

Marx's Theory of Alienated Labor and Its Contemporary Value

-- Based on "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" (Excerpts)

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ABSTRACT

The theory of "alienated labor" is a crucial component of Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844". It also provides strong support for analyzing the poverty of workers under the capitalist mode of production. Marx made extensive discussions on "alienated labor", constructed a relatively complete conceptual system, and systematically analyzed the fourfold determination of alienated labor as the primary content. On the basis of analyzing the fourfold determination, exploring the hidden relationship between alienated labor and private property, and seeking practical ways to eliminate alienated labor are the key to truly grasping Marx's theory of alienated labor. This theory is not only a major theoretical achievement of Marx's criticism of bourgeois political economy, but also an important breakthrough for the formation of his historical materialism. It can be said that the issue of alienation plays a connecting role in Marxism, especially in Marxist political economy. Considering the current development of China's economy and society in the context of the new era, the new development concept implemented in the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics embodies the practical significance and guiding value of Marx's theory of alienated labor: promoting the construction of a community with a shared future for man and nature through innovative development and green development; advancing the building of harmonious labor relations through shared development and open development; and facilitating the free and all-round development of human beings through coordinated development.

KEYWORDS

Marx; Alienated Labor; Private Property; New Development Concept.

1. THE MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844: MARX'S THEORY OF ALIENATED LABOR AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (hereafter referred to as the Manuscripts) is an unfinished work by Marx, written between April and August 1844, and unpublished during his lifetime. It represents Marx's earliest achievement in transitioning to the study of political economy. With the establishment of the capitalist mode of production as the dominant social system, the tremendous development of productive forces did not bring universal prosperity to society. Instead, it gave rise to an impoverished working class, whose poverty was continuously produced and reproduced. In the Manuscripts, Marx proceeded from "the current economic facts"-namely, the dominant position of capitalist private ownership and the wage-labor system-and proposed the theory of alienated labor while exploring the root causes of this social phenomenon, providing its initial formulation. The theory of alienated labor served as Marx's fundamental theoretical method and principle for analyzing the social and economic issues of his time. In the Manuscripts, Marx employed

the fourfold determination of alienated labor and adhered to a holistic perspective to expose the unjust reality of capital-labor relations under capitalism. He endowed alienated labor with a new value orientation, making it a latent driving force for criticizing capitalism and exploring the construction of socialism.

2. THE CONNOTATION OF ALIENATION AND ALIENATED LABOR

2.1. The Concept of Alienation

Numerous philosophers have discussed "alienation" from different perspectives. Hegel, from an idealist standpoint, interpreted alienation positively, arguing that absolute spirit is the starting point and destination of all activities. Feuerbach further advanced the concept of alienation by investigating the essence of humanity. Marx's understanding of "alienation" differs from both. While Marx also explored alienation through the lens of the relationship and status between subject and object, his focus was neither on the alienation of Hegel's absolute spirit nor on the alienation of Feuerbach's perceptual human being. As Marx criticized Hegel: "The only labor Hegel knows and recognizes is abstract mental labor."^[1] In his critique of Feuerbach, Marx noted: "He does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *The Essence of Christianity*, he regards only theoretical activity as genuinely human activity."^[2]

Building on the alienation theories of these two thinkers, Marx shifted the subject and object of alienation from abstraction to reality. He argued that the subject of alienation is neither the objective absolute spirit nor the perceptual human being divorced from reality, but the exploited wage laborers under the wage-labor system-workers who engage in productive labor yet do not own the products of their labor, and who sell their labor power only to lose control over their own labor. "This fact merely indicates that the object produced by labor, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer."^[2]

2.2. The Fourfold Determination of Alienated Labor

2.2.1. Alienation of Human Beings from the Products of Their Labor

Strictly speaking, workers engage in production to meet their own livelihood needs: labor is a means of survival, the product is the fruit of their labor, and the products they produce should ultimately return to them. However, in capitalist society, even basic livelihood needs become a struggle. The vast majority of surplus value created by workers through day-and-night labor is appropriated by capitalists free of charge. The workers' capacity to produce surplus value is directly proportional to the capitalists' degree of exploitation, condemning workers to a state of hunger. As Marx stated: "The object produced by labor, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer."^[1] The consequence of this labor alienation for workers is "toil without gain." The root cause lies in the dominance of private ownership in capitalist society and the social system underpinned by this ownership.

2.2.2. Alienation of Human Beings from Their Labor Activity

From Marx's perspective on labor, labor is an activity through which humans satisfy their survival and livelihood needs through hard work-a process of reclaiming their subjectivity, encompassing production activities carried out voluntarily. However, under capitalism, labor loses its attribute of freedom and becomes an alien activity. Capitalists, as owners of capital, control all aspects of workers' labor. Workers are forced to perform unpaid labor to meet the needs of others, leaving them with no choice but to "sacrifice themselves." As a result, workers come to loathe and avoid labor, for only by abandoning labor can they truly escape suffering. Trapped in a passive position in labor, workers' free development is severely hindered. Their hatred of labor and attempts to flee it, coupled with the

denial of their labor value, lead to extremely low productivity, undermining the foundation for sustained social development.

2.2.3. Alienation of Human Beings from Their Species-Essence

Feuerbach defined human "species-essence" as a static existence. Marx inherited this view while enriching its connotation, arguing that "the species-essence of humans is free, conscious activity." [2] As concrete beings, humans are the unity of subject and object, and their existence should be encompassed within their own consciousness. When labor is understood as an activity essential to life itself, it becomes a necessary condition for the continuation of the human species-and this is precisely what distinguishes humans from animals. However, when human life activity no longer serves to meet human beings' own needs, the species-life of workers is deprived by factors external to labor, and humans cease to be "human." When people fail to realize their goal of transforming the objective world through material production, they become alienated from themselves.

2.2.4. Alienation of Human Beings from One Another

The aforementioned three forms of alienation give rise to the alienation between humans, meaning that individuals are reduced to interchangeable entities, even measured by the same standards. As Marx put it: "The relationship of man to himself only becomes objective and real for him through his relationship to other men." [3] Normally, human beings should coexist harmoniously. However, in capitalist society, workers are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. With no alternative but to sell their labor power to capitalists, workers not only lose ownership of their products but are also forced to engage in productive activity. Capitalists, meanwhile, reap the benefits without effort, appropriating the surplus value created by workers for free over the long term. As the number of workers grows, the opposing forces of capitalists and workers inevitably intensify, leading to the formation of two antagonistic classes.

3. ALIENATED LABOR AND PRIVATE PROPERTY

3.1. Private Property Manifests as the Cause of Alienated Labor, Or more Precisely, its Necessary Condition.

Based on his analysis of the fourfold determination of alienated labor, Marx traced the root causes of alienated labor by examining its relationship with private property. Before the emergence of private ownership societies, people engaged in free and conscious activities, laboring according to their production and livelihood needs. However, with the rise of social division of labor and the increasing development of commodity economy, workers' activities and products were stripped away from them, and labor was reduced to a mere means of subsistence. The question of who owns the products of labor became a key puzzle for Marx. By deduction, labor and its products were monopolized by others-namely, capitalists. Workers, dominated by capital, were reduced to tools for creating wealth. Labor gradually became alienated around private property, directly resulting in workers being "deprived of their means of subsistence" and the emergence of class antagonism.

3.2. Private Property Also Manifests as the Result of Alienated Labor.

After labor becomes alienated, workers, bound by the wage relationship, sell their labor and mechanically produce surplus value, which is gradually transformed into capital. This capital is primarily used to pay workers' wages, meet capitalists' livelihood needs, and expand reproduction. In essence, the entire process is nothing but a cycle of mutual production between workers and capital-or even a process of consuming workers. Wages constitute only a tiny fraction of total capital; capitalists only provide enough to sustain workers' basic survival. The remaining capital is directly used to purchase more labor power for further capital production. Capitalists' one-sided and excessive exploitation traps workers in a cycle of "producing themselves." While labor promotes capital

accumulation, it also harbors profound contradictions. After the emergence of alienated labor, and in light of its four manifestations, capitalists seize the vast majority of products created by workers. The more products capitalists possess, the more concentrated private ownership becomes, and the more surplus value they extract from workers. The degree of capitalist exploitation is proportional to capital accumulation and inversely proportional to workers' labor income. From another perspective, with the alienation of labor and the increasing concentration of private ownership, capitalists can accumulate more private property-at this point, private property manifests as the result of alienated labor.

4. THE THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ALIENATED LABOR

4.1. Marx's Theory of Alienated Labor Paved a Realistic and Rational Path for Historical Materialism.

Through this theory, Marx thoroughly criticized Hegel's idealism, questioned the rationality of private ownership, exposed the ugly face of capitalists to the people, and revealed the essence of capitalist exploitation of workers. He proposed the thesis that eliminating private ownership is the way to eradicate alienation. Marx argued that human labor and material production are the foundation and driving force of social progress. Starting from the conscious subject of "human beings," his theory of alienation clarified that the essence of humanity lies in people engaged in productive practice within social history-distinct from Feuerbach's abstract "human being." Marx regarded the sublation of alienation and the restoration of humanity's practical essence as the core of human emancipation.

4.2. Marx's Theory of Alienated Labor Opened an Effective Path for Establishing Scientific Political Economy.

In Marx's view, the root causes of human alienation and class antagonism lie in the inherent flaws of capitalist society-excessive political oppression and economic exploitation. Marx sought to address the problem of labor products dominating human beings by eliminating these political and economic ills, thereby accelerating the process of overcoming bourgeois political economy and constructing a scientific and comprehensive political economy. Bourgeois political economy has always relied on private property for protection, realizing the domination of humans through the ownership of property and strenuously justifying the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, as long as private ownership persists and existing social relations remain unchanged, the ills of capitalism will not be eliminated. The development of bourgeois political economy will be subject to various constraints, and it will ultimately be forced to undergo fundamental transformation.

5. THE CONTEMPORARY VALUE OF ALIENATED LABOR

5.1. Promoting the Construction of a Community with a Shared Future for Man and Nature through Innovative and Green Development

Marx pointed out that human beings should rationally regulate the material exchange with nature, "carrying out this exchange in a way that is worthy of and appropriate to their human nature." [4] In other words, the relationship between humans and nature is dialectically unified: humans are part of nature, and their production and livelihood depend on nature. Natural resources are the main source of human means of production and subsistence. At the same time, humans confirm their "human essence" through objective activities that transform nature. Therefore, humans should carry out activities to transform nature in accordance with the inherent laws of both humanity and nature, rather than treating nature as an inexhaustible "treasure trove."

Since the reform and opening-up policy, the profound transformation of production relations has emancipated and developed productive forces, leading to remarkable achievements in China's economic and social development. However, driven by economic interests, some ecological and environmental problems have also emerged, resulting in the alienation of the human-nature relationship. In response, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "We want both green mountains and gold mountains. But if we had to choose between the two, we would choose green mountains, for green mountains are gold mountains themselves." [5] This means that economic development must not come at the cost of ecological destruction—ecology itself is part of the economy, and protecting the ecology is equivalent to developing productive forces. The relationship between "green mountains" (ecological protection) and "gold mountains" (economic development) is dialectically unified.

First, "wanting both green mountains and gold mountains" reflects the people's aspiration to "acquire abundant material wealth through economic development while maximizing ecological protection" [6], embodying the interdependent relationship between ecological protection and economic development, which should advance in tandem. Second, "choosing green mountains over gold mountains" demonstrates that when conflicts arise between ecological protection and economic development, short-term economic gains must never be pursued at the expense of the ecological environment. Humans and nature form a community with a shared future, and green mountains satisfy the people's growing desire for a better life—thus, ecological protection takes precedence over economic development. Third, "green mountains are gold mountains themselves" illustrates the inherent unity between ecological protection and economic development: "green mountains" are not only the foundation of "gold mountains" but also the basis for creating "gold mountains." In other words, "protecting the ecological environment is protecting productive forces, and improving the ecological environment is improving productive forces." [7]

In the basic principles for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, "adhering to the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature" is a fundamental principle. Addressing the Leaders' Climate Summit, President Xi Jinping pointed out that to build a community with a shared future for man and nature, we must adhere to green development: "We should follow the trend of the current scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation, seize the huge development opportunities brought by green transition, drive the transformation and upgrading of economic, energy, and industrial structures with innovation, and make a sound ecological environment a pillar for the sustainable development of the global economy and society." [8] It is evident that adhering to the concepts of innovative development and green development is the key to building a community with a shared future for man and nature.

Among the new development concepts, innovative development takes precedence: "Innovation is the primary driving force for development" [9], serving as a crucial engine for national progress, national rejuvenation, and human societal advancement. Green development, as an important reflection of the people's pursuit of a better life, is the cornerstone for transforming the mode of economic development and promoting the sustainable development of the economy and society. Green development provides the premise and foundation for innovative development, while innovative development serves as the core support for green development. To build a community with a shared future for man and nature in the new era, we must practice the concept that "green mountains are gold mountains," promote the sustainable development of ecologically resource-rich regions through green innovation, drive the high-quality development of resource-based regions through innovation, uphold the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, and achieve mutual prosperity between humans and nature.

5.2. Promoting the Construction of Harmonious Labor Relations through Shared and Open Development

Under the capitalist mode of production, capitalists, relying on private ownership of the means of production and the wage-labor system, become the dominant social force. They control and dominate workers, the means of production, and living labor-strengthening their power to dominate workers and their products. This power is, in fact, produced and reproduced by workers themselves: the more products workers produce, the greater the power that dominates them. As the subjects of labor, workers should construct and enjoy social relations in accordance with their inherent needs. However, under the influence of capital, these social relations are completely replaced by the relationship of "employer and employee." Workers have no choice but to sell their labor power in accordance with the "false" principle of equal exchange, otherwise, they cannot survive. The employer-employee relationship embodies the exploitation and oppression of workers by capitalists, whose essence is the inequality between humans-leading to comprehensive antagonism among people.

Since reform and opening-up, while leveraging the advantages of the socialist system, China has, based on Marxism's important guiding ideology for socialist construction, acknowledged and learned from the strengths of capitalism, drawing on the advanced achievements of civilization created by capitalism and the advanced experience reflecting the laws of modern socialized production to serve socialist construction. On this basis, China has continuously upheld and improved the system of "public ownership as the mainstay, with diverse forms of ownership developing side by side" and the distribution system of "distribution according to work as the mainstay, with multiple forms of distribution existing alongside it." It has been committed to eliminating inequality in distribution and antagonism in human relations, providing institutional guarantees for the construction of harmonious social relations.

Entering the new era, with the rapid economic and social development of China, labor relations have become increasingly harmonious. However, it should be noted that constructing harmonious labor relations still faces numerous challenges under the new historical conditions. For example, labor relations remain characterized by "strong capital and weak labor," protection of labor rights is still insufficient, and the development of the new economy and new business forms has brought about labor disputes in the relevant job market and issues regarding labor protection for flexible workers.

Labor relations regulate the relationship between labor and capital. Harmonious labor relations can effectively promote income equity, reduce the impact of technological progress on income gaps, and foster a sense of community-serving as the foundation for realizing common prosperity, the essential requirement of socialism[10]. Therefore, the Party and the state attach great importance to the work of building harmonious labor relations. The Opinions on Building Harmonious Labor Relations issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in March 2015 pointed out: "Under the new historical conditions, striving to build harmonious labor relations with Chinese characteristics is an important part of strengthening and innovating social governance and safeguarding and improving people's wellbeing, an important foundation for building a harmonious socialist society, an important guarantee for sustained and healthy economic development, and an inevitable requirement for strengthening the Party's governing foundation and consolidating its governing position." [11]

5.3. Promoting the Free and All-Round Development of Humans through Coordinated Development

First of all, labor characterizes the essence of humans. The fundamental difference between human labor and animal activities lies in that human labor is a "conscious life activity", while animal activities are merely instinctive behaviors for sustaining the survival of their species. In contrast, human "conscious life activity" not only maintains the survival of the human species, but also, as the essence of humans, creates the unique mode of existence and life form of humans, and fosters the development of human self-awareness.

Secondly, free labor represents the labor attribute inherent in the essence of humans. The characteristic of such free labor is that humans can freely dominate their own labor and labor products, and freely carry out objectifying activities in accordance with the inherent laws of themselves and the objects. Through this process, humans create a world that is truly "human-oriented", aiming to achieve the self-confirmation of the human essence.

However, under the mode of production where capitalist private ownership and the wage-labor system dominate, workers—who are the subjects of labor—have instead become objects dominated by labor. Labor and its products, which embody the essence of humans, have turned into chains that control humans themselves. This kind of labor forces the entire social production to serve the needs of capital accumulation and submit to the sole goal of capital pursuing profits.

Since the reform and opening-up policy was launched, China has achieved remarkable accomplishments in economic construction. Nevertheless, driven by the interests of capital, phenomena of alienation between humans and their true selves have occasionally emerged in Chinese society. Examples include the one-sided development of individuals under the highly divided labor system, and the quantification of social life based solely on monetary standards. Against this backdrop, the age-old question—"What is a human being?"—has once again prompted profound reflections among the Chinese people.

In response to this question, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "Essentially, humans are cultural beings, not 'materialized' beings; they are dynamic and all-round beings, not rigid and 'one-dimensional' beings." [14] The all-round development of humans fundamentally refers to the all-round development of their labor capabilities, that is, the free, sufficient, and harmonious development of their intellectual and physical abilities. Meanwhile, the free and all-round development of humans emphasizes the development of all humans, rather than development achieved at the expense of some people.

Based on this understanding, General Secretary Xi Jinping provided a straightforward interpretation and answer: "Our people love life and aspire to better education, more stable jobs, higher incomes, more reliable social security, better medical and health services, more comfortable housing conditions, and a more beautiful environment. They also hope that their children can grow better, work better, and live better. The aspirations of the people for a better life are our goal." [15]

At the same time, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "The uncoordinated development in China is a long-standing issue, which is prominently reflected in the relationships between regions, between urban and rural areas, between economic and social development, between material civilization and spiritual civilization, and between economic development and national defense construction." [12] Therefore, adhering to coordinated development is essential to narrowing the gaps between regions, between urban and rural areas, between industries, and between social strata—thereby promoting the all-round development of people in different regions, industries, and strata. Moreover, adhering to coordinated development helps eliminate

It is particularly important to emphasize that a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, as well as harmonious labor relations, are prerequisites for realizing the free and all-round development of humans. Conversely, the realization of humans' free and all-round development constitutes the ultimate value of constructing a harmonious human-nature relationship and harmonious labor relations. Without a harmonious relationship between humans and nature and harmonious labor relations, there can be no free and all-round humans, nor can the true restoration of the human essence be achieved. Thus, these three aspects are dialectically unified.

To sum up, although *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is a classic work written more than 170 years ago, the truth it contains still shines a light on the present era. "Although the era we live in has undergone tremendous and profound changes compared with Marx's time, from the perspective of the 500-year history of world socialism, we still live in the historical era pointed out

by Marxism." [13] Therefore, the value of Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 today lies not only in theory, but more importantly in practice.

Through long-term theoretical innovation and practical exploration, we have been committed to realizing the social ideal of eliminating alienated labor, returning labor fruits to workers, and achieving the free and all-round development of humans. To address this historical task, it is imperative to adopt a new development model and new development concepts that align with this goal. Precisely for this reason, the Communist Party of China has put forward the new development concepts through innovations in top-level design. These concepts provide specific and feasible practical approaches to solving this historical task, and represent a realistic path for socialism with Chinese characteristics to overcome alienation and realize the free and all-round development of humans, while upholding the principle that "development is the absolute principle".the imbalance between economic development and social development, and addresses the tendency of prioritizing material gains over spiritual development. Ultimately, it facilitates the all-round development of humans, preventing them from becoming one-dimensional beings who only pursue material interests.

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6. CONCLUSION

Through long-term theoretical innovation and practical exploration, we have been committed to realizing the social ideal of eliminating alienated labor, returning labor fruits to workers, and achieving the free and all-round development of humans. To address this historical task, it is imperative to adopt a new development model and new development concepts that align with this goal. Precisely for this reason, the Communist Party of China has put forward the new development concepts through innovations in top-level design. These concepts provide specific and feasible practical approaches to solving this historical task, and represent a realistic path for socialism with Chinese characteristics to overcome alienation and realize the free and all-round development of humans, while upholding the principle that "development is the absolute principle".

Therefore, in the new era and new stage, China's development must be guided by the dialectical unity of the new development concepts—namely, innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing. Only in this way can we truly build a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, establish harmonious labor relations, and ultimately achieve the true restoration of the human essence and the free and all-round development of humans.

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