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Alexander Migursky
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In trying to understand the moral paralysis that undermines the *revolutionary* energy so essential to our collective survival—an energy that has no real place within the narrow ideological confines of democratic realism—we find ourselves returning, almost reflexively, to the Marxist concept of alienation. This idea addresses more than just economic conditions; it speaks to the very structure of modern subjectivity, encompassing both psychological and political-economic dimensions.

Marx argued that all labor is a form of *objectifying* our "species-being"—our essential human capacities and potential.[1] But this process requires a kind of *self-separation*: the worker must be temporarily removed from the reality they are helping to shape, only to be ultimately dispossessed of the very thing they have created. In a market economy, this loss

[1] That is, the capacity for conscious and free intellectual-material activity—*praxis*. More on this concept and the existential aspects of Marx's theory of creativity. See. Кондрашов П. Н. Философия Карла Маркса. Экзистенциально-антропологические аспекты. М., 2024. С 89–117.

takes the form of the commodity, which becomes the primary vehicle through which labor is claimed, bought, and sold.

Because the commodity embodies not just materials but the time, energy, skills, and life of the worker, its exchange represents a deeper loss. Nature, labor, time, the body—even the subjectivity of others—begin to appear as alien, external forces that confront the worker as hostile and indifferent. This experience corrodes both productive activity and individuality itself, which Marx saw as formed through a relationship with the universal dimensions of our shared humanity.

If everything we produce is destined to be lost or alienated, then our labor power—the very *basis of our physical existence*—comes to define us purely as workers. Our survival becomes dependent on systems and forces with which we are fundamentally at odds. If, as Marx believed, human essence is expressed through the historically conditioned forms of transformative activity, then alienation, far from being a secondary effect of capitalism, must be understood as its root cause—indeed, the origin of private property itself.

> Thus, through *estranged, alienated labour*, the worker creates the relationship of another man, who is alien to labour and stands outside it, to that labour. The relation of the worker to labour creates the relation of the capitalist — or whatever other word one chooses for the master of labour — to that labour. *Private property* is therefore the product, result, and necessary consequence of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.[2]

What sets Marx's method apart is his effort to go beyond the surface-level economic laws identified by the Ricardian

[2] Маркс К. Экономическо-философские рукописи 1844 года. М., 2010. С. 335–336.

socialists—such as the tendency of human labor to be devalued as productivity increases—and instead search for the deeper, anthropological roots of alienation and economic exploitation. By applying dialectical materialism to the analysis of production, Marx developed a conceptual framework for understanding the evolution of social relations: a process marked by the emergence and eventual overcoming of various forms of alienation, tied closely to changes in economic systems.

From a psychological perspective, each historical era brings with it its own characteristic forms of mental distress—disorders that mirror the dominant mode of production, the tools and technologies it employs, and the specific ways individuals experience alienation through the loss or appropriation of what they produce. Today, as capitalist economies enter what many consider a terminal phase—driven by extreme labor specialization, the monopoly power of corporations, and the virtualization of social life—alienation reaches unprecedented levels. This is because the very logic of production now permeates all aspects of life, turning even our emotions and most private experiences into commodities in the digital marketplace.

According to Marx and Engels, the global expansion of communication under capitalism, while a vehicle of domination, also contains the seeds of emancipation. It creates the potential for the oppressed to overcome alienation through collective ownership of the means of production and their democratic management.[3] In theory, such a transformation would open the way to a fuller realization of human potential.

Still, a critical question remains unresolved: How can labor—which, by its nature, alienates and is further alienated through market exchange—become truly "free" while preserving an industrial foundation built on the division of labor and

[3] Маркс К., Энгельс Ф. Немецкая идеология. С. 51–52. URL: https://clck.ru/3FW5BJ

the political systems that sustain it? What is labor, beyond an expression of our "species-being," if it requires continuous intervention into the self-reproducing logic of capitalist society in order to become emancipatory praxis? And why should we not suspect that, in attributing an ontological status to alienation in labor, Marx himself might be engaging in a mode of reasoning more typical of the very figure he cautiously calls the "non-worker"—in other words, the bourgeois?

> Firstly, it must be noted that everything which appears in the worker as an *activity of alienation*, appears in the non-worker as a *state of alienation*.
>
> Secondly, the *real, practical relation* of the worker to production and to its product (as a mental state) appears in the non-worker confronting him as a *theoretical* relation.
>
> *Thirdly*, the non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself, but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker.[4]

By portraying economic existence as a "state of alienation," Marx implicitly places the blame on the exploited subject for the irrational ways they reproduce and sustain themselves through labor. In doing so, he largely overlooks the "activity of alienation"—that is, the external forces that compel the worker to produce more than is necessary for themselves and their immediate community of exchange. Labor, which by its nature implies a concrete, practical relationship between the worker and what, how, and why something is made, is stripped by Marx of the psychological nuance that might distinguish it from play or from mechanical work.

[4] Маркс К. Экономическо-философские рукописи 1844 года. С. 339.

to absorb contradiction and remain open to transformation within the limits imposed by reality.[12]

[12] Джонсон Ч. Рынки, освобожденные от капитализма. Неверленд, 2024. С. 18–19.

actions.[9] The suppression of "meaningless" play thus mirrors the broader impoverishment of social life under capital.[10]

Deprivation, when compounded by sustained state interference in market exchanges, social structures, cultural values, and interpersonal relations, obscures the possibility of a freer, more expansive life. Most social contact becomes overcoded by the symbolic residues of institutional repression. The absence of moral confidence—either in one's personal capacities or in communal recognition—renders us dependent on political actors whose legitimacy is often grounded in corrupted electoral systems. Their monopolies on decision-making and resource allocation constrict the "capacity" of the market, reduce representation for vulnerable groups, and interrupt the transformation of moral norms.

By contrast, Activity on *free markets*, emerging as a means of evading captive, falsified, and state-imposed modes of exchange, can be genuinely subversive insofar as it fosters the rise of alternative forms of sociality, professional self-realization outside conventional spheres of employment, and the creation of mutual aid funds that allow independent researchers, artists, and musicians to pursue creative endeavors without bureaucratic accountability or the constant preoccupation with financial balance sheets.

In this sense, the ideal of a free market resembles Giorgio Agamben's *gesture* toward dissolving the contradiction between means and ends—the contradiction that paralyzes moral imagination.[11] As a discursive declaration of non-coercive social interaction, the free market provides tools of struggle that are *not themselves ends*, thereby preserving utopia's capacity

[9] Cantine H. Art: Play and its Perversions // Retort. Bearsville, New York, Fall 1947. URL: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/holley-cantine-art-play-and-its-perversions

[10] Гудман П. На пути к единодушию. Неверленд, 2024. С. 141–143.

[11] Агамбен Д. Средства без цели. М., 2015. С. 63–64.

This disregard for the emotional and motivational complexity of labor allows Marx to treat the worker's relation to production as "theoretical"—that is, as something shaped entirely by the internal logic of the economic system, rather than by subjective intentions or internal conflicts. By downplaying the significance of individual exchanges and personal motivations, Marx gradually denies the worker the autonomy that many of us seek through participation in social life: the freedom to learn, develop skills, and offer the products of our labor to others on our own terms.

In this respect, classical political economy was often more attentive to the subjective motivations of market agents. Adam Smith, for instance, defined the "real price" of anything as the labor and effort one is willing to sacrifice to obtain it. The calculation of risk—understood as the potential loss of one's resources, including tools, time, health, skills, and even moral convictions—allows us to distinguish between different modes of productive activity and to preserve labor as a meaningful human investment.[5]

The marginalists, building on Smith's insight, expanded the definition of labor to include any physical or mental activity that, while painful or burdensome in the moment, is believed by the subject to be justified by a future reward. *Labor*, in this view, offers deferred satisfaction—whether in the form of mastery, achievement, social recognition, or psychological relief. A person will engage in labor only if its eventual rewards outweigh the pleasures foregone in the present. When that deferred satisfaction fails to materialize, negative utility takes over: the subject withdraws from labor to preserve their remaining resources.[6]

[5] Смит А. Исследование о природе и причинах богатства народов. М., 2016. С. 61–62.

[6] Carson K. Studies in Mutualist Political Economy. South Carolina, 2011. P. 74–76.

This shift defines the boundary between *labor* and *work*. While *labor* is an activity justified by providing positive social, moral, intellectual, and economic experiences in the short term, *work* is defined by a progressive increase in moral, social, intellectual, and economic costs that ultimately displace any indirect satisfaction, turning labor into coercion rather than creative self-expression. Work is the most common form of employment in the capitalist system of production, characterized by the perpetual lending of one's skills to the owners of capital without the right to dispose of the products of one's own labor.

The history of capitalism is inseparable from the dispossession of vast populations from their means of production, legal claims to property, and political freedoms. The state's direct involvement in redistributing the products of labor and shaping modes of economic organization—driven by a logic of class favoritism—paved the way for an extensive model of industrialization, mass production, and the consolidation of property relations through the exclusive right of private ownership. For the majority, this escalation of entry barriers into the market and their coercive integration into industrial systems marked a foundational act of modern social exclusion, severing them from traditional modes of subject formation.

Adam Smith equated all forms of social exclusion with denial of the "necessaries"—the material and symbolic goods whose possession constitutes the condition of being recognized as fully human. To be excluded is not merely to lose access to resources but to experience a psychological deformation: a deepening sense of incongruity between oneself and the norms of one's community. In the context of the market, this sense of displacement—exacerbated by economic, gendered, sexual, national, or political marginalization—impairs one's ability to negotiate, assess risks, and make meaningful choices. Consent to work under such conditions is not simply a result of the structural alienation Marx described, but rather the outcome of prolonged social deprivation, which *erodes*

capacities and produces a *lived experience of poverty*—not just of means, but of possibilities.[7]

It is no surprise that most political unrest in contemporary societies follows the passage of repressive laws or the elimination of civil rights. The deprivations caused by discriminatory policies not only reduce political participation but also narrow the range of economic opportunities, forcing people to accept exploitative working conditions in *politically crudely defined markets* in order to maintain at least a minimal sense of "human" dignity within the symbolic order shaped by state and corporate power. Pride in one's labor becomes increasingly difficult when that labor—imbued with existential value—can at any moment be criminalized, rendered obsolete, or destroyed.

This deprivation is reinforced ideologically by the moral glorification of work and the devaluation of alternative forms of human activity. Typically, the only recognized counterpoint to work as coercive production, or to labor as an autonomous creative endeavor, is *play*: voluntary social interaction valued for the pleasure it provides in the act itself, without regard for the results.[8] In class societies, play is discursively suppressed in order to enforce status hierarchies, separating the "adult" from the "child," regardless of biological age. To become "adult" is to renounce supposedly childish pursuits in favor of work. As a result, entire domains of human activity must conform to capitalist business models—defined by products with elastic demand—just to survive and maintain their social legitimacy.

At the same time, forms of employment that neither deepen interpersonal bonds nor support more inclusive models of humanity increasingly provoke rejection—both of labor as such and of adult identity, understood as the accumulation of experience necessary to assess the costs of one's own and others'

[7] Sen A. Social Exclusion: Concept, Application, and Scrutiny. Cambridge, 2000. P. 4–6.

[8] Блэк Б. Анархизм и другие препятствия для анархии. М., 2004. С. 21–22.