thought, the worker's role is not abolished but extended to everyone, and individual differences are to be eliminated, "using force to discard talents and so on"; for material private property, the most superficial form of collectivization and equalization is adopted, with any material property that cannot be equalized being eradicated; in regard to women, a "bestial" form of communal marriage is proposed to oppose marriage, treating women as part of material property to be collectivized. Marx criticizes this communism as "quite crude and thoughtless," [1] which denies individuality everywhere, turning everything into material private property, reflecting the petty bourgeoisie's "envy and desire for equalization" of large capitalists' private property. This form of communism ultimately seeks the fulfillment of the petty bourgeoisie's

own desire for equalization, "which is merely the complete manifestation of private property[1]," and for the poor, those with low demands, it would even represent a regression in social history.

Communism with a political nature that demands the abolition of the state. Both of these forms of communism arise from the context of private property and the alienation of humans, recognizing that individuals must overcome self-alienation and return to their true nature. However, these two forms of communism are based solely on the denial of the harmful effects of private property. In other words, they have not yet recognized that private property is the "positive essence" and necessity that could be established in the historical development of human society. Therefore, they also fail to realize that the fundamental factor driving the end of private property is a rather simplistic conception.

4.2 Marx's Theory of Communism: The Overcoming of Private Property and Alienation

"Communism is the positive transcendence of private property, which is the self-alienation of man, and therefore it is the true appropriation of human essence through and for humanity. It is the return of man to himself and to society (i.e., to his human nature), a return that is complete, conscious, and preserves all the wealth of past development[1]." The entire movement of history is the actual process of the realization of this communism. Marx explains communism precisely through the development of human social history and the development of material production.

The scholar Xia Zhiguang believes that the classic statement by Marx quoted above implicitly outlines three major stages in human social history: the stage before alienation and private property arise; the stage in which human alienation, the emergence, and development of private property occur; and the stage of communism that overcomes human self-alienation and private property, leading to higher social stages thereafter[3].

To positively transcend the social and historical relation of private property, its initial form precisely manifests as the "universalization and completion of the private property relation[1] ".The positivity of private property in relation to previous feudal production relations needs to be recognized and promoted, until within it, the force of the negation of negation in production gives rise to the germ of higher production relations that oppose private property — the germ of communism[5].

Furthermore, it is necessary to eliminate private property by abolishing alienation. "The subject living under an irrational system is not a fully realized human being, not a true species-being, but an egoistic individual separated from their own species essence, an alienated person. Human liberation and development consist of abolishing this alienation and enabling humans to re-appropriate their essence[7]." As for human liberation and development, Marx already recognized that it must rely on the working class: "The liberation of society from private property and other forms of oppression, and from the system of enslavement, is expressed through the political form of the liberation of the working class[1]."

5 Conclusion

The alienation of both things and people further gives rise to the alienation of human species essence and the relationships between people. Under alienated labor, the relationship between the worker and the product of labor, through the labor process, produces the relationship between the worker and the capitalist, giving rise to the system of capitalist private property.

A social-historical examination of private property, recognizing its positivity in relation to previous production relations and fully unleashing the productive forces contained within it, is the premise for the positive transcendence of private property. The relationship embedded in the worker's relationship to production is the enslavement of all humanity; therefore, through the political form of the liberation of the working class, the universal liberation of humanity can be achieved. When humanity is universally liberated and developed, it moves towards and realizes the return to the essence of human beings and its true realization.

At the same time, Marx's explanation of the positive transcendence of alienated labor and private property also reflects the germ of the materialist conception of history, which unveils the laws of development in human society and history.

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