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Alienation

MARX'S CONCEPTION OF MAN
IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

BERTELL OLLMAN

*Associate Professor
Department of Politics, New York University*

SECOND EDITION



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Preface to the second edition

A book like *Alienation* is never truly finished; its arguments are only more or less ready to be read. Under the sometimes forceful prodding of critics and other readers, I have tried to improve its readiness by filling in bothersome gaps, providing occasional clarifications and otherwise strengthening positions that events have shown to be wanting.

Most of the critical comment, both favorable and unfavorable, directed at *Alienation* has had to do with my attributing to Marx a philosophy of internal relations and the conclusions I drew from this. That this was in part foreseen is evidenced by the appendix to the first edition in which I tried to respond, before the fact, to expected criticisms. This was clearly insufficient, as these same and similar objections fell upon me from all sides, including the side of those who had much praise for the book. I would like to take advantage of this second edition to return to the fray and offer a more extended defense for my interpretation, especially since I consider it to be absolutely central to what is of value not only in this book but in the book I am now writing on Marx's method. The response to my critics on the question of internal relations is found in Appendix II of this edition.

Two other major additions to *Alienation* are the systematic discussion of Marx's theory of ideology (now Chapter 32), elements of which were formerly dispersed throughout the book, and an attempt to set the treatment of political alienation in the framework of Marx's broader theory of the state (now Section III of Chapter 30). The latter is also offered as a model of how an approach based on internal relations can be used to integrate various apparently contradictory interpretations of Marx's views.

Finally, I should also like to draw the attention of those familiar with the first edition – whose comments, after all, provoked most of these revisions – to my efforts at clarifying the political implications of holding that Marx did or did not have an ethics (pp. 46-7, 50-1), the basis for his inconsistent use of the concept 'class' (pp. 120-2), the sense in which one can and cannot speak of alienation in the 'communist' countries (perhaps the most frequently asked of all questions) (pp. 252-3), and the theoretical

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status of Marx's vision of communism and the means and criteria for judging it (pp. 49, 118-9, 238-9). While all these additions/changes and the many minor ones have not by any means made *Alienation* into a new book, I have no doubt that they have helped make it into a better one.

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Note on translations

The English translations of Marx's works have been used whenever they were available. Where I had doubts about the translation of a particular expression I checked the German original. For the very involved *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which occupies a central place in my study, I have used Martin Milligan's translation (Moscow, 1959) in preference to the more recent one by T. B. Bottomore (London, 1963) and Ria Stone's little known mimeographed translation (n.p., 1949).

Though very difficult to follow, it is my impression that Milligan's effort is a more faithful rendering of what Marx wrote than either of the others. Bottomore's work, in particular, in attempting to simplify, has often chosen the better known English expression over the accurate one. On p. 157, for example, he translates *Wesen* as 'significance', while Milligan renders it as 'essence' (p. 103); on p. 153, Bottomore translates *abstrahieren* as 'eliminates', while Milligan renders it as 'abstracts' (p. 99); and there are many such instances. The importance of these differences, which may seem trivial now, will become clear as my interpretation develops.

Furthermore, in preparing his translation of the text which appears in the *Gesamtausgabe*, Milligan made use of the recent corrections (1956) of typographical and other errors that had found their way into the first edition. Some of these changes are not without importance, such as the substitution on several occasions of *Genuss* (happiness) for *Geist* (spirit).

In my own efforts at translating Marx's texts, I have tried to follow as far as possible the pattern set by Milligan. Thus, for example, *Wesen* is generally rendered by 'essence', 'nature' or 'being'; *Kraft* is generally rendered by 'power', and *Wesenskraft* by 'essential power'. Again, the significance of these English expressions, and others which I regularly substitute for Marx's originals, will become clear later.

The attempt to be consistent has also meant that I have had, on occasion, to alter words in the English editions of Marx's other works. Any change considered significant is mentioned in the footnotes. The footnotes are also used to comment on problems that arise in translating particular terms when these terms make

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their appearance in the text. In this respect, the present 'Note on translations' is only an introduction to the subject of translating Marx which is dealt with in more detail in the pages to come.

Acknowledgements

Whatever its achievements and failures, this work stands as a tribute to Isaiah Berlin without whose aid as a teacher and friend it could never have been completed. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge the debt I owe to his wisdom and kindness. Among the many people who have read portions and offered helpful criticisms, Marshall Berman, Ann Spackman, Richard Gombrich, Norman Pollach, Z. A. Pelczynski, Graeme Duncan, Peter Sedgwick, Steven Lukes, Charles Taylor, Peter Waterman, Paul Sweezy, David McLellan, Shlomo Avineri, Colwyn Williamson and, in particular, Maximilien Rubel and John Plamenatz deserve special thanks. None of the above, of course, bear any responsibility for the judgements expressed. Financially, the task of research was considerably eased through the generosity of the Ford Foundation and of St. Antony's College (Oxon.), and I would like to thank them for their help as well.

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'Marxism' is essentially Marx's interpretation of capitalism, the unfinished results of his study into how our society works, how it developed, and where it is tending. Men in their relations with each other, their products and activities are the primary subject matter of this study. It is *men* who fight on both sides of the class struggle, men who sell their labor-power, men who buy it, and so on. Though Marx generally organizes his findings around such non-human factors as the mode of production, class and value, his theory of alienation places the acting and acted upon individual in the center of this account. In this theory, man himself is offered as the vantage point from which to view his own relations, actual and potential, to society and nature; his conditions become an extension of who he is and what he does, rather than the reverse. To expound the analysis of capitalism made from this vantage point, an analysis that remains little known despite the current preoccupation with the term 'alienation', is the task of this book.

Marx's individual, however, is himself a product of theory. Marx has a conception of how men appear, what they feel and think, what motives influence them and how much, and – on another plane – what they are capable of, both in existing and in new conditions. Without these qualities, they could not or would not respond to events in the manner Marx posits. For even if we accept that material conditions are as he describes them, there is no need for people to react as Marx says they do and will unless they bring to their situation such qualities as make other action impossible or extremely unlikely. Consequently, any account of alienation as an explanatory social theory focusing on the individual must begin by clarifying what is distinctive in Marx's conception of human nature.

Marx seems to have been aware of the significance of other writers' views on man and, to some extent, of man's status in their broader theories, but he was only partially and intermittently aware of his own. He notes, for example, that 'our philosophic consciousness is so arranged that only the image of man that it conceives appears to it as the real man', but this barb of wisdom is never pointed inward.¹ The 'True Socialists' are condemned because they take the 'German petty philistine' as the typical man, and see his

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qualities in everybody.² Bentham is accused of doing the same thing with his ideal, the English shopkeeper.³

However, Marx's chief objection to these writers' views is that they are unhistorical, that they fail to take account of the transformations in human character that follow changes in social conditions. Taking the individual simply for what he appears, as something given, of the same order as the earth and the sky rather than as a product of his time, is declared by Marx to be an illusion characteristic of each epoch in history.⁴ For him, variations in human nature are also produced by the diverse conditions of life found inside the same society. For example, the contrasting qualities of capitalists and workers are said to be due to differences in the circumstances in which each class lives. Obviously, a conception of human nature which does not take these factors into account is faulty at its inception, but to take them into account, as Marx does, is not the same as being without a conception of human nature. It merely complicates this conception with the addition of these new factors.

Marx's own conception of human nature was most fully, if not carefully, worked out in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and in *The German Ideology* (1846). Yet, the form of presentation makes coming to grips with this conception an involved and cumbersome task. Relevant material on the subject of man can also be found throughout Marx's writings, but it is not nearly so concentrated as in these early works, neither of which was published. Two questions arise: why did Marx not present his conception of human nature in a more ordered fashion? And why did he not publish the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*? The latter question, which is also asked by critics who would like to dismiss these works as 'immature', must be taken first.

To begin with, Marx did try to publish *The German Ideology*, and only failed because conditions in Germany did not allow it. He tells us in the aftermath that he did not mind abandoning this work 'to the gnawing criticism of the mice' because it had achieved its main purpose – self-clarification.⁵ Marx always wrote to obtain specific ends, and, once the philosophies he attacked as pernicious in *The German Ideology* began to decline, the purpose – other than self-clarification – for which he wrote this early work became obsolete. Furthermore, Marx was constantly revising his exposition, and

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he must have soon realized that the form in which he first presented his positive views was unfathomable to the working class people he most wanted to understand them.⁶

Like *The German Ideology*, but even more so, the *1844 Manuscripts* is an exercise in self-clarification. In much less space it manages to cover much more ground. While *The German Ideology* is essentially an historical and philosophical work, one cannot classify the *1844 Manuscripts*, despite the label that has been attached to it, in the same way. History, philosophy, economics, psychology, anthropology, ethics, religion and sociology crisscross each other in an amazingly complex pattern as Marx's intellect ranges across the whole terrain of what he knows. In this work, Marx provided himself with the brave outlines of a new system, but he was surely aware that this first statement of his views would convince no one and that few would even comprehend what he was saying.

In explaining why Marx did not publish *The German Ideology*, I have also accounted in part for why Marx did not present his conception of human nature in a more ordered fashion. Human nature was an important topic when he wanted to put his own house in order, but he hesitated to give it the same prominence when his purpose was to explain his views and to convince others. Proletarian class consciousness could be better affected by emphasizing environmental factors which are open to direct kinds of evidence and which can be developed in discussion. Whereas talk about human nature, as Marx recognized, is too often a means of putting an end to discussion.

Moreover, and this is probably as important, in the years immediately following 1844 Marx was engaged in a series of political and ideological disputes with a number of petty bourgeois and socialist thinkers whose favorite expressions were 'human nature', 'humanity' and 'man in general'. In combating the 'True Socialists', Stirner, Feuerbach, Krieg and others, Marx was driven to distinguish his own theories by the relative absence of terms which were their main stock in trade and to formulate the thoughts they contained in another manner.

Yet, despite the fact that anthropology and psychology cease to be major subjects, man continues, of necessity, to occupy a central position in Marx's theories. And the men who act and interact in

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Marx's later writings are no different from those who appear in his early works. The conception of human nature with which he began has hardly altered. Thus, while the framework and categories used in *Alienation* are borrowed for the most part from the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, their content, as my quotations will amply show, is not so limited.

Before trying to reconstruct Marx's conception of human nature, there are problems concerning his broader philosophy that must be considered. In particular, one must make an author's peace with Marx's unusual terminology, a preliminary task which is too often shirked, to insure that no more or other is made of his expressions than he intends them to convey. The path from Marx's use of language leads directly to the view of reality which underlies it, and from here to the methods of inquiry and exposition that he felt this view required. These matters are dealt with in the opening Part. I would not devote much space to Marx's general philosophy in a work on alienation if this subject were treated adequately elsewhere. Unfortunately, I do not believe this is the case.

The organization of this book, therefore, is as follows: Part I deals with the philosophical foundations of Marxism, primarily with how Marx views all of reality; Part II deals with Marx's conception of human nature, or the ties Marx sees between man and nature, viewed in the above manner; and Part III with the theory of alienation, or what happens to these ties in capitalism, again viewed in the above manner. In erecting this pyramid of concerns, I have tried to keep necessary repetition, the presentation of familiar relations in new and more complex guises, to a minimum.

My treatment of Marxism also differs from that of most other writers in this field in being 'unhistorical' in three different senses: little attention is given to the development of Marx's ideas; not much time is spent on their genesis; and no attempt is made to set Marxism in the perspective of other ideas before and since. As for the first, I do not emphasize alterations in Marx's thinking because I do not see many there, especially when compared to the essential unity in Marxism from 1844 on. Consequently, to gain an understanding of these views, it is far more important to treat all Marx's writings as expressions of a single theoretical scheme than to give an undeserved emphasis to the relatively few and minor changes

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that occur. The latter approach only enhances the difficulty of grasping the interrelations present.

Even the concession which is always made regarding the new terminology Marx adopted after 1844 is overdone. The 'Hegelian' and 'Feuerbachian' language of the *1844 Manuscripts* is only partly replaced by another one better suited to presenting Marx's ideas and getting them accepted. As for the rest, Marx's specialization in the fields of politics, history and economics did not require a terminology which had been used primarily in discussions of philosophy and anthropology. Even in his later works, however, whenever connections across disciplines had to be made, he frequently resorted to these 'older' terms; though, as we shall see, their meanings may have altered somewhat through the change of context.

The view which holds that Marx's ideas must be partitioned according to the period in which they appear, each period taken as a radical departure from what came before, requires evidence of a kind that has nowhere been offered. First, one must show that Marx was aware of such a break, that he actually and clearly refers to his earlier views as incorrect. Second, one must show that what Marx either approves or disapproves of in his first works is treated in a contrary manner later on. And third, one must show that a significant number of early concepts do not enter into later works at all.

Though we find numerous allusions to developments and minor changes in theories and ways of presenting them, neither Marx nor Engels ever points to a change of mind that qualifies for the term 'break'. On the contrary, it was Marx's habit to return to his earlier notebooks in drafting his later works. Engels informs us, for example, that in writing *Capital* Marx used his notebooks of 1843-5.⁷ The *Grundrisse* (1858), which served as Marx's first draft for *Capital*, contains many pages which could have been lifted bodily from the *1844 Manuscripts*.⁸ Even in the published version of *Capital*, there is much more of Marx's 'earlier' ideas and concepts than is generally recognized. The chapters on Marx's economic theories in the middle of Part III are my attempt to document this thesis.

But if Marx's theories cannot conveniently be separated into periods, how can the many small changes and developments which did occur be accounted for? Clearly, I do not wish to say that

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Marx's views were always the same, or that 'true' Marxism is only what appears in the *1844 Manuscripts*, or in *The Communist Manifesto*, or in *Capital*. Instead, my position is that there is an *evolution* in Marx's thinking which is already present in the logic of his earliest commitments and knowledge, and that from the moment he began writing seriously about man and society his views progressed in a direction from which he never turned aside. As we shall see, the new areas he came to study, together with the results of his research are responsible for most of this theoretical development. The writings of 1842, 1844, 1846 and 1848 show the most significant alterations, but the essential unity of all the main ideas advanced must not be lost. In the following pages I treat the developments and changes in Marx's theories and expressions whenever they are relevant to the subject under discussion.

Relatively little time is devoted to the origins of Marx's ideas (hence, too, to their originality), not because this point is unimportant, but because I believe the prior task is to establish what these ideas are. The origins of any theoretical system can only be studied after one grasps it well enough to know what does and does not count as origins. This grasp is not achieved by seeking bits and pieces of Marxism in the works of other thinkers, but only by fitting together the relations in Marxism itself. Only after we know Marx's major theories, which includes their mutual relations as parts of a system, can we know what we are looking for. Otherwise, superficial similarities may be taken for influences, with the result that Marx's ideas are often made more difficult to understand by the very preparations made to understand them.

Finally, I do not set Marxism alongside other theories that have been expounded before and since, first, because until we know what Marxism is it makes little sense to provide it a niche in the history of ideas; and, second, because I admit to having a prejudice against accounts of Marxism which rely on analogies with other theories.

It is the intellectual's disease – a disease from which I am not wholly immune – to treat one thing by discussing everything which bears the slightest resemblance to it. When applied to Marxist exegesis, this means that Aristotle, Locke, Hegel, Feurbach, Rousseau, the Roman Catholic Church and many more people, ideas and things are used in extended analogies to highlight Marx's meaning. But all analogies have a tendency to be misleading both

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for the writer and his readers. The writer is tempted to substitute his understanding of the analogy for an understanding of his subject, and to trim the edges of the latter whenever necessary to facilitate comparison. The reader is tempted and often urged to do the same. To assert that Marx, like Aristotle, had a teleology, or that, like Rousseau, he believed man a social animal, or that, like Locke, he wanted man to be free is to mislead people into thinking that the similarity is more than that of a lowest common denominator. Marxism, understood as Marx's interpretation of capitalism, did not exist before Marx, nor in its pure form does it exist anywhere outside his writings. What Marx said is the raw material to be used in explaining Marxism.

What, then, of Engels? As Marx's intimate collaborator for almost forty years of his life and his literary executor after death, Engels is usually taken as a co-equal spokesman with Marx for the theories of Marxism. For most purposes, this procedure is perfectly justifiable. Certain small differences, however, do exist on the subject of man and alienation so that to deal fully with both men would require many exacting distinctions. Consequently, I have restricted my evidence for Marx's conception of human nature and the theory of alienation to Marx's own words. Yet, the marginal possibility of error in using Engels is not enough for me to ask readers to do the same. Occasionally (the section on philosophical foundations is replete with such instances), the forthrightness of Engels' speech on points where there is complete agreement with Marx supplants all other considerations, and he finds his way into the text as a totally reliable witness. A more detailed defense of Marx's and Engels' unity of views is offered in the forthcoming discussion of the dialectic, which has been the center of most of the controversy surrounding this unity.

Criticism, no matter how penetrating, if it comes at the wrong time is also out of place, and can be as effective a barrier to understanding as the most rigid stupidity. The threads of any argument, especially one so intricate as Marxism, should not be submitted to any definite pronouncements until a substantial piece of the cloth has been woven. Otherwise, one cannot be sure that what is under attack is 'what Marx really meant'. I am only too conscious of the fact that, generally, what is being disputed in the avalanche of exegetic material on Marxism is not what this socialist thinker said

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– the evidence of his writings particularly today is readily available
– but what he was 'trying to say'. Therefore, Marx must be allowed
sufficient time unimpeded by constant interruptions to establish his
views. For this reason I have delayed my own more important
critical comments until the end.

Throughout *Alienation* I have tried not to make Marxism more
consistent than it really is, while at the same time stressing its
essential unity. Marx is always the architect, this writer but the
archaeologist of his ideas.