

## **What is alienated labour and what would unalienated labour be like?**

This essay argues that Marx's conception of alienation is seriously flawed when compared with that of Hegel because of a misunderstanding of Hegel by Marx.

Marx based his theory of alienation on Feuerbach's critique of Hegel. This presented Hegel as advocating the existence of a transcendent 'Spirit', the God of traditional theism, standing outside and above the realm of human life, yet intervening in it and shaping human history. This interpretation of Hegel coincided with that of the 'right' Hegelians, who wanted to bring Hegel into line with traditional Christian doctrine, but it is a distortion of Hegel's true position.

At issue here is the age-old question of universals. As W. T. Stace explains in *The philosophy of Hegel*, Hegel belonged to a long philosophical tradition that saw universals as being 'real', but not actually having independent existence. They were 'real' in the sense that existence ultimately depended on them, but they themselves only actually existed *through* the world of individual things.

Essentially, Hegel's Spirit equates to the whole of humanity's *social being*: art, culture, religion, politics, economics, wars, revolutions, class conflict, etc, etc. Alienation arises from the contradiction between this social being and individual consciousness. The movement of history is towards freedom, the process of overcoming this alienation through the reconciling of mankind's social being and the individual.

In opposition to Hegel's position concerning the 'real' nature of universals, Feuerbach and Marx resort to pure nominalism. Seeing Hegel's Spirit as something transcendent, they insist on beginning instead from finite existing individual human beings and developing a philosophical anthropology based on this. Their concept of '*species-being*' begins from trying to define a common universal property of human beings as a species. The difference between human beings and other animals, as they see it, is their universality. Whereas other animals are determined by their nature to specific ends, a human being is able to direct itself towards innumerable different ends. Marx saw social being as arising out of this "free conscious activity" of individuals:

man's consciousness of the necessity of association with the individuals around him is the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. (Marx and Engels GI: 42)

This in turn leads to the development of language:

language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. (GI: 41-42)

But problems begin to arise from this social intercourse that obstructs the individual "free conscious activity" that has brought it into existence.

Labour's realisation is its objectification. (Marx EPM: 69)

Objectified labour can become separated, estranged, alienated, from the labourer that produced it. He can produce, not just for himself, but for others. The growth of a division of labour means the requirements of production for others comes to dominate individual labour:

as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. (GI: 44-45)

The existence of alienated objectified labour leads inevitably to its becoming private property:

*Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated

labour (EPM: 80)

And this means the labourer's free conscious activity becomes transformed eventually into:

an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion and the yoke of another man. (EPM: 79)

For Marx, if labour is to become unalienated then it must *return* to a supposedly past form of free conscious activity, where the individual is not separated from his own labour. His descriptions of how this would happen under communism are really quite absurd in a modern society where, as Jonathan Wolff states:

there is probably not a single person on earth who could make a simple pencil (Woolf: 35-36)

Accepting Feuerbach's insistence on a nominalism that begins from defining individual human beings, in opposition to Hegel's conception of starting from humanity's social being as a whole, he sees alienation as *obscuring* the true nature of human beings. In contrast, for Hegel alienation *reveals* the true nature of Spirit. Without alienation it could not come to know itself. Humanity objectifies itself through its activity in the world and thus reveals its true nature to itself through a historical process. Instead of returning to some past form, Hegel sees the concepts of individual freedom and universality as only emerging through a historical process:

The Substance of the Spirit is Freedom. From this we can infer that its end in the historical process is the freedom of the subject to follow its own conscience and morality, and to pursue and implement its own universal ends; ... The end of the world Spirit is realised in substance through the freedom of each individual. (Hegel. Quoted by McCarney: 65)

In this circumstance, unalienated labour would arise from each person being able to freely choose their contribution to humanity's social being as a whole.

Modern scientific anthropology shows Marx's philosophical anthropology to be pure fantasy. He is proposing a return to something that never existed. Human beings did not suddenly emerge, as if from nowhere, as a species with 'free conscious activity'. What marks their beginning is the existence of stone tools and toolkits: long lasting objectified labour. These first appeared suddenly, without any accompanying evolutionary change, in a species that had existed without these tools for several hundred thousand years. It was several million years later before language evolved. The gradual improvement of these stone toolkits: 'means of production', accompanied later by evolutionary changes, enabled the human species to gradually free itself from the specificity that other species were trapped in and assume more and more universality in its activity.

Thus objectified labour preceded the development of human universality. The latter arises out of the former. If we accept Marx's contention that objectified labour becomes separated from the original producer and leads inevitably to alienated labour and private property, then both of these would be likely to have existed at an early stage. Division of labour in the production and use of the toolkits also seems likely.

Hegel left no philosophical anthropology, but the emergence of Spirit from Nature requires the existence of a species that *socially* objectifies its activity to begin to live in a world of its own making. That is what did come about through the evolution of the human species.

There is an important central question that Marx did prove against Hegel. Hegel fails to recognise that private ownership of the means of production is a major obstacle to the development towards freedom. This point could, however, have been better developed by Marx by beginning from

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Hegel's conception of real universals, rather than Feuerbach's nominalism. Marx's major new insights developed later in *Capital* did come about through such a reassessment of Hegel's philosophical position.

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