

C. J. ARTHUR ON MARX AND HEGEL ON ALIENATION

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For some time now it has been fairly regular for commentators on Marx to take his criticisms of Hegel at their face value, without doing much to offer challenges to those criticisms. The recent renaissance in Hegel studies has led to a change of outlook on this matter. As philosophers are reading Hegel more closely many are finding that Marx's reading of Hegel is significantly deficient on a number of issues. Marx's glosses have helped to foster some of the myths about Hegel's views that were for a long while prevalent, and that now and again are still found in a few commentators. Combatting these myths requires going to their source. I would like to confront one myth in particular, the idea that for Hegel human alienation is inevitable and insurmountable, and to examine Marx's claims about this, especially as they are presented by C. J. Arthur in his book *Dialectics of Labour*.¹ I use Arthur's commentary because I think his is a good example of an approach that takes Marx's views on Hegel uncritically.

Arthur's book, which is a detailed study of Marx's 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,' attempts to articulate the unity of these writings by showing how through the concept of human labour Marx was able to synthesize premises from German (Hegel's) philosophy, English political economy, and French socialism. The author argues that all the sections of the 1844 manuscripts are essential to the theory of alienation and that they continue to be of importance for Marx's later mature writings in political economy.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, of central concern is the relationship of Marx's view of labour to Hegel's philosophy, and Part Two, which is entitled 'The Critique of Hegel,' comprises fully a third of the text. The discussion of Marx and Hegel is undoubtedly the most provocative aspect of this work, and while it does very well at explicating Marx's view of Hegel and the influences of the latter on the former, it does little if anything in the way of raising critical questions about Marx's interpretation and critique of Hegel's dialectical philosophy. As I will argue, there are some important misinterpretations of Hegel by Marx on the subject of alienation that Arthur fails to discern in the critique of Hegel. Before turning to this argument, I will summarize the first part of the book which discusses Marx on alienation.

Part One, entitled 'Marx's Theory of Alienation,' has three chapters devoted, respectively, to 'Alienated Labour,' 'Private Property,' and

¹ C. J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

'Communism.' Corresponding to these topics are three central claims made by the author concerning Marx's views: 1) that while in 1844 Marx 'for the first time attributes ontological significance to *productive activity*,² which serves as the 'mediation' between man and nature, yet under capitalism labour is identical to alienated or estranged labour; 2) that, in contrast to pre-capitalist forms, private property under capitalism is the result, and not the basic cause, of alienated labour since it is under the system of wage labour that the 'active alienation of labour from itself' becomes dramatized; and 3) that communism is not merely the abolition of private property but its 'positive supersession' as reappropriation of the human essence by taking possession of the productive forces, but still is not yet 'self-transcending historical practice.'³

1. According to Arthur, the categories of 'productive activity' and 'labour' in Marx should be kept distinct in order to avoid confusion about Marx's ontology, for it is the former term, and not the latter, which refers consistently to the generic relation of mediation in the relationship 'man-activity-nature.' On the human side of this relation productive activity results in the 'development of a wealth of needs,' and on the nature side the 'development of the productive forces.' However, Marx tends to equate the term 'labour' with labor under capitalism—wage-labour—which is estranged labor and, therefore, a corrupted or diminished form of generic human activity due to the 'double' alienation of 'man from man' and 'man from nature.' Borrowing from Istvan Mezaros, Arthur distinguishes between two levels of mediation: a) first order mediation which is ontologically basic as the generic essence of human objectification and b) second order mediations which are historically specific and tend to manifest estrangement where original unity in the relation 'man-activity-nature' is lost. The second level of mediation is built upon the first as a sort of 'conceptual inflection' whereby what is originally the generic activity of objectification becomes alienation. For Arthur this distinction is important for seeing both the 'objective necessity of a historical supersession' of alienation (since otherwise a collapsing of the distinction leads to a view of the essentiality of certain historical phenomena, e.g., private property and exchange) and the inevitability of alienation.⁴

In part, Arthur's concern here is with Marx's terminology in which 'labour' is often synonymous with 'wage-labour' and with 'estranged labour.' There is no question that in the *Manuscripts* Marx uses 'labour' in such a shorthand way and this has been recognized by other commentators. However, in *Capital* Marx uses 'labour' in the positive generic sense, as a

² Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 5.

³ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 25.

⁴ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 41.

first order and not second order mediation, and Arthur's concern is that, if the ambiguity in Marx's use of 'labour' is not noted, misunderstandings about the two levels of mediation could occur. He concludes that generally Marx defines 'labour' negatively and equates it with alienating activity rather than with free self-activity. As we will see later, this concept of human activity is important for contrasting Marx's views on alienation with those of Hegel.

2. In his discussion of private property in Marx's *Manuscripts* Arthur attempts to clarify another possible source of confusion having to do with Marx's claims that alienation is due to the subordination of labour to private property and yet that private property is not the cause but the consequence of alienated labour. The problem apparently is that a reader might find an inconsistency in Marx's account if the dynamics of the relation between private property and alienated labour under capitalism are not properly understood. First, property is in any case a human institution and creation and has its origins in the human activity of appropriation—it does not make its appearance *sui generis*. Second, capitalist private property is the direct result of the accumulation of value produced by wage labour. Although here Marx has not yet developed the theory of surplus value, his views on property are consistent with his ontology of productive activity as the source of all objectification. In pre-capitalist formations, landed property may well be, from a temporal perspective, the power behind the exploitation of certain forms of labour with no 'internal economic dialectic' between the two, but under capitalism fully developed private property is freed of its political determinations and thus subject to 'purely economic movement' in relation to labour. This corresponds to the change from personal relations of dependency to common dependence on impersonal relations created by the capitalist market which operated on the basis of alienated labour. Arthur's conclusion is that '[p]rivate property, originally *other* than labour, becomes in practice labour's *own* other, private property *as* alienated labour. Private property is unmasked as itself a *structure of alienation*, rather than the (apparently external) cause of estrangement.'⁵

Again, the upshot of Arthur's discussions thus far is the fundamental character of human productive activity, even when it undergoes various historical transmutations. Moreover, the necessary supersession of alienation is grounded in the contradiction internal to private property under capitalism, a contradiction analyzable as the unity in opposition of labour and capital, a second order phenomenon which violates the first order essential relation between productive activity and its object. Moreover, 'Only if labour is grasped as the overriding moment in the alienated labour/private property complex can the conditions of a *real*

⁵ *Dialectics of Labour*, pp. 5-19.

transcendence of estrangement be established.⁶ What this seems to mean is not only that the power of overcoming alienation—just as the ability to establish it—is in the hands of human actors but also that the inevitability of the overcoming of alienation is in a way dictated by the necessity of the ultimate predominance of the first order mediation over estranged second order mediations. Put simply, the ontology of human productive activity itself dictates the return to its essential nonalienated unity.

3. As Arthur understands it, for the Marx of the *Manuscripts* communism is not a narrow political program but rather an essential response to alienation. 'It has fundamental ontological significance as the gateway to the reappropriation by the community of the human essence.'⁷ Clearly, since private property is the expression of alienation under capitalism, communism must in some way supersede private property. However, there are two important issues here.

First, although alienation itself cannot be considered historically necessary without reducing second order mediations to first order ones, there is historical necessity to the stages of productive development, and especially to the levels of development of productive forces under capitalism. Thus, the overcoming of property cannot be construed as a simple return to the primitive past prior, to the occurrence of alienating divisions of labour. But this means that Marx must have a *positive* as well as negative conception of property, which brings us beyond private property without regressing backwards in history. Accordingly, in contrast to crude egalitarian communism which focusses merely on equality of distribution of goods and neglects individual differences (where all are labourers *simpliciter*), communism as the '*positive* supersession of private property as *human self-estrangement*' must also preserve the 'human wealth' and achievements that have been created historically. In short, communism as the 'negation of the negation' (private property being the first negation) is forward, not backward, looking and develops concretely and immanently out of capitalism, as well as in opposition to it.

Second, according to Marx, '[c]ommunism is the necessary shape and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism itself is not as such the goal of human development—the shape of human society.'⁸ What does this mean? According to Arthur, for Marx the 'goal of human development' lies beyond communism because it transcends the 'opposition to private property,' by which communism is still apparently 'infected by its opposite.' In contrast, 'socialism as 'positive humanism' stands on the ground of the essential relations of man to himself and to nature. It does not

⁶ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 25.

⁷ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 33.

⁸ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 35.

require to be perpetually mediated through its understanding of itself as the opposite of private property, although this mediation is a historically necessary stage.⁹ In effect, the ultimate human goal is fully positive, the retrieval of humanity's ontological essence, the non-alienated unity of man-activity-nature.

As one can see, Arthur's efforts seem to be well directed in his focussing on clarification of possible ambiguities or inconsistencies in Marx's treatment of labour, private property, and communism. We get not a critical exposition and interpretation but one which attempts simply to read Marx intelligibly and coherently.

In Part Two of his book, 'The Critique of Hegel,' Arthur attempts to delineate precisely the theoretical relationship between Marx and Hegel, and specifically to articulate the ways in which Marx appropriates from Hegel and those in which he significantly departs from Hegel. The themes of this discussion are labour, alienation, dialectic, and the influence of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Just as in the first part, here Arthur does a very good job of explaining Marx's views, but, as we will see, the care and effort which was put into a coherent reading of Marx is somewhat missing when it comes to interpreting Hegel.

In Chapter 5, on 'Hegel's Phenomenology,' Arthur says that for Marx 'Hegel's strength is precisely that he gives full recognition to the problem of *estrangement*. His weakness is that, in spite of the wealth of social and historical material treated, he considers it ultimately as a problem of *consciousness*.'¹⁰ Arthur's discussion of the *Phenomenology* is aimed at providing a context for this assessment. Right off, there is the issue of terminology regarding the translation of Hegel's *Entausserung*. Following Georg Lukacs, Arthur thinks that 'alienation' is a better English translation than 'externalization,' especially since with the latter we are likely to be confused with 'objectification' (*Vergegenständlichung*). The difference, broadly, is that while *Entausserung* carries the sense of 'posited as objective,' it also connotes relinquishment, such that an objectivity is set up from which the subject is estranged. *Entfremdung* is quite unambiguous, and may be rendered as 'estrangement'.¹¹

In my view, there are two reasons for being uneasy with this handling of semantics. First, instead of considering Hegel's own usage on its own terms the strategy appears to be to make Hegel speak so that Marx, who explicitly distinguishes objectification from alienation, will not sound confused; and second, the similarity between 'Entausserung' and 'Entfremdung' seems to be overdone here, since to 'relinquish,' 'dispose of,'

⁹ Quoted by Arthur on p. 38 from Karl Marx, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 306.

¹⁰ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 49.

'divest,' 'part with,' or 'discard' (*entaussern*) does not necessarily imply the negative connotation of to 'estrangle' or to 'alienate' (*entfremden*). Of course, for someone already familiar with Marx's critique of Hegel, this way of understanding the terminology is consistent with Marx's usage and will also facilitate reading Hegel in the way Marx does. Despite the fact that in his appendix Arthur recognizes that with 'alienation of property' one can use '*Entausserung*' but not '*Entfremdung*,' and generally that the latter term is of narrower application, he nonetheless concludes that '[w]ith Hegel's *Phenomenology* it is tempting to suggest that *Entfremdung* stands to *Entausserung* as phenomenological result to the active process of spirit's positing itself in otherness. This would conform with Marx's gloss: '*Entfremdung*...constitutes the real interest of *Entausserung*.'¹² If nothing else, this certainly begs the question of the correctness of Marx's reading of Hegel.

Arthur tells us that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be read as a sort of epistemological *Bildungsroman* of spirit where the determination of the untruth of various perspectives involves not just negative refutations but simultaneously the discovery of the grounds for progress in knowing, a development which is possible only because it takes place immanently to consciousness. Spirit reaches absolute knowledge when in grasping its own essence it transcends all alien positings of the object of knowledge. However, there is a problem in the way that Hegel construes the relationship of knowledge to its object. 'More particularly, the problem is: how can consciousness claim to know its object (*Gegenstand*) when the latter is posited as other than it?'¹³ The solution for Hegel must be that 'consciousness becomes more and more aware that it is its own activity that constitutes the object as an object of knowledge. The very distinction between knowledge and its object is drawn from the point of view of consciousness and is hence to be construed as a distinction falling within consciousness itself.'¹⁴ The fundamental significance of the *Phenomenology*, therefore, along with the implications for Marx's appropriation and critique of Hegel, are: first, the alienation experienced by spirit in the otherness of its object, as well as the transcending of this alienation through overcoming of this otherness, is understood as the active self-determination of spirit and not the result of passive submission to some external process; second, alienation has a positive meaning for self-consciousness since it involves the positing of spirit as objective and then recognizing this objectivity as spirit's own achievement. Thus, the necessity of self-alienation which leads to a 'positing through negating.'¹⁵

¹² *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 50.

¹³ Quoted by Arthur on p. 148 from Marx, *Collected Works*, p. 331.

¹⁴ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 52.

¹⁵ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 52.

Moreover, the 'labour of the negative' eventually finds a 'resting place' with the absolute knowledge that culminates the *Phenomenology*.

Arthur reminds us that Marx's critical appropriation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is inspired partly by Ludwig Feuerbach, and in particular by the method of inversion by which Hegel's *Bildungsroman* of spirit is anthropomorphized such that spiritual activity is read as the activity of human labour. While Marx is attracted to the 'producing principle' in Hegel, and the idea that self-estrangement leads to its overcoming, yet, according to Arthur, Marx discovers 'four mistakes' in Hegel: '(a) the reduction of man to self-consciousness and activity to spiritual labour; (b) the identification of objectivity with estrangement; (c) the claim that spirit (read 'man') is 'at home in its other-being as such;' (d) the failure to go beyond the 'negation of the negation' to the self-sustaining positive.'¹⁶ There is a single thread running through these mistakes and it goes something like this. Because Hegel as 'idealist' identifies the human essence with self-consciousness, all human estrangement is nothing but the estrangement of self-consciousness and objectivity is merely an abstraction posited by consciousness only to be taken back into itself. The reconciliation achieved by self-consciousness does not involve any practical transformation of objectivity but is merely a 'change of attitude' resulting from the realization by consciousness that the alienated objectivity is really only its own product. The basic idea is that the process of alienation (*Entausserung*) and overcoming of alienation is purely immanent to self-consciousness and therefore is nothing but an abstract activity that is inherently uncritical and conservative, despite the fact that it cannot surpass negativity. In contrast, with Marx, who views human labour as material rather than spiritual, alienation occurs in the context of an already existing external nature, and the estranged product of human labour must not just be recognized as such, or reinterpreted philosophically, but must be reappropriated through a practical solution, i.e., revolutionary practice which reconstitutes reality and sets it on a new basis—the 'self-sustaining positive.'

Without doubt, much of this interpretation of Hegel, given by Marx and elaborated by Arthur, hangs on the reading of Hegel's use of '*Entausserung*.' Again, Arthur follows Lukacs in rendering '*Entausserung*' as both 'alienation' or 'estrangement' so that the conclusion that Hegel equates *objectivity* with estrangement (where the end result stands opposed to spirit), or *objectification* with alienation (where the act of externalization is experienced as inherently alienating), might appear obvious. Moreover, while we have Marx agreeing with Hegel that objectification through labour and the overcoming of alienation is necessary, there is a disagreement over the necessity of alienation itself, for according to Marx estrangement is not intrinsic to the ontological

¹⁶ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 56.

structure of labour itself but is only an historical manifestation that can and will be transcended eventually. Since for Hegel externalization is inherently alienating, all historical objectifications must necessarily involve estrangement, and the ultimate retrieval of otherness by spirit can only occur in the abstract domain of philosophical speculative thought. The practical result of Hegel's philosophical reconciliation is his conservative accommodation with private property, the state, and religion. Hegel shares the uncritical standpoint of modern political economy from which alienation is preserved rather than abolished.

In a short appendix to Chapter 6 Arthur raises the question, 'is Marx fair to Hegel?' He makes reference to a work by Gilian Rose entitled *Hegel Contra Sociology* where it is argued that Marx distorts Hegel's *Phenomenology* by giving it a 'Fichtean reading.' Arthur's response to this is that Marx sees an 'antagonistic unity' in Hegel between Spinoza's substance and Fichte's self-consciousness, and in any case 'Marx's point is that where the absolute is concerned, the relation to the object is grasped by Hegel ultimately as not a really objective relation.'¹⁷ Moreover, it would seem, in Arthur's view, that Hegel's view of the positing by consciousness is, in fact, very Fichtean.

Although Arthur claims that his concern with Hegel in this book is with how Marx saw him and not with defending Marx's reading, he does believe that the 'general thrust' of Marx's view is correct.¹⁸ Indeed, Arthur actually goes significantly further than this statement would suggest, for subsequently in later chapters he provides a critique of Hegel on wage-labour (Chapter 8) and in Part Three a quite favorable overall assessment of Marx (Chapter 10). The only significant criticism that Arthur makes of Marx is that the latter may have been too Hegelian in seeing self-mediation as the solution to the 'riddle of history' and too Feuerbachian in his view of the 'complete unity in essence of man with nature' which resulted in a failure to appreciate the 'recalcitrance of nature to human use.'¹⁹ Ultimately, these sources led Marx to be overly optimistic about the 'abolition of labour' in the future society, where free activity seems to supplant not only private property and alienation, but the realm of material necessity as well. Marx seems to fail to see, at least in a consistent way, that freedom and material necessity must be understood as dialectically related and that freedom is never fully achieved at any point in history, but must continually be 'won and re-won in the dialectic of history.'²⁰

Arthur's conclusion here about Marx is somewhat curious, for it is precisely the sort of response an Hegelian would make in acknowledging

¹⁷ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 60.

¹⁸ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 75.

¹⁹ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 74.

²⁰ *Dialectics of Labour*, p. 138.

that because of the character of temporal finitude the 'cunning of reason' never ceases in history. But I doubt that Arthur would understand how an Hegelian could hold this view given his, and Marx's, interpretation of the role of the 'absolute' in Hegel.

It seems that there is a failure here to recognize that Marx is not just rhetorically unfair to Hegel at times but that he misinterprets Hegel in fundamental ways. In particular, the distinction between Absolute Spirit and the Absolute Idea is not kept straight, with the consequence that the relation between history and logic in Hegel is confused. Georg Lukacs, upon whom Arthur relies heavily, is notorious for reinforcing the Marxist reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a simple working out of logical categories. Also, the idea that the *absolute*, be it Idea or Spirit, is an identity-in-difference, and not a simple identity, is often overlooked or not considered carefully. Finally, there is a tendency in Marx and his followers to take the concept of self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a basically psychological phenomenon, supporting the conclusion that Hegel as idealist must either reject or underplay the role of independent external reality in his view of historical development. In failing to see that, on the one hand, self-consciousness is not merely a mental state for Hegel but a relation in the world and, on the other, that the *Phenomenology* is concerned with what knowing is and not with metaphysical being or existence, Hegel's phenomenological project is twisted and distorted.

I have already commented on the issue of Hegel's terminology and at this point will only indicate that the equation of *Entausserung* with estrangement (*Entfremdung*) is surely a mistake. As Louis Dupre has convincingly argued, in Hegel alienation occurs not simply because of the encounter with otherness in the act of externalization but due to the lack of recognition of the self in the other.²¹ 'Alienation consists in the mind's inability to recognize itself in an externalization which it nevertheless knows to be its own.'²² Prior to the emergence of spirit in the *Phenomenology*, the *Entfremdung* of the 'unhappy consciousness' is - overcome precisely through the *Entausserung* of self-consciousness whereby the will is affirmed as universal.²³ Subsequent to the appearance of spirit, the term 'alienation' (*Entausseruna*) attains its full meaning as a problem of adequate externalization in the degree of self-recognition in the object, and not of the distinctness *per se* of the object.

²¹ L. Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' *Hegel Studien*, Bd. 7 (1972), 217-236.

²² Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' p. 218.

²³ Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' p. 219.

According to Dupre, Marx's concept of alienation is heavily under the influence of Feuerbach who understood religious and philosophical alienation to involve the projecting of an infinite divine Other as the ground of man. Marx, for example, applies this meaning in his opposition to Hegel with a critique of the state and its 'mystifying' institutions.

The consequences of Marx's usage is that he attributes to Hegel the identification of alienation with objectification and the overcoming of alienation with the elimination of objectivity.²⁴ However, for Dupre this interpretation is 'patently false' since Hegel recognizes that it is in the interaction between consciousness and the world, not the dissolving of the world in consciousness, that consciousness becomes actual. The overcoming of alienation consists in the fact that consciousness no longer remains stranger to what it could originally conceive *only* as external to itself.²⁵ (my emphasis)

Dupre also recognizes that there are incoherencies in Marx's theory of objectivity, but, unlike Arthur who thinks that Marx does not take the otherness of nature seriously enough, Dupre believes that Marx's mistake is in defining objectivity as 'independent' of man.²⁶ Naturally, this raises the issue of the proper conception of the relationship 'man-activity-nature' and I suspect that an appropriate Hegelian response to Marx's ontology of productive activity is to reassert the primacy of consciousness over material labour, since the human being cannot act upon the world until he or she has made some sort of interpretation of it, so as to provide the goals and meaning of the action.

The difficulty with the quasi-naturalistic ontology that underlies Marx's view of objectification is that it neglects the epistemological context of action and in doing so takes the relation of subject to object as unproblematic. The traditional philosophical questions about the possibility of knowledge simply do not figure into Marx's project, and indeed one gathers that for Marx these are largely pseudo-questions generating pseudoproblems. Also, in casting reason in a purely instrumental mode Marx has reduced the symbolic dimension of action to a merely secondary epiphenomenal-like status. This goes along with a reductionist tendency in Marx's criterion of concrete activity in making material productive activity the paradigm of concreteness. Not surprisingly, one of the legacies of Marx for later Marxism has been either the ignoring or oversimplifying of the perennial philosophical issue of the ground of knowledge and meaning.

²⁴ Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' p. 233.

²⁵ Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' p. 233.

²⁶ Dupre, 'Hegel's Concept of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of It,' pp. 234-35.

Overall, C. J. Arthur provides us with a very accurate understanding of Marx's *Paris Manuscripts*, and he makes a valiant effort at dispelling certain 'myths' about Marx, e.g., the idea that he was influenced by Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage. However, the clarity and cogency of his exposition and interpretation does not remove the flawed character of Marx's early philosophy. It may well be that, since Marx had already committed himself in 1843 to the overcoming of philosophy in practice, he inevitably would be somewhat of a careless philosopher and more a zealous revolutionary trying to force theory into an ideological mold. In any case, there is a certain abstractness and dogmatism to the *Paris Manuscripts* that many commentators have failed to recognize, with the consequence that in simply taking Marx as an authoritative source some misconceptions about Hegel's views have been perpetuated.