

The Internal Logic of Marx's Theory of Alienated Labor

--A Textual Study Based on the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

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Abstract

In his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx creatively proposed the theory of alienated labor. Proceeding from economic facts, he reduced the content of this theory to four determinations, namely: the alienation of the worker from the product of his labor; the alienation of the worker from the act of labor itself; the alienation of man from his own species-essence; and the alienation of man from man. Each determination possesses its own independent essential meaning, yet they are also internally interrelated. Starting from the text of the Manuscripts, clarifying the internal logic of Marx's thought on alienated labor helps us to deeply analyze the theoretical structure of the theory, reveal various phenomena of alienation in capitalist society, and criticize capitalist private property.

Keywords

Alienated labor; alienation; private property.

1. Introduction

Marx comprehensively examined social reality, drawing upon the alienation thought of the German classical philosophers as his philosophical foundation; by transcending the limitations of their thought, he ultimately formulated his theory of alienated labor. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx criticizes the concept of labor in political economy, starting from economic facts to reveal the phenomena of alienated life experienced by both capitalists and workers as a result of labor alienation. By elaborating on the manifestations of "alienated labor" and conducting a step-by-step analysis—progressing from the superficial to the profound—he systematically summarizes its four determinations, thereby exposing the root causes of alienated labor within capitalist society. Alienated labor exists within the real conditions of capitalist society; to achieve human emancipation, it is essential to accurately grasp the essence of alienated labor. "Political economy, which proceeds from labor as its principle, ostensibly acknowledges man, but in reality it is only carrying out the complete negation of man." Marx's thought on alienated labor affirms human value, reveals the exploitation and oppression of the working class and the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, and advocates the thorough emancipation and full restoration of human nature.

2. The Genesis of the Theory of Alienated Labor

Marx's views on alienated labor are rooted in profound intellectual and social foundations. His earliest attention to "alienation" concerned the alienation of "self-consciousness," and he proposed that the issue of alienation should be directed at man himself. With the development of capitalism and the enrichment of his own practice, Marx discovered that the root of alienation lay not in "political alienation," but rather in the economic alienation of civil society.

(1) The Germination of Marx's Thought on Alienation

In his Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy and his doctoral dissertation, Marx already employed the philosophical term “alienation.” “Only in Epicurus does appearance appear as appearance, i.e., as an alienation of essence that manifests itself as such in its reality.” In analyzing Epicurus’s atomism, Marx raised the issue of conceptual alienation. The swerving motion of atoms is a distinctive feature of Epicurean philosophy: while acknowledging rectilinear motion, he also posited a deviation from it. Numerous atoms, through their swerving motion, mutually repel and collide, producing a qualitative difference from their own atomic concept, thus forming the phenomenal world. The contradiction between the essence contained in the atomic concept and its actual existence is thereby objectified. Consequently, Marx regarded the phenomenal world as the alienation of the atomic concept. Marx further pointed out that nature and religion are, in essence, alienations of self-consciousness. He noted that underdeveloped productive forces made it difficult for people to form reasonable explanations for various natural phenomena, creating feelings of fear, and thus they imagined a supernatural force behind natural phenomena. At the same time, all proofs of the existence of gods in religion and mythology are in fact proofs of human beings’ own notions of gods, and are all refutations of those notions. Consequently, Marx held that the essence of gods should revert to “self-consciousness,” directing the problem of alienation toward “man” and returning it to a humanistic concern for man himself.

With the development of capitalism, feudal forces tenaciously defended politics, using religion as a tool of feudal autocratic rule. The Young Hegelians, as radical representatives of the bourgeoisie, sought to advance the further development of capitalism by engaging in free debate through their critique of religion. The “religious” issue became the central focus of the debates of the time. In his critique of religion, Marx pointed out that religion, in its essence, is an “inverted world outlook” and a tool used by the ruling class to deceive and oppress the people. The critique of “religious alienation” was, in essence, a critique of “political alienation.” Marx further perceived the phenomenon of economic alienation in civil society; moving from an analysis of the alienation of the superstructure to the economic base, he launched an in-depth investigation into the economic sphere of civil society. He discovered that the political state had become alienated from civil society. The essence of civil society lies in the pursuit of interests, where human relations are fundamentally relations of material interests. Within civil society, individuals exist as alienated beings who do not enjoy the “equality” and “freedom” granted by the political state. Within civil society, people achieve only an abstract and partial emancipation; in essence, man has become dualized.

Through step-by-step analysis and inquiry, Marx discovered that only by delving into the economic alienation of civil society could the true source of alienation be found. To transform people from mere members of civil society into truly human beings, it is necessary to oppose man’s self-alienation and to restore the alienated human world and human relations to humanity itself.

(2) The Formulation of the Theory of Alienated Labor

With the completion of the British Industrial Revolution and the establishment of the capitalist mode of production, social productive forces developed rapidly, yet general social prosperity was not achieved. The bourgeoisie possessed the vast majority of social wealth, while the working class was forced into extreme poverty and lived a profoundly miserable existence. The research conducted by bourgeois political economists did not begin from the actual conditions of the national economy at the time; they failed to recognize that workers, despite their labor, were enslaved by the commodities they produced. They did not explain “the connection between private property, avarice, and the separation of labour, capital, and landed property, exchange and competition, the devaluation of man and the devaluation of labour, monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between all this and the whole system of alienation and the money system,” but instead treated the existence of private property as a given fact. They

regarded the poverty of the proletariat as a necessary and reasonable condition for increasing national wealth, offering explanations favorable to the bourgeoisie for the tragic reality of the proletariat, and zealously defended the capitalist system of private property.

Marx saw that the conflicts between people and the antagonism of social classes were all rooted in the inequality of material possession behind people's interests. The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 represent the initial result of Marx's turn to the study of political economy. He broke through the speculative tradition of German classical philosophy, integrating their speculative philosophy with his own economic research, focusing on the analysis of economic facts, and discussing alienation from the perspective of the subject's essence, which confronts man in an inhuman way. In the Manuscripts, Marx launched a critique of bourgeois political economists; through an analysis of the realities of the national economy at the time, he found that the more wealth the workers produced through the production of commodities, the cheaper their labor became. While affirming the positive role of labor, he proposed the theory of alienated labor, striving to reveal the position and condition of the proletariat under the capitalist system and to seek an explanation for the dehumanization of the proletariat.

3. The Four Determinations of Alienated Labor and Its Internal Logic

Marx regarded the analysis of alienated labor and the analysis of economic facts as inseparable. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, starting from the facts of political economy and taking as his point of entry the observation that "the devaluation of the world of men increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things," he scientifically summarized the theory of alienated labor and proposed its four determinations.

(1) Basic Concepts

"Alienation" originally referred to the yearning and envy toward idols; it was a form of alienation in a non-philosophical sense. The concept of "alienation" first appeared in economic literature, denoting the transfer of property rights; later it shifted to the field of philosophy, where it was adopted as a political concept within the political sphere. German classical philosophers used "alienation" to describe the relationship between subject and object, meaning that in the course of its own development, the subject, through its own activity, produces its own opposite, which then confronts the subject as an external, alien force that in turn enslaves the subject itself. The concept of "alienated labor" was first introduced in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Critically developing the alienation thought of his predecessors, Marx extended the concept of "alienation" to "alienated labor," investigating economic facts from the perspective of political economy and formulating the theory of alienated labor. Marx used the concept of "alienated labor" to explain the relationship between man and labor, and further to analyze human labor relations under the capitalist social system.

(2) The Four Determinations of Alienated Labor

First, the alienation of the worker from the product of his labor, i.e., "the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer." Political economy posits that "labor is the source of all wealth." Following this logic, since workers invest their physical and mental energy in the production process, they should possess ownership and control over the product of their labor. However, under capitalist conditions of production, the worker does not appropriate the product of labor; the products he creates become alien beings, transforming into a social power that dominates the worker, thereby enslaving and controlling him. The more products the worker produces, the less he possesses, and the more powerful the alien force that rules over him becomes. Thus, the product of labor confronts the worker as an alien power.

Second, the alienation of the worker from the act of labor itself is manifested in the self-alienation of man within the labor process. Labor is the embodiment of the free will and creativity unique to human beings. In itself, labor is free; the labor process should originally be a process in which people attain happiness and satisfaction, free from external compulsion. However, in capitalist society, labor no longer belongs to what is essential to the worker, but rather becomes a mere activity for maintaining existence, serving to satisfy other various needs outside of labor. People are forced to labor, suffering both spiritually and physically.

Third, the alienation of man from his own species-essence. The species-essence of man is “free conscious activity” — this is the fundamental attribute that distinguishes man from animals and all other beings, directly differentiating human life activity from that of animals. As Zuo Yawen points out, the species-essence is “not the ‘activity’ of labor or practice, but the ‘characteristic’ of this ‘activity.’” [4] Labor, as the basic form of human life activity, represents purposeful and conscious activity. The development of man’s essential powers is realized through labor; only through this form of labor can man express his “species-essence.” However, in alienated labor, the object of labor and man’s species-life are deprived; labor is completely reduced to a means of subsistence, and man’s species-essence itself is degraded to a means of merely sustaining physical existence.

Fourth, the alienation of man from man. No individual in society can exist apart from the community; there must necessarily be certain relations among people. However, under capitalist production conditions, these interpersonal connections are obscured by money. The capitalist treats the worker as a tool for generating profit; the worker sells his labor to survive, viewing labor merely as a means of subsistence. The worker becomes alienated from his own product of labor — both his labor and his products belong to another being, not to himself. Moreover, this being can only be a human being, because only a human being can become an alien power that dominates others. In capitalist society, under the coercion and oppression of the bourgeoisie, the worker engages in labor activity through alienated labor, thereby producing an alien human being — the capitalist.

4. The Internal Logic of Alienated Labor

Marx, standing on the side of the proletariat and the working people, starts from the actual life phenomena of the impoverished workers; he analyzes the alienation of the worker from the product of his labor, delves into the alienation inherent in the worker himself, proceeds to examine the alienation of labor from man’s species-essence, and finally analyzes the alienation of man from man.

(1) Objectification and Alienated Labor

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, when revealing the first determination of alienated labor, Marx first introduced the concept of objectification. Marx argued that objectification and alienation are closely intertwined philosophical categories — two aspects of the same process. In the relationship between the worker and the product of labor, both these distinct dimensions are included: objectification and alienation. Objectification is a universal characteristic of all labor; every product is created through man’s objectifying activity — that is, labor congealed in an object and materialized as such an object. In other words, the realization of labor is precisely objectification; human labor can only be realized through this process of objectification. Alienation, on the other hand, represents a special form of objectification, “a unique phenomenon arising from the objectifying labor process under capitalist conditions of production.” Under capitalist conditions, the worker creates products, creates external objects, and simultaneously creates an independent force that confronts him as hostile and alien. The worker’s material and spiritual activities and their products turn into external, alien forces that turn against, dominate, and enslave man himself. Political economy

confuses general objectification with alienated labor. On the basis of clearly distinguishing between objectification and alienated labor, Marx systematically elaborated the four determinations of alienated labor.

(2) Internal Logic

The first determination is the alienation of the worker from the product of his labor. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states: "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of men increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things." According to the facts of political economy, it can be observed that the more wealth the workers produce and the greater the influence and scale of production, the poorer they become and the more they are transformed into cheap commodities. It is precisely from this economic fact that Marx analyzes the alienation of the worker from the product of his labor. Specifically, the worker exists in an alienated relationship with his own product of labor: the more effort the worker expends in labor, the more powerful the alien objective force he creates, and the poorer he himself becomes. This is the most direct manifestation of the process of alienated labor and constitutes the most readily observable economic fact. By proceeding from the premises established by the facts of political economy, it becomes impossible for the political economists to deny the validity of these rational inferences.

In Marx's view, alienation under the capitalist system manifests not only in the product of labor but also in the productive activity itself. "Self-alienation, through external projection and through objectification, essentially becomes the alienation of things"; the alienation of the product reflects the alienation inherent in the act of production itself. Consequently, Marx shifted his focus from analyzing the external relationship between the product of labor and the worker to analyzing the subject itself — namely, the relationship between the worker and his own labor. The second determination involves a further analysis of the decisive elements within the first determination. The first determination and the second determination represent two aspects of the alienating activity of labor; both fall within the scope of production activities under capitalist conditions and are possessed, controlled, and dominated by "another." Furthermore, alienated labor produces alienated labor: labor is the active side, while the product is the passive side; therefore, advancing from product alienation to labor alienation is more profound.

Under capitalist conditions, labor merely serves as a means for individuals to sustain their own existence; only when fulfilling their basic survival needs can people feel themselves to be human. Conversely, in the context of free conscious activity, they feel themselves to be less than human. Thus, the relation between the worker and his species-essence becomes the object of Marx's further investigation. Marx points out that the alienation of the "species" is an inevitable consequence of both the first and second forms of alienation: "since (1) alienated labor alienates nature from man, and (2) alienates man from himself, from his own active function, from his life activity, it consequently alienates the species from man." Whether it be the alienation of the product or the alienation of labor itself, these are phenomenal economic facts; in contrast, the alienation of the species-essence constitutes the essential philosophical determination of the phenomenon of alienation. From these first two determinations of alienated labor, Marx derives the third determination: the objects of production created by the worker through labor are plundered, and man's free activity is reduced to a mere means of sustaining physical existence; from the subject's perspective, this is the alienation of man's species-essence from himself. The alienation of the "species-essence" refers to the alienation of man's productive labor as his species-life, as well as the alienation of the product of labor as the objectification of his species-essence. Using "human essence" as the intermediary link, Marx

arrives at the level of social relations, thus forming a line of logical reasoning that moves from phenomena to essence, from the individual to society, and from economics to philosophy.

5. Conclusion

Through his systematic examination of the relations between man and his own product of labor, between man and his own labor activity, and between man and his own species-essence, Marx discovered that, under the conditions of capitalist society, all three pairs of relations have undergone profound alienation without exception. The alienation of the worker from the product of his labor means that the objective world created by man turns back into an alien power that dominates him; the alienation of the worker from the act of labor itself means that labor, which should embody man's free and conscious activity, is reduced to an external means of subsistence; the alienation of man from his own species-essence means that man loses his spiritual essence as a "species-being," and his free conscious activity is degraded to a mere tool for sustaining physical existence. These three forms of alienation are progressively interlinked and internally connected, moving from the most immediate economic phenomena to the philosophical essence of man himself.

Marx further points out that the alienation of these three relations inevitably leads to the fourth determination—the alienation of man from man. For when man loses his species-essence, the relation between man and man ceases to be a free, comprehensive, and rich human relation, and becomes instead an alienated relation of mutual opposition and estrangement, mediated by money, interests, and external forces. It is precisely in this sense that the theory of alienated labor not only reveals the enslaved and reified condition of the proletariat under the capitalist mode of production, but also fundamentally points toward a critique of capitalist private property. By revealing the four determinations of alienated labor and clarifying their internal logic, Marx provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding human emancipation, and also offers important intellectual resources for our contemporary reflection on various forms of alienation in modern society—such as the alienation of consumption, the alienation of technology, and the alienation of interpersonal communication.

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