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# The foundation of Marx's concept of value in the *Manuscripts of 1844*

Laurent Baronian

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to show how Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which stand as his first systematic study of classical economists, transform the concept of labour as it had been developed by political economy against mercantilism and physiocracy. The current interpretations of the Marxian theory of value are first reviewed. The analysis of the *Manuscripts* then shows that the contribution of Hegelian philosophy lies in the definition of social labour in total opposition to the orthodox conception. This issue leads to a re-examination of the significance of these *Manuscripts* for the Marxian concept of value and its source, general and abstract labour.

**Keywords:** Marx, theory of labour-value, critique of political economy, alienation

## Introduction

Previous interpretations of the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts* have focused on the status of categories such as alienation or human essence, in order to show how they herald *The Capital* (Lukács 2002) or, on the contrary, how they present a radically different problematic to that of Marx's mature writings (Althusser 1996). In other words, these interpretations questioned the scope of a critique of political economy in the absence of a theory of labour-value. In this analysis, we intend to show that the *Manuscripts* themselves determine how Marx will later design the marxian concept of value and its source, general and abstract labour. This paper presents the genesis of this concept of value, or more specifically, the conception of social labour, which is at the core of the Marxian concept of value.

After a review of the current interpretations of Marx's concept of value, and the critical basis on which this concept rests in Marx's theory, we will examine, among the three sources of Marxism, in what ways German philosophy can be said to hold the secret of the critical method. This is indeed what the analysis of the *Manuscripts of 44* will reveal. We will then be able to identify the essential difference between Marx's concept of labour and that of the Classical economists. Insofar as Marx, informed by Hegel, considers labour - especially social labour - as a production activity or *living labour*, his critique of political economy aimed to show that, by considering labour only in the various forms of private property, classical economists only really considered social labour as it is objectified in its product, that is, as dead labour. On the other side, Feuerbach's influence led Marx to redefine the human being as a social being and to conceive of human generic life as social activity of labour, in such a way that concepts of alienation and estrangement merge into a unique and specific meaning. Finally, will be outlined the consequences of this difference concerning the definition and the role of the concept of value as they appear in Marx's later works.

## **Marx's concept of value and the contribution of German Philosophy to the critical method**

The farther the theory of labour value stands from the scope of economic investigation, the more historians of economic thought tend to include Marx among classical economists. Therefore, Marx's theory appears as a radicalized version of the classical theory of labour value. Historians of economics inspired by Neoclassical or Neo-Ricardian theory even argue that labour value serves as neutral specie, a unit of measure of commodities and capital, while Marx uses it to elaborate a theory of capitalist exploitation (Blaug 1999, 290-292). And this difference appears all the more significant if we remember that, since the works of Torrens and above all Sraffa, economists have acknowledged that labour value, especially in Ricardo's theory, serves as a unit of measure of capital and social products only under certain assumptions (Sraffa 1960). In contrast to assigning the role of measuring the distribution of the social product to the concept of value, as Smith and Ricardo did, marxist economists stress its highly critical role in Marx's theoretical framework (Mandel 1987, 372).

It is well known that this critical role refers to the specifically social and historically relative nature of the mode of production based on exchange value.

Indeed, Marx frequently claims that, although classical economists discovered labour as the source of value, they consider the laws of capitalist mode of production to be natural and eternal ones. This leads them to consider the value-form "as something quite indifferent or external to the nature of the commodity itself" (Marx 1983, 92). This, in Marx's view, explains why they were unable to properly deduce the more developed forms of value such as money and capital, or, in other words, to deduce from labour the various economic categories with which they generally use to analyze economic phenomena. Thus, as Hilferding points out in his polemic against Böhm-Bawerk (Hilferding 1920), the critical aspect of Marx's method essentially relies on exposing the relative and historical nature of the value-form of social labour, which he does in the *Contribution* and in the first section of Book I of *The Capital*. According to Marx, the reason why political economists have been unable to fully recognize the source of value in labour is not only that they were exclusively concerned with the question of the distribution of the social product, namely with the magnitude of the value. Rather, considering that labour manifests itself naturally in the value of the commodity, political economists have never been able to clearly distinguish between labour producing use value and labour specifically producing exchange value:

it has not the least idea, that when the difference between various kinds of labour is treated as purely quantitative, their qualitative unity or equality, and therefore their reduction to abstract human labour, is implied (Marx 1983, 91-92).

In this sense, the concept of general and abstract labour seems to condition all the difference between Marx and political economy and carry the historical weight of the value-form of social labour. Much has been written about the concept of abstract labour, especially with a view to show how Marx's numerous and varied formulations on this subject make it difficult to provide a clear definition (Faccarello 2000, 85-88). And the accurate definition of this concept seems all the more essential since Engels considered "the history of the development of the labour as the key which allows to understand the whole history and the discovery of historical materialism itself" (Engels 1961, 60). But we would not realize the importance of such a discovery if historical materialism did not break decisively with the conception of labour conveyed by political economy.

Since Engels has published his pamphlet *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy* (1886), historical materialism is usually defined as the conceptual synthesis of three different fields: French historiography for the

concept of class struggle, British political economy for the concept of labour and German philosophy for the dialectical method (Plekhanov 1976; Kautsky 1908; Lenin 1977). As it is, political economy neither ignores labour for determining the nature of economic categories, nor the importance of the class struggle for determining their size (Smith 2003, chap. VIII). In particular, not only had the bourgeois historians described the historical development of class struggle, as Marx confides in his correspondence, but "bourgeois economists had described their economic anatomy" (Marx 1964a, 59). On the other hand, Marx has always claimed the discovery of the dual nature of labour, namely concrete and abstract labour. So we have to find out to what extent Hegelian dialectics provides the basis for an original conception of labour that would not only differ from the classical theory of value, but clearly oppose it.

## **Analysis of the *Manuscripts***

### *The tribute to political economy and the limits of its concept of labour*

At first glance, the choice of analysing the *Manuscripts of 1844* may seem inappropriate to draw the elements necessary to challenge the classical conception of labour. Didn't Marx pay homage to political economists for having acknowledged "labour as its principle — Adam Smith — and which therefore no longer looked upon private property as a mere *condition* external to man" (1964, 128)? By discovering labour as the source of value, the various forms of wealth, such as money or land held by economic agents, cease to appear as mere objectivities whose value lies in their natural properties. Rather, they all become materialized forms of labour. Marx shows his respect again for political economists in his study of the fetishism of the commodity in Book I of *Capital*.

The recent scientific discovery, that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production, marks, indeed, an epoch in the history of the development of the human race. (Marx 1983, 85).

More precisely, from the moment they are defined as forms of labour, forms of private property cease to appear as mere objectivities externally owned by man but come to be considered as objectified forms of the subjective essence of wealth that is labour itself. For political economy,

which has discovered — within private property — the *subjective essence* of wealth, the adherents of the money and mercantile system, who look upon private property *only as an objective* substance confronting men, seem therefore to be *fetishists*, *Catholics*. (1964, 128).

Thus, money and land, which are eminent forms of wealth for mercantilism and physiocracy, are reduced to their unique essence, i.e. labour. Anticipating the idea, developed in particular in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, that land has no inherent value, Marx asserts that “land only exists for *man* through labour, through agriculture” (1964, 130). He draws the consequence that, since the world of private property, which means the system of the exchange value itself, appears as a world where the essence of man universally adopted the form of private property, man himself comes to be defined in relation to private property. We notice here that, although Marx makes use of generic categories such as alienated or estranged labour and private property, he analyzes this system at its most advanced stage, where labour is examined in its modern form of wage labour. Indeed, Marx already considers the specificity of the wage-form as an alienated form of remuneration of 'labour': “the wage is but a necessary consequence of labour's estrangement. After all, in the wage of labour, labour does not appear as an end in itself but as the servant of the wage” (1964, 117). Similarly, wealth itself is essentially viewed as a form of capital:

All wealth has become *industrial* wealth, the wealth of *labour*; and *industry* is accomplished labour, just as the *factory system* is the essence of *industry* – of labour – brought to its maturity, and just as *industrial capital* is the accomplished objective form of private property (1964, 131).

Yet, the ultimate form of private property, capital, precisely emerges at the historic moment when man, regarded as a worker, becomes excluded from ownership of the objectified forms of his labour: money, land and capital, insofar as they constitute forms of labour, are precisely opposed to the worker as realities that are extraneous to and dominate him. In recognizing labour as the essence of private property, political economy recognizes that the forms of private property (capital, land) being opposed to this subjective source, the essence it has recognized as a principle is contradictory in itself (1964, 130). Political economy simultaneously recognizes that man is the essence of private property and that the development of private property has harmful consequences for man.

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Political economy starts out from labour as the real soul of production; yet to labour it gives nothing, and to private property everything (1964, 117). Far from refuting it, the ruptured *world of industry* confirms their *self-ruptured* principle. Their principle is, after all, the principle of this rupture (1964, 130).

Therefore the study of this contradiction leads Marx to the project of a critique of political economy based on a new method of exposition of economic categories.

### *Marx's relationship to Hegel and the need for a new method*

First, while they recognize labour as the unique source of wealth, political economists exclusively conceive of it as the source of private property, or in other words, consider labour only in terms of its *objectified* forms which are the forms of private property. Political economists unquestionably spread the notion of labour as the universal source of value but, given the prominent place of the system of private property within their theoretical framework, they consider labour itself only in terms of its materialization into a product. In Marx's own words, political economy

starts with the fact of private property, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulas the *material* process through which private property actually passes, and these formulas it then takes for *laws* (1964, 106).

Here, Marx already criticizes the ahistorical approach of political economy – a point that had already been made by Hegel in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, when he noted that political economy merely abstracts the laws and categories from economic and social phenomena, without generating them according to the gradual development of the free will in and of itself (Hegel 2003, § 189). But Marx goes further in that direction. Taking for granted the existence of the system of private property, political economy cannot even understand its laws,

i.e. it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property. Political economy does not disclose the source of the division between labour and capital, and between capital and land (1964, 106).

And it is useless to resort to so-called primitive states of human development to show its origin, as did Smith and Malthus, for it only “pushes the question away into a grey nebulous distance” (1964, 107).

Following political economy, Marx thinks that the economic movement can be reproduced in its true nature only through labour as the essence of private property. But, starting from private property as a fact, political economy not only establishes labour as a principle which is contradictory in itself, since private property represents alienated forms of labour, but also, therefore, presents alienation as the natural and final product of labour in general.

In a sense Hegel himself has adopted the point of view of political economy. While Hegel grasps the production of man by himself as a process of alienation and suppression of alienation, and *labour* as the *essence* of man – as man's essence which stands the test, he follows political economy, especially Smith, insofar as he does not envision any possibility of expression of labour outside the system of division of labour based on private property. Thus, we can read in *Phenomenology* that Wealth, i.e. the division of labour based on private property, is a

universal spiritual essence, the continuously created result of the labour and action of all, just as it is again dissipated into the enjoyment of all [...]. Each individual doubtless thinks he is acting in his own interests when getting this enjoyment [...]. Yet looked at even in external fashion, it becomes manifest that in his own enjoyment each gives enjoyment to all, in his own labour each works for all as well as for himself, and all for him. His self-existence is, therefore, inherently universal, and self-interest is merely a supposition that cannot get the length of making concrete and actual what it means or supposes, viz. to do something that is not to further the good of all (1941, II, 60-61).

Later, Hegel will justify the absolute nature of the system of private property in stressing its adequateness to the free and singular nature of the individual will: "Since my will, as the will of a person, and so as a single will, becomes objective to me in property, property acquires the character of private property" (2003, §46). And this system strikes him as all the more self-evident since private property in itself does not prejudge the circumstances which determine "what and how much I possess" is a 'legal' contingency because "subsistence is not the same as possession and belongs to another sphere, i.e. to civil society" (2003, §49). Accordingly, the possibility of participating in Wealth is strongly conditioned, for instance, by possession of capital, but, with regard to the essence of the system, this is as contingent as differences of corporal and spiritual abilities between individuals (2003, §200).



On the one hand, Hegel conceives of Wealth, i.e. the system of private property, as the result of the productive activity of man through which he alienates his spiritual essence. Such alienation is to be overcome by man, but the ways in which he may re-appropriate his essence depends on its very nature. Yet Hegel defines the system of private property as a division of labour in relation to petty commodity production. Although he mentions the existence of classes and conflicting interests, the alienation inherent in economic life actually refers to the alienation of the simple commodity producer who, while pursuing his personal interests by exchanging his product for others products of labour, realizes his universal essence: "the individual in his own particular labour *ipso facto* accomplishes unconsciously a universal labour" (1941, I, 291). Under these conditions, the individual has only to reach the consciousness of the universality to re-appropriate himself the alienated form of the product of his labour. Then, private property at the basis of division of labour appears to be immanent in the development of the free subject, ensuring as it does the transition between the individual and the universal will embodied in the State (Hyppolite 1946, 382). To the extent that the suppression of alienation is purely formal and abstract, this movement of suppression

becomes a confirmation of the alienation; or again, for Hegel this movement of *self-genesis* and *self-objectification* in the form of *self-alienation* and *self-estrangement* is the *absolute*, and hence final, *expression of human life* – of life with itself as its aim, of life at peace with itself, and in unity with its essence (Marx 1964, 188). Labour is man's *coming-to-be for himself* within *alienation*, or as *alienated* man. The only type of labour which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labour (1964, 177).

For Hegel the appropriation of man's essential powers, which have become objects "is the appropriation of these objects as *thoughts* and as *movements of thought*" (1964, 175). Therein lies for Marx the idealistic core of Hegel's conception of alienated labour. Unlike Hegel, Marx thinks the separation of labour and capital not as a contingent result of the system of private property, but actually as a necessary phase of its historical development. The relations of private property "contain latent within them the relations of private property as *labour*; the relation of private property as *capital*, and the *mutual* relation of these two to one another" (1964, 122).

For the first time in his early critical economic studies Marx expresses the necessity to work out a genetic method for determining categories and economic

laws which would break with both political economy and the Hegelian dialectic. To oppose Hegel's philosophy of Law, which starts from the concept of individual will, Marx starts from an empirically verifiable economic fact: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size" (1964, 107). And this simply expresses that

the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour's realization is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labour appears as a *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *bondage to it*, and appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation* (1964, 108).

Marx agrees with Hegel when he identifies the production of man by himself as a process of objectification and disobjectification, as alienation and suppression of this alienation, hence the loss of objectivity and reality of man as a conquest of himself, i.e. as a manifestation, achievement and objectification of human essence. Marx, following Hegel, "grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man's *own labour*" (1964, 177). But he intends to examine what Hegel never analysed, that is to say fact that, at the most advanced stage of the system of private property, the objectification of labour doesn't entail re-appropriation and develops itself in digging the estrangement. The system of private property not only means that the product of labour stands before the worker as its external reality, but that it is a hostile power that dominates and crushes him.

The critical method must be aimed at showing the genesis of this relation. To do so, it is essential to throw off centre the notion of private property, and start from a new point of departure, i.e. labour itself, the living source of the system of private property. The method must capture how labour produces the system of private property through its process of alienation. This is the only way to

grasp the essential connection between private property, greed, and the separation of labour, capital and landed property, between exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of men, monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the *money* system (1964, 107).

Admittedly, we do not find any historical genesis of wage labour itself in the *Manuscripts*. However, Marx learns from political economy that capitalist mode of

production is perfectly in keeping with the principle that labour is the essence of private property. By taking alienated labour as the starting point of his critical method, Marx thus significantly departs from political economy, which considers the system of private property as given, and identifies it instead as a historical product necessary for the development of man viewed in terms of its production process of a world reflecting his own image: "But liberated industry, *industry* constituted for itself as such, and *liberated capital*, are the necessary *development* of labour" (1964, 123).

But on the other hand, starting from alienated labour is to show how man *really* alienates himself during this process, as shown by the existence of wage labour. If private property is the correlate of alienated labour, then its most appropriate form must stand in the opposition between labour and capital. In capital, the product of labour in which the worker has objectified himself keeps him under its domination. The worker has produced a world of objects reflecting his essential powers, but this world is hostile to him and projects the image of his misery and powerlessness. For the man who is a worker, his essential powers only serve the capital that is estranged from him. For the reason that worker's essential powers are estranged from him, they must become estranged precisely as they are deployed and objectified. Consequently, if the worker is alienated to the product of his labour, labour necessarily alienates the activity that produces itself, the activity of labour itself.

The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labour is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation in the activity of labour itself (1964, 110).

Thus wage labour is defined as

the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life indeed, what is life but activity? – as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have *self-estrangement*, as previously we had the estrangement of the *thing* (1964, 111-112).

Therefore, this inversion carried out by critical method must result in a transformation of the conception of the human being, as well as a transformation of the meaning of alienation.

*Analysis of alienated labour and the discovery of the social nature of labour underpinning private property*

Since their publication in 1932, the Parisian Manuscripts have received at least three different interpretations as to their place and status in Marx's works. A first interpretation centres on the idea that the *Manuscripts* introduces the problem of alienated labour more broadly, adding, beside its economic dimension, an ethical and anthropological dimension to this notion (Popitz 1953; West 1969). By contrast, Althusser thinks that philosophical ideology still pervades the *Manuscripts*, insofar as they revolve around a humanistic "problematic", so much so that the concept of alienation appears as a premarxist one (Althusser 1996, 246). Among those believing that the account of alienation given in the *Manuscripts* is in keeping with Marx's later works, Mandel follows Althusser's interpretation when he pretends that the criticism expressed is based on a humanistic conception which is insufficient in the light of the scientific revolutionary critique of *The Capital*. But the *Manuscripts* are in keeping with Marx's works in the sense that they

represent a transition [...], where the anthropological concept survives in places, while achieving considerable progress already on the Hegelian conception, first because no longer based on a needs-labour dialectic that leads to the impossibility of solution, and secondly, because it already includes the possibility to exceed alienation, thanks to the Communist struggle of the proletariat (Mandel 1967, 180-181).

Finally G. Haarscher (1981) believes that it is necessary to distinguish in the *Manuscripts* between capitalist alienation, ontological alienation and a division between theory and practice, and thinks that they favour an ethical-legal critique of alienation at the expense of an economic and even ontological critique. S. Josa-Mercier, who criticized this analysis and argues in favour of similar resonances between Marx's early works and *The Capital*, however recognizes that the use of the concept of alienation in the pages of the first manuscript, where it refers to the movement of alienated labour, does not cover its use in the third manuscript, where it would be closer in meaning to a « dialectic of negativity ». She concludes that

the question arises as to the relationship between the First and Third Manuscript: Well, what's the relationship to Marx 44, between "alienated labour" and "labour", the latter being defined as a result of Hegel as the process of alienation and

suppression of alienation? To our point of view, this is this tacit knowledge that makes if not the inadequacy, at least the incompleteness of the *Manuscripts of 44* (1986, 76).

All the issues raised about the *Manuscripts* are based on the problem of the definition of alienation. Between those who defend the irreducibility of the *Manuscripts* and those who consider them entirely in keeping with *The Capital*, the issue is to determine whether the term *alienation* is still understood in its Hegelian sense in the *Manuscripts* or whether Marx assigns it another meaning which can be found in his later works.

Let us now return to Hegel's process of alienation. Through the system of private property, man alienates his "spiritual essence" objectified in the division of labour. This indeed reflects the participation of every individual in the general welfare, although everyone pursues strictly personal interests, and so on. But what are division of labour, State, Morality, etc, to Hegel? Essences which are estranged to man. We have seen that, as long as they result from alienation of self-consciousness, these essences are re-appropriated by thought only. But once self-consciousness is turned into a real and concrete human being, what are these essences – the essential powers of man – but objectified forms of man's essence? However, we need to further clarify what these essential powers are. In any case, by substituting self-consciousness or even the free will with the real individual, Marx provides a more precise meaning of human essence of the real man: it is his social being (Salvaggio 1994). Society itself produces man as man, as well as society is produced by him. And the way man expresses his social nature is nothing but his *praxis*, his activity of labour. Thus the division of labour, which is the alienated essence of man in Hegel's theory, becomes "the economic expression of the social character of labour within the estrangement" (1964, 159) in Marx's theory. From this point of view society is not an entity external to the individual with whom he entertains relationships of opposition or complementarity. Rather, society is the condition and the purpose of the individual, insofar as he is in essence a social being:

Above all we must avoid postulating "Society" again as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of *communal* life in association with others – is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life* (1964, 137-138).

Thus reveals itself the deep issue of the critical choice to start from the labour in its process of alienation. When Hegel and economists consider labour in the form of division of labour, i.e. in the form of private property, they actually consider social labour exclusively in terms of its objectified forms facing the individual, who is then seen as a being of needs separated from society. Once again the great merit of political economy is to have equated society, by defining it as a division of labour, with human activity in general, but it only considers this activity in its objectified and alienated forms: "*the division of labour*, too, is therefore nothing else but the *estranged, alienated* positioning of human activity as a *real activity of the species* or as *activity of man as a species being*" (1964, 159).

Alienated labour uses the vital activity, the productive life, as "a *means* of satisfying a need – the need to maintain physical existence" (1964, 113). "Yet the productive life is the life of the species [i.e. social life]" (1964, 113). "Life itself appears only as a *means to life*" (1964, 113). In the system of private property, labour, which is the generic action of man, the active expression of his social being, appears as a mere personal means of subsistence for the individual.

For, what ensures the connection between participation in the generic life and the satisfaction of needs? Money does. Anticipating here what he will develop about the commodity fetishism, Marx wonders about the nature of money: "If money is the bond binding me to human life, binding society to me, binding me and nature and man" (1964, 167), then money becomes the "*other person*" (1964, 166). It is the "character as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature. Money is the alienated ability of mankind" (1964, 208). Thus the system of division of labour based on private property corresponds to a world in which people are alienated or estranged from each other. Indeed, being estranged from his generic life, the individual is necessarily estranged from others:

An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species being, is the *estrangement of man from man*. When man confronts himself, he confronts the *other man*. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labour and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labour and object of labour (1964, 114).

Thus, after the alienation of product of labour and of productive activity itself, alienated labour consists thirdly in exchanging one's social labour power for objective means of individual satisfaction, insofar as it means exchanging one's

ability to work for a product of labour (wage). Or even, to the extent that it is a monetary wage, it consists in acquiring the product of the objectified social power of others.

However, as we have seen, not only is the wage labourer estranged from the product of his labour, or even from his productive activity, the product also turns against him as an estranged and hostile power. But the product would not behave in this way if it was not driven by the desire of another man. If labour expresses itself in the form of objectified essential powers, and if the system of division of labour and its corollary, money, are merely substitutes for relationships between men, then only another man may turn the product of labour against its producer. The worker not only alienates his social powers by working in exchange for the private products of others, but these social powers turn against him insofar as they are the private property of others. If,

the product of his labour, his labour *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. If his own activity is to him related as an unfree activity, then he is related to it as an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, coercion, and the yoke of another man (1964, 116).

The capitalist mode of production then defines the power of a class based on the labour performed by others within the system of private property. But this latest character of alienated labour stresses more profoundly the overall nature of the developed system of private property: the opposition between generic life and its product, human being's social labour and the product of labour captured by private property. Therefore Marx can equally use both words: alienation [Entfremdung] and estrangement [Enttäusserung]. As man's generic being is defined as a social being and generic activity is defined as the social activity of production (as labour), man alienates himself in his labour insofar as he becomes estranged from the product of his labour. The product of his labour is estranged to him insofar as his labour is alienated. The new conception of human being unifies the two words and thus gives the concept of alienation its original meaning. In this sense, we cannot adopt Althusser's view that the Parisian Manuscripts centre on humanistic problematics. Nor can we follow E. Mandel when he deplores the presence of Hegelian flaws. Indeed Marx uses a concept of alienation based on a definition of man, which departs from both Hegel and Feuerbach: man is fundamentally a social being and his labour activity, even in an alienated form and in the context of private property, consists precisely in social production,

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*just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him. Activity and mind, both in their content and in their mode of existence, are social. social activity and social mind (1964, 137).*

Categories such as alienated labour, private property and division of labour are undoubtedly too extensive to apply exclusively to the analysis of capitalist mode of production. Rather, as we have seen, they refer to the production based on exchange value in general. Hence the feeling, on the part of the reader, that the specific history of the capitalist mode of production is generally not fully understood and that, because of the large amount of contrasting analyses, Marx develops a materialist theory of alienation in general, or even that he establishes different types of alienation. But insofar Marx sees the essence of man as a social being, alienation is in each case an objective exteriorization of man's essential powers, that is to say of the individual's social powers; and the suppression of alienation corresponds to social re-appropriation of this objectified collective world.

## **Marx's first confrontation with political economy and the consequence for the concept of labour-value**

At first glance, the result that Marx obtains with his critical method seems curious: private property is the product of alienated or estranged labour itself. One might have thought, on the contrary, that private property was the origin of alienated labour; this would be the natural conclusion of a an approach that takes private property as the starting point for the analysis of labour (which is the perspective adopted by classical economists and Hegel himself).

Just as we have derived the concept of *private property* from the concept of *estranged, alienated* labour by *analysis*, so we can develop every *category* of political economy with the help of these two factors; and we shall find again in each category, e.g., trade, competition, capital, money, only a *definite* and *developed expression* of these first elements (1964, 118).

But starting from alienated labour means starting from labour activity itself, in order to demonstrate how this activity alienates itself in the forms of private property. By appearing as the product of alienated labour, these appears at the same time as the first stage of the process by which man relinquishes and re-appropriates his essential powers because, to the extent that these essential powers of man express themselves through the productive activity itself, these



forms of private property are objectified alienated forms of his generic powers. Yet political economy, starting from private property and division of labour, starts from those alienated forms, and that's why it "gives nothing to labour and everything to private property" (1964, 120). This means that political economy does not grant any importance to labour activity itself, and everything to its objectified forms, because, as Marx noted in his pamphlet against F. List, "Private property is nothing more than the materialized labour" (1982, 1433). And the first thesis on Feuerbach is expressed as follows:

The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included — is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, *are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively* (1982, 1029; our emphasis).

Starting from private property to come to alienated labour is precisely starting from what is to be explained, because private property is basically a system dominated by objectified forms of labour, or of essential powers of man materialized in the appropriated products of labour. But as the essential powers result from the productive activity itself, starting from alienated labour, from labour in the process of its alienation, is starting from the original source of man's essential powers, from his productive life, to the extent that it is his generic life. As man's generic life is his social life, starting from productive activity is starting from social labour itself. For Marx, political economy, which considers the social nature of labour only in the form of the division of labour, of the exchange of the products of labour based on private property, becomes tangled up in an inextricable contradiction because, while asserting its social science, it "gives expression to the contradiction in his science – the establishment of society through unsocial, particular interests" (1964, 163). More specifically, if political economy considers social labour only in its objectified forms, which are the forms of private property, this means that it does not consider the essence of private property as such, i.e. social labour as a living productive activity.

Here appear the limits to a certain humanistic interpretation of the critique of political economy which has emerged since the publication of Marx's early writings. Let us take one of the latest works among them – C. Smith's *Marx and the Millenium* (1996) - a critical examination of traditional Marxism and a defence of an Open Marxism for use by new generations. The author rightly claims that Marx defines the activity of labour as social activity and that human nature is nothing but the ensemble of social relations between individuals. From

this point of view, the forms of private property through which political economy views economic laws, present themselves as alienated and inhuman forms of the social process of production of human life. But Smith draws the erroneous conclusion that an attempt to render intelligible the laws of this irrational system of private property would be in vain. He therefore limits the issue of the critique to that of demystifying the ideological categories of political economy. He seems to ignore that the 'socialised standpoint' conditions the very nature of the Marxian category of value and consequently the character and laws of capitalist production stated in *The Capital*.

The 1844's critique of economic categories will next condition all that departs the conception of value in Marx from that of classical economists. Actually, as long as it considers the social nature of labour only in terms of exchange of the products of labour, it can consider the value-form of the social labour only with regard to its product, the commodity, not to labour itself, as Marx confides to Engels in 1868:

a very simple thing has escaped all the economists is that if the commodity have the dual character of use value and exchange value, it must be that the labour represented in this commodity has this dual character also [...] This is in fact the whole secret of the critical method (1964a, 195).

To define the creating value labour as general and abstract labour is nothing but recognizing that a social activity of labour is at the basis of the forms of private property.

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