

Totality of Production and Alienation in Marx:

Notes for Critical Analysis

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I. Marx's Conception of Production in the 'Introduction' of 1857

Despite its provisional character and the short period of composition (scarcely a week), the so-called 'Introduction' of 1857 contains the most extensive and detailed pronouncement that Marx ever made on epistemological questions related to production. With observations on the employment and articulation of theoretical categories, these pages contain a number of essential formulations. In keeping with his style, Marx alternated in the 'Introduction' between exposition of his own ideas and criticism of his theoretical opponents. The text is divided into four sections¹:

- (1) Production in general
 - (2) General relation between production, distribution, exchange and consumption
 - (3) The method of political economy
 - (4) Means (forces) of production and relations of production, relations of production and relations of circulation, etc.
- (Marx 1973: 69)

The first part of this article will deal with Marx's conception of production exposed in the first two sections of this text, while the second will overview Marx's conception of alienation. The first section opens with a declaration of intent, immediately specifying the field of study and pointing to the historical criterion: '[t]he object before us, to begin with, material production. Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure.' Marx's polemical target was 'the eighteenth-century Robinsonades' (Marx 1973: 83), the myth of Robinson Crusoe (see Watt 1951: 112) as the paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*, or the projection of phenomena typical of the bourgeois era onto every other society that has existed since the earliest times. Such conceptions represented the social character of production as a constant in any labour process, not as a peculiarity of capitalist relations. In the same way, civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] – whose emergence in the eighteenth century had created the conditions through which 'the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate' – was portrayed as having always existed (Marx 1973: 83).

In reality, the isolated individual simply did not exist before the capitalist epoch. As Marx put it in another passage in the *Grundrisse*: 'He originally appears as a *species-being, tribal being, herd animal*' (Marx 1973: 496, trans. modified). This collective dimension is the condition for the appropriation of the earth, 'the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labour, as well as

¹ The first part of this article will deal with the first two sections, while the second on Marx's conception of alienation.

the seat, the *base* of the community [*Basis des Gemeinwesens*]’ (Marx 1973: 472). In the presence of these primal relations, the activity of human beings is directly linked to the earth; there is a ‘natural unity of labour with its material presuppositions’, and the individual lives in symbiosis with others like himself (Marx 1973: 471). Similarly, in all later economic forms based on agriculture where the aim is to create use-values and not yet exchange-values,² the relationship of the individual to ‘the objective conditions of his labour is mediated through his presence as member of the commune’; he is always only one link in the chain (Marx 1973: 486). In this connection, Marx writes in the ‘Introduction’:

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent [*unselbstständig*], as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clans.³
(Marx 1973: 84)

Similar considerations appear in *Capital*, vol. I. Here, in speaking of ‘the European Middle Ages, shrouded in darkness’, Marx argues that ‘instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterizes the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production’ (Marx 1996: 88). And, when he examined the genesis of product exchange, he recalled that it began with contacts among different families, tribes or communities, ‘for, in the beginning of civilization, it is not private individuals but families, tribes, etc., that meet on an independent footing’ (Marx 1996: 357). Thus, whether the horizon was the primal bond of consanguinity or the medieval nexus of lordship and vassalage, individuals lived amid ‘limited relations of production [*bornirter Produktionsverhältnisse*]’, joined to one another by reciprocal ties (Marx 1973: 162).⁴

² Marx dealt with these themes in detail in the section of the *Grundrisse* devoted to ‘Forms which Precede Capitalist Production’ (Marx 1973: 471-513).

³ This conception of an Aristotelian matrix – the family preceding the birth of the village – recurs in *Capital*, vol. I, but Marx was said later to have moved away from it. Friedrich Engels pointed out in a note to the third German edition of 1883: ‘[s]ubsequent very searching study of the primitive conditions of man led the author [i.e. Marx – MM] to the conclusion that it was not the family that originally developed into the tribe, but that, on the contrary, the tribe was the primitive and spontaneously developed form of human association, on the basis of blood relationship, that out of the first incipient loosening of the tribal bonds, the many and various forms of the family were afterwards developed’ (Marx 1996: 356). Engels was referring to the studies of ancient history made by himself at the time and by Marx during the final years of his life. The main texts that he read or summarized in his anthropological notebooks, which are still unpublished, were *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* by Edward Burnett Tylor, *Ancient Society* by Lewis Henry Morgan, *The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon* by John Budd Phear, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* by Henry Summer Maine and *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* by John Lubbock.

⁴ This mutual dependence should not be confused with that which establishes itself among individuals in the capitalist mode of production: the former is the product of nature, the latter of history. In capitalism, individual independence is combined with a social dependence expressed in the division of labour (see Marx 1987: 465). At this stage of production, the

The classical economists had inverted this reality, on the basis of what Marx regarded as fantasies with an inspiration in natural law. In particular, Adam Smith had described a primal condition where individuals not only existed but were capable of producing outside society. A division of labour within tribes of hunters and shepherds had supposedly achieved the specialization of trades: one person's greater dexterity in fashioning bows and arrows, for example, or in building wooden huts, had made him a kind of armourer or carpenter, and the assurance of being able to exchange the unconsumed part of one's labour product for the surplus of others 'encourage[d] every man to apply himself to a particular occupation' (Smith 1961: 19). David Ricardo was guilty of a similar anachronism when he conceived of the relationship between hunters and fishermen in the early stages of society as an exchange between owners of commodities on the basis of the labour-time objectified in them (see Ricardo 1973: 15, cf. Marx 1987a: 300).

In this way, Smith and Ricardo depicted a highly developed product of the society in which they lived – the isolated bourgeois individual – as if he were a spontaneous manifestation of nature. What emerged from the pages of their works was a mythological, timeless individual, one 'posited by nature', whose social relations were always the same and whose economic behaviour had a historyless anthropological character (Marx 1973: 83). According to Marx, the interpreters of each new historical epoch have regularly deluded themselves that the most distinctive features of their own age have been present since time immemorial.⁵

Marx argued instead that '[p]roduction by an isolated individual outside society ... is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other' (Marx 1973: 84).⁶ And, against those who portrayed the isolated individual of the eighteenth century as the archetype of human nature, 'not as a historical result but as history's point of departure', he maintained that such an individual emerged only with the most highly developed social relations (Marx 1973: 83). Marx did not entirely disagree that man was a ζῷον πολιτικόν [*zoon politikon*], a social animal, but he insisted that he was 'an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society' (Marx 1973: 84). Thus, since civil society had arisen only with the modern world, the free wage-labourer of the capitalist epoch had appeared only after a long historical process. He was, in fact, 'the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century' (Marx 1973: 83). If Marx felt the need to repeat a point he considered all too evident, it was only because works by Henry Charles Carey, Frédéric Bastiat and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had brought it up for discussion in the previous twenty years. After sketching the

social character of activity presents itself not as a simple relationship of individuals to one another 'but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing' (Marx 1973: 157).

⁵ The economist who, in Marx's view, had avoided this naïve assumption was James Steuart. Marx commented on numerous passages from Steuart's main work – *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* – in a notebook that he filled with extracts from it in the spring of 1851 (see Marx 1986).

⁶ Elsewhere in the *Grundrisse* Marx stated that 'an isolated individual could no more have property in land and soil than he could speak' (Marx 1973: 485); and that '[l]anguage as the product of an individual is an impossibility. But the same holds for property' (Marx 1973: 490).

genesis of the capitalist individual and demonstrating that modern production conforms only to ‘a definitive stage of social development – production by social individuals’, Marx points to a second theoretical requirement: namely, to expose the mystification practised by economists with regard to the concept of ‘production in general’ [*Production im Allgemeinen*]. This is an abstraction, a category that does not exist at any concrete stage of reality. However, since ‘all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics’ [*gemeinsame Bestimmungen*], Marx recognizes that ‘production in general is a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element’, thereby saving pointless repetition for the scholar who undertakes to reproduce reality through thought (Marx 1973: 85).

Although the definition of the general elements of production is ‘segmented many times over and split into different determinations’, some of which ‘belong to all epochs, others to only a few’, there are certainly, among its universal components, human labour and material provided by nature (Marx 1973: 85). For, without a producing subject and a worked-upon object, there could be no production at all. But the economists introduced a third general prerequisite of production: ‘a stock, previously accumulated, of the products of former labour’, that is, capital (Mill 1965: 55).⁷ The critique of this last element was essential for Marx, in order to reveal what he considered to be a fundamental limitation of the economists. It also seemed evident to him that no production was possible without an instrument of labour, if only the human hand, or without accumulated past labour, if only in the form of primitive man’s repetitive exercises. However, while agreeing that capital was past labour and an instrument of production, he did not, like Smith, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, conclude that it had always existed.

The point is made in greater detail in another section of the *Grundrisse*, where the conception of capital as ‘eternal’ is seen as a way of treating it only as matter, without regard for its essential ‘formal determination’ (*Formbestimmung*). According to this,

capital would have existed in all forms of society, and is something altogether unhistorical. ... The arm, and especially the hand, are then capital. Capital would be only a new name for a thing as old as the human race, since every form of labour, including the least developed, hunting, fishing, etc., presupposes that the product of prior labour is used as means for direct, living labour. ... If, then, the specific form of capital is abstracted away, and only the content is emphasized, ... of course nothing is easier than to demonstrate that capital is a necessary condition for all human production. The proof of this proceeds precisely by abstraction [*Abstraktion*] from the specific aspects which make it the moment of a specifically developed *historical* stage of human production [*Moment einer besonders entwickelten historischen Stufe der menschlichen Production*].

(Marx 1973: 257-8)

In fact, Marx had already criticized the economists’ lack of historical sense in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

⁷ The more elaborate exposition of this idea is to be found in John Stuart Mill (Mill 1965: 55f.).

Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations – the relations of bourgeois production – are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.

(Marx 1976: 174)

For this to be plausible, economists depicted the historical circumstances prior to the birth of the capitalist mode of production as ‘results of its presence’ with its very own features (Marx 1973: 460). As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*:

The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and *natural* (not historical) form of production then attempt ... to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not-capitalist – because he is still becoming – as the very conditions in which he appropriates *as capitalist*.’

(Marx 1973: 460)

From a historical point of view, the profound difference between Marx and the classical economists is that, in his view, ‘capital did not begin the world from the beginning, but rather encountered production and products already present, before it subjugated them beneath its process’ (Marx 1973: 675). For ‘the new productive forces and relations of production do not develop out of nothing, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property’ (Marx 1973: 278). Similarly, the circumstance whereby producing subjects are separated from the means of production – which allows the capitalist to find propertyless workers capable of performing abstract labour (the necessary requirement for the exchange between capital and living labour) – is the result of a process that the economists cover with silence, which ‘forms the history of the origins of capital and wage labour’ (Marx 1973: 489).

A number of passages in the *Grundrisse* criticize the way in which economists portray historical as natural realities. It is self-evident to Marx, for example, that money is a product of history: ‘to be money is not a natural attribute of gold and silver’, but only a determination they first acquire at a precise moment of social development (Marx 1973: 239). The same is true of credit. According to Marx, lending and borrowing was a phenomenon common to many civilizations, as was usury, but they ‘no more constitute credit than working constitutes industrial labour or free wage labour. And credit as an essential, developed relation of production appears *historically* only in circulation based on capital’ (Marx 1973: 535). Prices and

exchange also existed in ancient society, ‘but the increasing determination of the former by costs of production, as well as the increasing dominance of the latter over all relations of production, only develop fully ... in bourgeois society, the society of free competition’; or ‘what Adam Smith, in the true eighteenth-century manner, puts in the prehistoric period, the period preceding history, is rather a product of history’ (Marx 1973: 156). Furthermore, just as he criticized the economists for their lack of historical sense, Marx mocked Proudhon and all the socialists who thought that labour productive of exchange value could exist without developing into wage labour, that exchange value could exist without turning into capital, or that there could be capital without capitalists (see Marx 1973: 248).

Marx’s chief aim in the opening pages of the ‘Introduction’ is therefore to assert the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production: to demonstrate, as he would again affirm in *Capital*, vol. III, that it ‘is not an absolute mode of production’ but ‘merely historical, transitory’ (Marx 1998: 240).

This viewpoint implies a different way of seeing many questions, including the labour process and its various characteristics. In the *Grundrisse* Marx wrote that ‘the bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic stage of social development that the necessity of the objectification of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their alienation’ (Marx 1973: 832). Marx repeatedly took issue with this presentation of the specific forms of the capitalist mode of production as if they were constants of the production process as such. To portray wage labour not as a distinctive relation of a particular historical form of production but as a universal reality of man’s economic existence was to imply that exploitation and alienation had always existed and would always continue to exist.

Evasion of the specificity of capitalist production therefore had both epistemological and political consequences. On the one hand, it impeded understanding of the concrete historical levels of production; on the other hand, in defining present conditions as unchanged and unchangeable, it presented capitalist production as production in general and bourgeois social relations as natural human relations. Accordingly, Marx’s critique of the theories of economists had a twofold value. As well as underlining that a historical characterization was indispensable for an understanding of reality, it had the precise political aim of countering the dogma of the immutability of the capitalist mode of production. A demonstration of the historicity of the capitalist order would also be proof of its transitory character and of the possibility of its elimination.

An echo of the ideas contained in this first part of the ‘Introduction’ may be found in the closing pages of *Capital*, vol. III, where Marx writes that ‘identification of the social production process with the simple labour process’ is a ‘confusion’ (Marx 1998: 870). For,

to the extent that the labour process is solely a process between man and Nature, its simple elements remain common to all social forms of development. But each specific historical form of this process further develops its material foundations and social forms. Whenever a certain stage of maturity has been reached, the specific historical form is discarded and makes way for a higher one.

(Marx 1998: 870)

Capitalism is not the only stage in human history, nor is it the final one. Marx foresees that it will be succeeded by an organization of society based upon ‘communal production’ (*gemeinschaftliche Production*), in which the labour product is ‘from the beginning *directly* general’ (Marx 1973: 172).

II. Production as a totality

In the succeed pages of the ‘Introduction’, Marx passes to a deeper consideration of production and begins with the following definition: ‘All production is appropriation [*Aneignung*] of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society [*bestimmten Gesellschaftsform*’ (Marx 1973: 87). There was no ‘production in general’ – since it was divided into agriculture, cattle-raising, manufacturing and other branches – but nor could it be considered as ‘only particular production’. Rather, it was ‘always a certain social body [*Gesellschaftskörper*], a social subject [*gesellschaftliches Subject*], active in a greater or sparser totality of branches of production’ (Marx 1973: 86).

Here again, Marx developed his arguments through a critical encounter with the main exponents of economic theory. Those who were his contemporaries had acquired the habit of prefacing their work with a section on the general conditions of production and the circumstances which, to a greater or lesser degree, advanced productivity in various societies. For Marx, however, such preliminaries set forth ‘flat tautologies’ (Marx 1973: 86) and, in the case of John Stuart Mill, were designed to present production ‘as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history’ and bourgeois relations as ‘inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded’ (Marx 1973: 87). According to Mill, ‘the laws and conditions of the production of wealth partake of the character of physical truths. ... It is not so with the distribution of wealth. That is a matter of human institutions solely’ (Mill 1965: 199).⁸ Marx considered this a ‘crude tearing-apart of production and distribution and of their real relationship’ (Marx 1973: 87), since, as he put it elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, ‘the “laws and conditions” of the production of wealth and the laws of the “distribution of wealth” are the same laws under different forms, and both change, undergo the same historic process; are as such only moments of a historic process’ (Marx 1973: 832).⁹

After making these points, Marx proceeds in the second section of the ‘Introduction’ to examine the general relationship of production to distribution, exchange and consumption. This division of political economy had been made by James Mill, who had used these four categories as the headings for the four chapters comprising his book of 1821, *Elements of Political Economy*, and before him, in

⁸ These statements aroused Marx’s interest, and in September 1850 he wrote notes on them in one of his notebooks of extracts: (see Marx 1983: 36). A few lines further on, however, Mill partly disavowed his categorical assertion, though not in the sense of a historicization of production. ‘Distribution,’ he wrote, ‘depends on the laws and customs of society’, and since these are the product of ‘the opinions and feelings of mankind’ – themselves nothing but ‘consequences of the fundamental laws of human nature’ – the laws of distribution ‘are as little arbitrary, and have as much the character of physical laws, as the laws of production’ (Mill 1965: 200). His ‘Preliminary Remarks’ at the beginning of the book may offer a possible synthesis: ‘[u]nlike the laws of production, those of distribution are partly of human institution: since the manner in which wealth is distributed in any given society depends on the statutes or usages therein prevalent’ (Mill 1965: 21).

⁹ Hence, those like Mill who consider the relations of production as eternal and only their forms of distribution as historical ‘show that [they] understand neither the one nor the other’ (Marx 1973: 758).

1803, by Jean-Baptiste Say, who had divided his *Traité d'économie politique* into three books on the production, distribution and consumption of wealth.¹⁰

Marx reconstructed the interconnection among the four rubrics in logical terms, in accordance with Hegel's schema of universality – particularity – individuality: (see Hegel 1969: 666f.) 'Production, distribution, exchange and distribution form a regular syllogism; production is the universality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the individuality in which the whole is joined together'. In other words, production was the starting-point of human activity, distribution and exchange were the twofold intermediary point – the former being the mediation operated by society, the latter by the individual – and consumption became the end point. However, as this was only a 'shallow coherence', Marx wished to analyse more deeply how the four spheres were correlated with one another (Marx 1973: 89).

His first object of investigation was the relationship between production and consumption, which he explained as one of immediate identity: 'production is consumption' and 'consumption is production'. With the help of Spinoza's principle of *determinatio est negatio*, he showed that production was also consumption, in so far as the productive act used up the powers of the individual as well as raw materials (see Spinoza 1955: 370). Indeed, the economists had already highlighted this aspect with their terms 'productive consumption' and differentiated this from 'consumptive production'. The latter occurred only after the product was distributed, re-entering the sphere of reproduction, and constituting 'consumption proper'. In productive consumption 'the producer objectifies himself', while in consumptive production 'the object he created personifies itself' (Marx 1973: 90-1).

Another characteristic of the identity of production and consumption was discernible in the reciprocal 'mediating movement' that developed between them. Consumption gives the product its 'last finish' and, by stimulating the propensity to produce, 'creates the need for *new* production' (Marx 1973: 91). In the same way, production furnishes not only the object for consumption, but also 'a need for the material'. Once the stage of natural immediacy is left behind, need is generated by the object itself; 'production not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object' – that is, a consumer (Marx 1973: 92). So,

production produces consumption (1) by creating the material for it; (2) by determining the manner of consumption; and (3) by creating the products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the consumer. It thus produces the object of consumption, the manner of consumption and the motive of consumption.

(Marx 1973: 92)

To recapitulate: there is a process of unmediated identity between production and consumption; these also mediate each other in turn, and create each other as they are realized. Nevertheless, Marx thought it a mistake to consider the two as identical – as Say and Proudhon did, for example. For, in the last analysis, 'consumption as urgency, as need, is itself an intrinsic moment of productive activity'.

Marx then turns to analyse the relationship between production and distribution. Distribution, he writes, is the link between production and consumption, and 'in accordance with social laws' it determines what share of the products is due

¹⁰ Marx knew both texts very well: they were among the first works of political economy he studied, and he copied many extracts from them into his notebooks.

to the producers (Marx 1973: 94). The economists present it as a sphere autonomous from production, so that in their treatises the economic categories are always posed in a dual manner. Land, labour and capital figure in production as the agents of distribution, while in distribution, in the form of ground rent, wages and profit, they appear as sources of income. Marx opposes this split, which he judges illusory and mistaken, since the form of distribution ‘is not an arbitrary arrangement, which could be different; it is, rather, posited by the form of production itself’ (Marx 1973: 594). In the ‘Introduction’ he expresses his thinking as follows:

An individual who participates in production in the form of wage labour shares in the products, in the results of production, in the form of wages. The structure of distribution is completely determined by the structure of production. Distribution itself a product of production, not only in its object, in that only the results of production can be distributed, but also in its form, in that the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution, i.e. the pattern of participation in distribution. It is altogether an illusion to posit land in production, ground rent in distribution, etc.

(Marx 1973: 95)

Those who saw distribution as autonomous from production conceived of it as mere distribution of products. In reality, it included two important phenomena that were prior to production: distribution of the instruments of production and distribution of the members of society among various kinds of production, or what Marx defined as ‘subsumption of the individuals under specific relations of production’ (Marx 1973: 96). These two phenomena meant that in some historical cases – for example, when a conquering people subjects the vanquished to slave labour, or when a redivision of landed estates gives rise to a new type of production (see Marx 1973: 96) – ‘distribution is not structured and determined by production, but rather the opposite, production by distribution’ (Marx 1973: 96). The two were closely linked to each other, since, as Marx puts it elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, ‘these modes of distribution are the relations of production themselves, but *sub specie distributionis*’ (Marx 1973: 832). Thus, in the words of the ‘Introduction’, ‘to examine production while disregarding this internal distribution within it is obviously an empty abstraction’.

The link between production and distribution, as conceived by Marx, sheds light not only on his aversion to the way in which John Stuart Mill rigidly separated the two but also on his appreciation of Ricardo for having posed the need ‘to grasp the specific social structure of modern production’ (Marx 1973: 96). The English economist did indeed hold that ‘to determine the laws which regulate this distribution is the principal problem in Political Economy’ (Ricardo 1973: 3), and therefore he made distribution one of his main objects of study, since ‘he conceived the forms of distribution as the most specific expression into which the agents of production of a given society are cast’ (Marx 1973: 96). For Marx, too, distribution was not reducible to the act through which the shares of the aggregate product were distributed among members of society; it was a decisive element of the entire productive cycle. Yet this conviction did not overturn his thesis that production was always the primary factor within the production process as a whole:

The question of the relation between this distribution and the production it determines belongs evidently within production itself. ... [P]roduction

does indeed have its determinants and preconditions, which form its moments. At the very beginning these may appear as spontaneous, natural. But by the process of production itself they are transformed from natural into historic determinants, and if they appear to one epoch as natural presuppositions of production, they were its historic product for another.

(Marx 1973: 97, trans. modified)

For Marx, then, although the distribution of the instruments of production and the members of society among the various productive branches ‘appears as a presupposition of the new period of production, it is ... itself in turn a product of production, not only of historical production generally, but of the specific historic mode of production’ (Marx 1973: 98).

When Marx lastly examined the relationship between production and exchange, he also considered the latter to be part of the former. Not only was ‘the exchange of activities and abilities’ among the workforce, and of the raw materials necessary to prepare the finished product, an integral part of production; the exchange between dealers was also wholly determined by production and constituted a ‘producing activity’. Exchange becomes autonomous from production only in the phase where ‘the product is exchanged directly for consumption’. Even then, however, its intensity, scale and characteristic features are determined by the development and structure of production, so that ‘in all its moments ... exchange appears as either directly comprised in production or determined by it’.

At the end of his analysis of the relationship of production to distribution, exchange and consumption, Marx draws two conclusions: (1) production should be considered as a totality; and (2) production as a particular branch within the totality predominates over the other elements. On the first point he writes: ‘The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity’ (Marx 1973: 99). Employing the Hegelian concept of totality,¹¹ Marx sharpened a theoretical instrument – more effective than the limited processes of abstraction used by the economists – one capable of showing, through the reciprocal action among parts of the totality, that the concrete was a differentiated unity (see Hall 2003: 127) of plural determinations and relations, and that the four separate rubrics of the economists were both arbitrary and unhelpful for an understanding of real economic relations. In Marx’s conception, however, the definition of production as an organic totality did not point to a structured, self-regulating whole within which uniformity was always guaranteed among its various branches. On the contrary, as he wrote in a section of the *Grundrisse* dealing with the same argument: the individual moments of production ‘may or may not find each other, balance each other, correspond to each other. The inner necessity of moments which belong together, and their indifferent, independent existence towards one another, are already a foundation of contradictions’. Marx argued that it was always necessary to analyse these contradictions in relation to capitalist production (not production in general), which was not at all ‘the absolute form for the development of the forces of production’, as

¹¹ ‘For the truth is concrete; that is, whilst it gives a bond and principle of unity, it also possesses an internal source of development. Truth, then, is only possible as a universe or totality of thought; and the freedom of the whole, as well as the necessity of the several subdivisions, which it implies, are only possible when these are discriminated and defined’ (Hegel 1892: 24).

the economists proclaimed, but had its ‘fundamental contradiction’ in overproduction (Marx 1973: 415).

Marx’s second conclusion made production the ‘predominant moment’ (*übergreifende Moment*) over the other parts of the ‘totality of production’ (*Totalität der Production*) (Marx 1973: 86). It was the ‘real point of departure’ (*Ausgangspunkt*) (Marx 1973: 94), from which ‘the process always returns to begin anew’, and so ‘a definite production determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments*’ (Marx 1973: 99). But such predominance did not cancel the importance of the other moments, nor their influence on production. The dimension of consumption, the transformations of distribution and the size of the sphere of exchange – or of the market – were all factors jointly defining and impacting on production.

Here again Marx’s insights had a value both theoretical and political. In opposition to other socialists of his time, who maintained that it was possible to revolutionize the prevailing relations of production by transforming the instrument of circulation, he argued that this clearly demonstrated their ‘misunderstanding’ of ‘the inner connections between the relations of production, of distribution and of circulation’ (Marx 1973: 122). For not only would a change in the form of money leave unaltered the relations of production and the other social relations determined by them; it would also turn out to be a nonsense, since circulation could change only together with a change in the relations of production. Marx was convinced that ‘the evil of bourgeois society is not to be remedied by “transforming” the banks or by founding a rational “money system”’, nor through bland palliatives such as the granting of free credit, nor through the chimera of turning workers into capitalists (Marx 1973: 134). The central question remained the overcoming of wage labour, and first and foremost that concerned production.

III. Alienation: from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital*

The overcoming of wage labour was strictly related to another key concept for Marx: alienation. The decisive event that finally revolutionized the diffusion of the concept of alienation was the appearance, in 1932, of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a previously unpublished text from Marx’s youth. It rapidly became one of the most widely translated, circulated and discussed philosophical writings of the 20th century, revealing the central role that Marx had given to the theory of alienation during an important period for the formation of his economic thought: the discovery of political economy. For, with his category of alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*), Marx not only widened the problem of alienation from the philosophical, religious and political sphere to the economic sphere of material production; he also showed that the economic sphere was essential to understanding and overcoming alienation in the other spheres. In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation is presented as the phenomenon through which the labour product confronts labour ‘as something alien, as a power independent of the producer’. For Marx,

‘the externalization [*Entäußerung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.’

(Marx 1992a: 324)

Alongside this general definition, Marx listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: 1) from the product of his labour, which becomes ‘an alien object that has power over him’; 2) in his working activity, which he perceives as ‘directed against himself’, as if it ‘does not belong to him’ (Marx 1992a: 327); 3) from ‘man’s species-being’, which is transformed into ‘a being alien to him’; and 4) from other human beings, and in relation to their labour and the object of their labour (Marx 1992a: 330).¹²

For Marx, in contrast to Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labour and the transformation of labour products into objects standing opposed to producers. The political difference between these two positions is enormous. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labour, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular, capitalist, epoch of production, and thought it would be possible to overcome it through ‘the emancipation of society from private property’ (Marx 1992a: 333). He would make similar points in the notebooks containing extracts from James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy*:

‘Labour would be the free expression and hence the enjoyment of life. In the framework of private property it is the alienation of life since I work in order to live, in order to procure for myself the means of life. My labour is not life. Moreover, in my labour the specific character of my individuality would be affirmed because it would be my individual life. Labour would be authentic, active, property. In the framework of private property my individuality has been alienated to the point where I loathe this activity, it is torture for me. It is in fact no more than the appearance of activity and for that reason it is only a forced labour imposed on me not through an inner necessity but through an external arbitrary need.’

(Marx 1992b: 278)

So, even in these fragmentary and sometimes hesitant early writings, Marx always discussed alienation from a historical, not a natural, point of view.

In the second half of the 1840s, Marx no longer made frequent use of the term ‘alienation’; the main exceptions were his first book, *The Holy Family* (1845), jointly authored with Engels, where it appears in some polemics against Bruno and Edgar Bauer, and one passage in *The German Ideology* (1845-6), also written with Engels. Once he had abandoned the idea of publishing *The German Ideology*, he returned to the theory of alienation in *Wage Labour and Capital*, a collection of articles based on lectures he gave to the German Workers’ League in Brussels in 1847, but the term itself does not appear in them, because it would have had too abstract a ring for his intended audience. In these texts, he wrote that wage labour does not enter into the worker’s ‘own life activity’ but represents a ‘sacrifice of his life’. Labour-power is a commodity that the worker is forced to sell ‘in order to live’, and ‘the product of his activity [is] not the object of his activity’ (Marx 1977: 202):

¹² For an account of Marx’s four-part typology of alienation, see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971, 136-52.

‘the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc. – does he consider this twelve hours’ weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where these activities cease, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours’ labour, on the other hand, have no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc. but as *earnings*, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed. If the silkworm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker.’

(Marx 1977: 203)

Until the late 1850s there were no more references to the theory of alienation in Marx’s work. Following the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, he was forced to go into exile in London; once there, he concentrated all his energies on the study of political economy and, apart from a few short works with a historical theme,¹³ did not publish another book. When he began to write about economics again, however, in the *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (better known as the *Grundrisse*), he more than once used the term ‘alienation’. This text recalled in many respects the analyses of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, although nearly a decade of studies in the British Library had allowed him to make them considerably more profound:

‘The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth.’

(Marx 1993: 157)

The account of alienation in the *Grundrisse*, then, is enriched by a greater understanding of economic categories and by more rigorous social analysis. The link it establishes between alienation and exchange-value is an important aspect of this. And, in one of the most dazzling passages on this phenomenon of modern society, Marx links alienation to the opposition between capital and ‘living labour-power’:

‘The objective conditions of living labour appear as *separated, independent* values opposite living labour capacity as subjective being.... The objective conditions of living labour capacity are presupposed as having an existence independent of it, as the objectivity of a subject distinct from living labour capacity and standing independently over against it; the reproduction and *realization*, i.e. the expansion of these *objective conditions*, is therefore at the same time their own reproduction and new production as the wealth of an alien subject indifferently and independently standing over against labour

¹³ See *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and the *Revelations concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne* and *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*.

capacity. What is reproduced and produced anew is not only the *presence* of these objective conditions of living labour, but also their presence as independent values, i.e. values belonging to an alien subject, confronting this living labour capacity. The objective conditions of labour attain a subjective existence *vis-à-vis* living labour capacity – capital turns into capitalist.’ (Marx 1993: 461-2)

The *Grundrisse* was not the only text of Marx’s maturity to feature an account of alienation. Five years after it was composed, the ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’ – also known as ‘*Capital, Volume One: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished*’ (1863-4) – brought the economic and political analyses of alienation more closely together. ‘The rule of the capitalist over the worker,’ Marx wrote, ‘is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer’ (Marx 1976: 990). In capitalist society, by virtue of ‘the transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital’, (Marx 1976: 1058) there is a veritable ‘personification of things and reification of persons’, creating the appearance that ‘the *material conditions of labour* are not subject to the worker, but he to them’ (Marx 1976: 1054). In reality, he argued:

‘Capital is not a thing, any more than money is a thing. In capital, as in money, certain specific social relations of production between people appear as relations of things to people, or else certain social relations appear as the natural properties of things in society. Without a class dependent on wages, the moment individuals confront each other as free persons, there can be no production of surplus-value; without the production of surplus-value there can be no capitalist production, and hence no capital and no capitalist! Capital and wage-labour (it is thus we designate the labour of the worker who sells his own labour-power) only express two aspects of the self-same relationship. Money cannot become capital unless it is exchanged for labour-power, a commodity sold by the worker himself. Conversely, work can only be wage-labour when its *own* material conditions confront it as autonomous powers, alien property, value existing for itself and maintaining itself, in short as capital. If capital in its material aspects, i.e. in the use-values in which it has its being, must depend for its existence on the material conditions of labour, these material conditions must equally, on the formal side, confront labour *as alien, autonomous powers*, as value – objectified labour – which treats living labour as a mere means whereby to maintain and increase itself.’ (Marx 1976: 1005-6)

In the capitalist mode of production, human labour becomes an instrument of the valorization process of capital, which, ‘by incorporating living labour-power into the material constituents of capital,... becomes an animated monster and ... starts to act “as if consumed by love”’ (Marx 1976: 1007). This mechanism keeps expanding in scale, until co-operation in the production process, scientific discoveries and the deployment of machinery – all of them social processes belonging to the collective – become forces of capital that appear as its natural properties, confronting the workers in the shape of the capitalist order:

‘The productive forces ... developed [by] social labour ... appear as the *productive forces of capitalism*. [...] Collective unity in co-operation,

combination in the division of labour, the use of the forces of nature and the sciences, of the products of labour, as machinery – all these confront the individual workers as something *alien, objective, ready-made*, existing without their intervention, and frequently even hostile to them. They all appear quite simply as the prevailing forms of the instruments of labour. As objects they are independent of the workers whom they dominate. Though the workshop is to a degree the product of the workers' combination, its entire intelligence and will seem to be incorporated in the capitalist or his understrappers, and the workers find themselves confronted by the *functions* of the capital that lives in the capitalist.' (Marx 1976: 1054)

Through this process capital becomes something 'highly mysterious'. 'The conditions of labour pile up in front of the worker as social forces, and they assume a capitalized form' (Marx 1976: 1056).

Beginning in the 1960s, the diffusion of '*Capital, Volume One: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished*' and, above all, of the *Grundrisse* paved the way for a conception of alienation different from the one then hegemonic in sociology and psychology. It was a conception geared to the overcoming of alienation in practice – to the political action of social movements, parties and trade unions to change the working and living conditions of the working class. The publication of what (after the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in the 1930s) may be thought of as the 'second generation' of Marx's writings on alienation therefore provided not only a coherent theoretical basis for new studies of alienation, but above all an anti-capitalist ideological platform for the extraordinary political and social movement that exploded in the world during those years. Alienation left the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities, took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles, and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

IV. Commodity fetishism and de-alienation

One of Marx's best accounts of alienation is contained in the famous section of *Capital* on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', where he shows that, in capitalist society, people are dominated by the products they have created. Here, the relations among them appear not 'as direct social relations between persons..., but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx 1996: 166):

'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists ... in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. [...] It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life

of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.'

(Marx 1996: 164-5)

Two elements in this definition mark a clear dividing line between Marx's conception of alienation and the one held by most of the other authors we have been discussing. First, Marx conceives of fetishism not as an individual problem but as a social phenomenon, not as an affair of the mind but as a real power, a particular form of domination, which establishes itself in market economy as a result of the transformation of objects into subjects. For this reason, his analysis of alienation does not confine itself to the disquiet of individual women and men, but extends to the social processes and productive activities underlying it. Second, for Marx fetishism manifests itself in a precise historical reality of production, the reality of wage labour; it is not part of the relation between people and things as such, but rather of the relation between man and a particular kind of objectivity: the commodity form.

In bourgeois society, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated alienation from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities. *Pace* those who deny that a theory of alienation is present in Marx's mature work, we should stress that commodity fetishism did not replace alienation but was only one aspect of it (Cf. Schaff 1980: 81).

The theoretical advance from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital* and its related materials does not, however, consist only in the greater precision of his account of alienation. There is also a reformulation of the measures that Marx considers necessary for it to be overcome. Whereas in 1844 he had argued that human beings would eliminate alienation by abolishing private production and the division of labour, the path to a society free of alienation was much more complicated in *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts. Marx held that capitalism was a system in which the workers were subject to capital and the conditions it imposed. Nevertheless, it had created the foundations for a more advanced society, and by generalizing its benefits humanity would be able to progress along the faster road of social development that it had opened up. According to Marx, a system that produced an enormous accumulation of wealth for the few and deprivation and exploitation for the general mass of workers must be replaced with 'an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force' (Marx 1996: 171). This type of production would differ from wage labour because it would place its determining factors under collective governance, take on an immediately general character and convert labour into a truly social activity. This was a conception of society at the opposite pole from Hobbes's "war of all against all"; and its creation did not require a merely political process, but would necessarily involve transformation of the sphere of production. But such a change in the labour process had its limits:

'Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it

as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.’
(Marx 1998: 959)

This post-capitalist system of production, together with scientific-technological progress and a consequent reduction of the working day, creates the possibility for a new social formation in which the coercive, alienated labour imposed by capital and subject to its laws is gradually replaced with conscious, creative activity beyond the yoke of necessity, and in which complete social relations take the place of random, undifferentiated exchange dictated by the laws of commodities and money. It is no longer the realm of freedom for capital but the realm of genuine human freedom.

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