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
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

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
inward, 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:

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\text{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.}
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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
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\text{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.}
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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