

## KARL MARX (1818-1883)

*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844****Estranged Labor***

Marx lays out here his theory on the alienation of labor  
Marx's thesis would advance the view put forth by Rousseau  
that the social contract as Locke understood it  
would be a swindle by the rich  
in this swindle an economic system is made law  
though it leaves workers estranged or alienated from their labor and the product of their labor  
and inevitably estranged from themselves  
and their humanity—it dehumanizes the worker by turning him/her into a commodity and a machine

**I. Introduction**

at the outset Marx notes his starting point to be the “premises of political economy”  
what Marx is referring to by ‘political economy’  
is that form of political theory that derives from Locke  
in which the primary function of government is the protection of private property  
and the economic theory that begins with the assumption of private property  
and a social division between private property owners and propertyless workers

Marx closes the opening paragraph with the assertion  
that the economic system established by this ‘political economy’  
divides humanity into two distinct classes: “the property *owners* and the propertyless *workers*.”  
Marx will later refer to these separate classes as  
the *proletariat* (the workers) and the *bourgeoisie* (the property owners)

Marx notes that the theorists of ‘political economy’ (such as Adam Smith)  
begin with the fact of private property  
but are not able to explain private property  
they have abstract formulas that describe how the system works  
and they understand or take these formulas as laws  
but they do not quite comprehend how these laws  
arise from the nature of private property

Marx's central thesis is that the consequences of this economic system  
are not quite comprehended either:

The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are *greed* and the war *amongst the greedy—competition*.

in the third paragraph Marx is referring to the transformation  
from the feudal to the capitalist system  
where a doctrine of competition replaced a doctrine of monopoly  
and a doctrine of the freedom of the crafts replaced a doctrine of the guild  
and doctrine of the division of landed property replaced a doctrine of the big estate  
‘political economy’ does not understand, Marx contends, how  
competition, freedom of the crafts, and the division of landed property

were the “necessary, inevitable and natural consequences” of the feudal property system

Marx contends that one must begin with “economic facts”  
 need to understand the connections  
 between private property, greed, and the separation of labor  
 between capital and landed property  
 between exchange and competition  
 between value and the devaluation of men  
 “the connection between this whole estrangement and the *money* system”

Marx thus ridicules the starting point of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau  
 of going back to a state of nature or, as Marx notes, “a fictitious primordial condition”  
 such an analysis “explains nothing”  
 it assumes as fact what is supposed to be deduced  
 draws an analogy to Theology  
 which explains the problem of evil with the concept of the fall of man  
 when it is precisely this notion of the fall of man that needs to be explained  
 Marx will turn from this starting point in a fictional past  
 to a starting point grounded in “an economic fact *of the present*”

## **II. Marx’s analysis of the fact of political economy**

the central argument is that the present economic system  
 is one that involves the *alienation* of the worker  
 when the worker is estranged from the product of his labor  
 when “the worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien* object”  
 then the worker becomes “poorer the more wealth he produces”  
 and also “an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates”

as the value of the world of things increases  
 the value of the world of men decreases  
 the worker becomes poorer not only in a strictly economic sense  
 but his inner world is poorer the less that belongs to him as his own

in perhaps somewhat of an existentialist point  
 Marx draws again an analogy with religion:  
 “The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself” (411)

when the worker is not the owner of the product of his labor  
 not only does the product of his labor become an alien object  
 his labor itself becomes an object, that is alien to him:

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside* him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

the laws of political economy determine that  
 the worker “becomes a slave of his object”:  
 the more value he creates, the more valueless he becomes  
 the better formed the product of his labor, the more deformed becomes the worker

the more civilized the product of his labor, the more barbarous becomes the worker  
 the more powerful his labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker  
 the more ingenious the labor becomes, the more less ingenious becomes the worker

Marx would agree with Smith that the division labor produces wealth for the rich  
 but wants to emphasize the privation it produces for the worker  
 it produces palaces for the rich, but hovels for the worker  
 it produces beauty for the rich, but deformity for the worker

the advancement of technology produces more wealth for the rich  
 by replacing labor with machines  
 but in doing so it leaves for some workers only a barbarous type of labor  
 and for others, the workers themselves are turned into machines  
 it produces intelligence for some, “but for the worker stupidity, cretinism”

the central issue is the relationship between the worker and his production  
 Marx emphasizes that the worker is alienated not only from the product of his production  
 but also from the very process of production  
 the worker is thus alienated from his life activity

what lead to, or constitutes the alienation of labor?  
 For Marx the source of the alienation of the worker  
 is that he does not own his labor:

First, the fact that labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being, that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.

Marx suggests that the system of ‘political economy’  
 is really a system of ‘forced labor’ or slavery

Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.

Marx elaborates on the notion of the dehumanizing effect of this alienated labor:

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.

at this point Marx develops another theme:  
 that the system of ‘political economy’ not only alienates the worker  
 (1) from the product of his labor  
 and, in doing so, alienates him from the objects of nature  
 (2) and the process of his labor  
 and, in doing so, alienates the worker from himself  
 there is also another aspect of the alienation of the worker  
 (3) the worker is alienated from his “spiritual essence, his *human* being” (414)

Marx’s point here develops from an argument about what constitutes the

essential difference between human beings and animals  
 the principle difference, Marx, argues is that human beings have the capacity to choose their being  
 animals simply are their life activity—they don't have a choice in determining their life activity

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity.

this is what Marx means by defining the human being as a “species being”  
 as a conscious being the human being determines what being human is

It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or rather, it is only because he is a species being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential* being, a mere means to his *existence*.

whereas an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself, or for its young  
 human beings produce even when immediate needs are satisfied  
 the human being “only truly produces in freedom”

thus, when the worker is alienated from his labor  
 he is estranged from his “species being”  
 and thus from his spiritual essence

there is then one final aspect of this alienation of the worker  
 (4)the worker is alienated from his fellow men

An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species being is the *estrangement of man from man*.

as the individual worker is estranged from his essential nature  
 he is also estranged from others

### **III. Private property as the consequence of alienated labor**

Marx here turns to the relationship between the worker  
 and the owner of his labor

We must bear in mind the previous proposition that man's relation to himself only becomes for him *objective* and *actual* through his relation to the other man. Thus, if the product of his labor, his labor *objectified*, is for him an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him.

Marx's central point is that private property is not the starting point  
 it is rather the consequence of alienated labor:

Through *estranged, alienated* labor, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labor of a man alien to labor and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labor creates the relation to it of the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor). *Private property* is thus the product, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labor*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.

thus it is not private property that is the cause of alienated labor

but alienated labor that is the cause of private property  
again drawing the analogy with religion:

But on analysis of this concept it becomes clear that though private property appears to be the source, the cause of alienated labor, it is rather its consequence, just as the gods are *originally* not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion.

Marx acknowledges that the relationship between alienated labor and private property becomes reciprocal  
just as private property is the product of alienated labor  
private property becomes the source of alienated labor,  
“the means by which labor alienates itself”

#### **IV. Application of the analysis of alienated labor**

(1) the issue of *wages*

the system of political economy gives everything to private property  
and nothing to labor

a result of this is that *wages* and *private property* are identical

Marx thus does not think that a forced increase in wages would make a significant difference

*An enforced increase of wages* (disregarding all other difficulties, including the fact that it would only be by force, too, that higher wages, being an anomaly, could be maintained) would therefore be nothing but *better payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity.

2) the issue of the emancipation of workers

From the relationship of estranged labor to private property it follows further that the emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the *political* form of the *emancipation of the workers*; not that their emancipation alone is at stake, but because the emancipation of workers contains universal human emancipation. . . .

at the end of the essay Marx turns to two problems

1) the general *nature of private property* in relation to *truly human* and *social property*

2) how is alienated labor rooted in the nature of human development