

On the wider Young Hegelian origins of Marx's concept of alienation

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In the debates about humanism and anti-humanism, the content of Marx's theory of alienation is often traced to the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach, especially the concept of *species-being*. Consequently, Marx's early humanism is seen to be tied up with his brief stint as a devoted Feuerbachian.¹ However, as David Leopold notes, alienation "is best thought of as a generic concept which can be applied to a wide variety of subjects".²

In this paper, I argue that we ought to anchor our understanding of Marx's use of the concept of alienation in precisely such a generic understanding, and that this generic concept originates not with Feuerbach specifically but with the wider Young Hegelian intellectual movement in general. More precisely, I will argue that we should not talk about a 'theory of alienation', but rather talk about alienation as a *technical concept* that can be applied in the process of developing new theories. Finally, I will also argue that doing this helps solve certain tensions in the interpretation of Marx's mature work.

In the following, I will begin by sketching out how three different Young Hegelian authors applied the concept of alienation in this technical way, beginning with Feuerbach and the way he appropriates the concept of alienation from Hegel. Then, I will move on to two Young Hegelians that, like Feuerbach, to a certain extent begin from the critique of religion, but who are decidedly and vocally *anti-Feuerbachians*: Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner. I do this in order to demonstrate that they apply the same technical concept of alienation in the same way as Feuerbach while reaching completely different conclusions.

¹ See, e.g., Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso Books, 2005), 72, 229-30; Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 31; David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, (London: Macmillan, 1969), 104, 107; Søren Mau, *Stummer Zwang*, trans. Christian Frings (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2021), 85 ff.; Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert. Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen Wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition* (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1999), 95ff.

² David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx. German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 68.

After discussing the way that this technical concept is applied by these three different Young Hegelians, I will proceed with a discussion of Marx. I will begin by briefly rehashing his youthful theory of alienation before moving on to discuss the ways in which he can be said to apply the *technical concept* of alienation in *Capital*. While I will also touch on the section on commodity fetishism, usually regarded as the most clear-cut case of alienation in *Capital*, I will mostly focus on two less obvious examples in order to demonstrate the generative role that alienation plays, viz. *capital as an automatic subject* and *machinery*.

I.

As mentioned, I will begin by discussing Feuerbach's appropriation of Hegel's concept of alienation. I will not go into much detail about Feuerbach's theory of species-being, human essence, etc. since (a) I assume it to be well-known to anyone participating in a conference on Marx and humanism, at least in its basic outline, and (b) I am here more interested in the *structure* of Feuerbach's use of the concept of alienation, not so much the results of his analysis.

Feuerbach primarily takes his concept of alienation from Hegel. In chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel famously analyses the confrontation of two self-consciousnesses. Following Fichte, he stresses the importance of recognition for the constitution of the self: to recognise and, in turn, be recognised by another self-consciousness as a free and independent being. However, this need for recognition takes the form of a struggle, ultimately for life and death, and in the process one self-consciousness comes to dominate the other and a relation of bondage and lordship is created. But through the process of this relation, it is ultimately reversed. The lord comes to rely on the bondsman who in turn receives recognition from the lord through the externalisation of himself in the product of labour that the lord enjoys.³ Since it will become important later, this latter point is what interests us here: that the bondsman ultimately gains recognition through his own creative activity by externalising himself in a product. (Hegel also returns to this theme of alienation as externalisation in the section on the self-alienation of Spirit.⁴) Further, this analysis by Hegel also emphasises intersubjectivity, or sociality, as a necessary condition for self-consciousness.

In the next section of chapter 4, on the 'Unhappy Consciousness', Hegel goes on to examine the phenomenon of alienation not as the externalisation of one self-consciousness's activity in the face of another, but as something internal to a single self-consciousness. "The

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-118.

⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ch. 6, section B.

unhappy consciousness”, Hegel says, “is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being”.⁵ In this analysis, alienation is not taken to mean externalisation (*Entäusserung*), as in the relationship between lord and bondsman, but as split (*Entzweiung*) of the individual person. The paradigmatic example of this taken up by Hegel is the split between man and God, or, in Hegel’s terminology, ‘the Unchangeable’.⁶

Feuerbach takes up both strands in Hegel’s concept of alienation, and in the first two chapters of *The Essence of Christianity* (on the essence of man and the essence of religion) he mirrors them exactly. In the first chapter, Feuerbach describes the essence of man as precisely such an intersubjective or social being as Hegel makes it into in the lordship and bondage section: “Man is himself at once I and Thou”, says Feuerbach, and so “he can put himself in the place of another”.⁷ At the same time, Feuerbach also stresses the externalisation aspect when he says that, “Man is nothing without an object” and continues:

But the object to which a subject essentially, necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject’s own, but objective, nature. If it be an object common to several individuals of the same species, but under various conditions, it is still (...) their own, but objective, nature.⁸

Similarly, in the second chapter Feuerbach’s investigation of the essence of religion mirrors Hegel’s analysis of the unhappy consciousness that has been split in two. The essence of religion is anthropology, says Feuerbach, and so it takes its content from the human – it is ‘their own, but objective, nature’. And so, the predicates of God are really just those that belong to the nature of man, viz. reason, will, and affection (or feeling).⁹ These characteristics of the human essence are instead projected unto God as His predicates by the unhappy consciousness, who then, rather than knowing their own nature directly, only comes to know it in a perverted or alienated form. Here, Feuerbach more or less explicitly references Hegel when he writes that, “To know God and not oneself to be God, to know blessedness, and not oneself to enjoy it, is a state of disunity, of unhappiness”.¹⁰

Feuerbach thus fundamentally understand alienation as (a) a product of externalisation, and (b) as something that gets its objective content entirely from the alienated

⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126.

⁶ Jon Stewart, *Hegel’s Century. Alienation and Recognition in a Time of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31 f.

⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans [George Eliot] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1854]), 2

⁸ Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 4.

⁹ Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 3.

¹⁰ Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 17.

subject. Finally, we can add that this alienated object *has power* over the alienated subject, but again that power is only a reflection of man's own power. This is of course evident in the view of God and religion as a form of alien power, but it is also true more generally, Feuerbach thinks. Thus, "the power of the object of feeling is the power of feeling itself; the power of the object of the intellect is the power of the intellect itself; the power of the object of the will is the power of the will itself".¹¹ Notice that these three powers are, again, the characteristics of human nature (feeling, will, and intellect), and again the alienated power has no content that does not come from the subject itself. And so, (c) the alienated object has power over the subject (but this power comes from the subject itself).

This is the basic structure of alienation as we find it time and again in Feuerbach, and which he applies in developing his theory. The obvious objection to this is to say: Why is it not the other way around? Feuerbach does not state his concept of alienation first and then apply it, rather we only discover it through its application; why, then, is it not his concept of alienation which is dependent on his theory and not the other way around? The counter to that objection is to show, as I will now do, that other Young Hegelians hold the same view of alienation without having the same anthropological theory of human nature.

II.

As big as the Young Hegelian intellectual movement was, Bruno Bauer was probably one of the most important figures, second only to Feuerbach and Arnold Ruge.¹² During the second half of the 1830s he underwent an enormous theoretical development to the point where his views had changed significantly between each work he published – even within the same series of works, such as his three-part review of David F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1835) or his multi-volume study of the gospels. However, throughout this period, alienation continued to play a significant role as a central concept, which Bauer applied to develop his theories. And even if he, like Feuerbach, began in the domain of religion and was, at least for a while, sympathetic to Feuerbach's project (he famously wanted to start a journal of atheism together

¹¹ Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 5.

¹² It is impossible to even estimate the actual size of the Young Hegelian intellectual movement, which consisted of hundreds if not thousands of philosophers, theologians, jurists, writers, critics, students, artists, aestheticians, etc. One indication, however, is the list of people that Arnold Ruge and Theodor Echtermeyer kept up an editorial correspondence with for their journal, the *Hallische Jahrbücher*, the unquestionable organisational centre of the movement – a list that can be found in the appendices to Martin Hundt's magisterial collection of the collected editorial correspondence, and which runs over 100 pages (!). See, Martin Hundt (ed.), *Der Redaktionsbriefwechsel der Hallischen, Deutschen und Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbücher (1837-1844)*, Vol. 3, *Apparat*, 91-194 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010).

with Marx and Feuerbach), he never shared Feuerbach's anthropological views, rejected the concept of *Gattung* altogether and, by the mid-1840s saw Feuerbach's philosophy as diametrically opposed to his own, at least in a Young Hegelian context.

This is most clear in an 1845 article specifically on Feuerbach, in which Bauer divides the Young Hegelian movement into two opposing camps. Hegel's great project, Bauer argues, had been to reconcile Fichte and Spinoza, subject and substance. However, this had resulted in an unresolvable tension in Hegel's system that in the end limited the absolute, which of course is impermissible. This tension, Bauer writes, can be resolved in one of two ways:

Either self-consciousness has to be consumed again in the fire of substance, that is, only the pure substantiality relation can persist and exist; or it has to be shown that personality is the creator of its attributes and of its essence, that it lies in the concept of personality in general to posit itself as limited, and to sublimate again this limitation, which posits itself, through this universal essence, since this very essence is only the result of its inner self-differentiation, of its activity.¹³

While Bauer classifies Feuerbach as an example of the former and a Spinozist, he takes himself as the prime example of the latter. To him, Hegel's ambition of "grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" is resolved decidedly to the advantage of the subject.¹⁴ Broadly speaking, the theoretical development he went through can be condensed into a process of transforming Hegel's absolute spirit into a secularised and atheistic (though not materialist) concept of *self-consciousness*.¹⁵

To Bauer, self-consciousness is the great *demiurge*, whose self-activity is the cause and content of everything.¹⁶ The development of spirit in history is therefore actually the development of self-consciousness, an activity which consists in *externalising itself*, of "making cultural forms, of constructing meaningful worlds, of value creation, of self-objectification".¹⁷ Bauer thus completely rejects Feuerbach's idea of the species (*Gattung*) as

¹³ Bruno Bauer, "Charakteristik Ludvig Feuerbachs", *Wigands Vierteljahrschrift* 3 (1845): 88. English translation quoted from Douglas Moggach, "The Subject as Substance: Bruno Bauer's Critique of Stirner", *The Owl of Minerva* 41, No. 1 (2009): 65. The piece was published anonymously at the time, but as Moggach argues (op.cit. p. 65n6) authorship has been established beyond all doubt.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 9-10.

¹⁵ See, John E. Toews, *Hegelianism. The Path to Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1845* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ch. 9.

¹⁶ Zvi Rosen, "The Influence of Bruno Bauer on Marx' Concept of Alienation", *Social Theory and Practice* 1, No. 2 (Fall 1970): 53.

¹⁷ Toews, *Hegelianism*, 325.

the source of the universal substance. As he makes clear in an 1844 article, “Die Gattung und die Masse” (somewhat weirdly translated into English as “The Genus and the Crowd”), he vehemently rejects Feuerbach’s notion of the species as the essence of man; such a view, he provokingly writes, encloses man in the way the essence of a caterpillar would be enclosed if it made a leaf into its only and highest world, i.e., rejected its true nature as a butterfly.¹⁸ Feuerbach’s view absorbs the subject into the substance, but to Bauer it is the reverse. The subject, self-consciousness, is the sole creator and host of the universal substance.

Having established that Bauer thoroughly rejects Feuerbach’s anthropological theory of the species we must now ask: what about alienation? While Bauer rejects Feuerbach’s theory, alienation nonetheless plays a similar theory-generating role in his own philosophical project.

Already in his earlier theological phase, alienation played a key role. In his articles for the *Journal of Speculative Theology*, which he himself edited, he expressed the problem of his age as one of alienation between man and God. In revelatory religion, truth appeared simultaneously in the form of self-consciousness and as external, impenetrable other, which appeared to self-consciousness as something alien (the ‘Unchangeable’ of the *Phenomenology*). The role of speculative theology was to sublimate religion into a final stage of genuine reconciliation between the human and divine and thereby also overcoming alienation, rather than following Strauss and others in their rebellion of the human freedom against revelation.¹⁹ His project therefore becomes to demonstrate, contra Strauss, that the apparently historically false and self-contradictory narrative of the gospels is actually the logically necessary form that the consciousness of the early Christians had to take and that the fallacies and self-contradictions are necessary to self-consciousness’s development.

But to the later Bauer, alienation obviously also plays a key role – perhaps an even greater one as self-objectification is seen by Bauer as the way in which self-consciousness ‘creates’ the world. Throughout most of history, this world seems alien to it. It takes the entire process of human history, of the development of Spirit, for self-consciousness to come to recognise itself in the world that it has created. In a way, this is a classically Hegelian understanding, and there is an extent to which the *Phenomenology* can similarly be read as a book about alienation in general.²⁰ But Bauer takes this to the extreme. The world

¹⁸ Bruno Bauer, “The Genus and the Crows”, in Lawrence Stepelevich (ed.), in *The Young Hegelians. An Anthology* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 201-202.

¹⁹ Toews, *Hegelianism*, 300-301.

²⁰ Stewart, *Hegel’s Century*, 36 ff.

which self-consciousness creates through its externalisation is the opposite of what it should be; its self-activity is absolute, i.e. limitless and incessant, but the external world restrains it in fixation. Subject and object change places, because self-consciousness empties its content into the world, which thereby gains a content that does not rightly belong to it. What should be recognisable to self-consciousness therefore instead appears as “an alienated and dismembered world”.²¹ Rather than limitless self-consciousness, this alien world is reflected as a limited and finite consciousness. This consciousness conceives of the world as dominated by natural forces, including the human world (state, society, religion, etc.), forces over which it has no control, and which in turn dominates it. Only through philosophical critique and the destruction of these independent forms does it become possible for self-consciousness to bridge the gap between man and his alienated world and for self-consciousness to realise its ultimate freedom in history.²²

Here, again, we have the same pattern in the application of the concept of alienation as we sketched out for Feuerbach above. Alienation is (a) a product of externalisation, (b) something that gets its objective content entirely from the alienated subject, and (c) the alienated object has power over the subject (but this power comes from the subject itself). The world, including the social forms of the human world, are the historical products of the externalisation of self-consciousness and get their content from it. Through this self-externalisation, this content, which comes from self-consciousness itself, comes to stand opposite it as the fixed, objective world and dominate it.

III.

Max Stirner is mostly famous for his 1845 book *The Ego and Its Own*, especially since he did not publish much in his lifetime (famously, Marx’s criticism of Stirner in the 1845-46 Brussels manuscripts takes up more pages than Stirner himself ever published). This work was, as much of Stirner’s thought, a direct attack against both Bauer and Feuerbach – so much so that it begins by quoting both of them on their ideas of ‘Man’ and then goes on to say, “Then let us take a more careful look at this supreme being and this new discovery” – before devoting the entire first part of the book to demolishing their ideas in what Frederick

²¹ Rosen, “The Influence of Bruno Bauer”, 54.

²² Ibid.

Beiser has described as the final stage of a general “trend toward de-hypostatisation” within the Young Hegelian school.²³

To Stirner, the ‘Man’ of both Bauer and Feuerbach, whether in the guise of *Gattungswesen* or self-consciousness, is nothing more than another hypostasis just like ‘the state’, ‘society’, ‘God’, etc. However, what may just seem like extreme nominalism on the part of Stirner is really not, as Jacob Blumenfeld has recently argued. Stirner does not reject universals completely; instead, he only denies their status as expressions of absoluteness. They stem from, and are thus conditioned on and mediated by, the singularity of individuals – through their uniqueness. Thus, Stirner does not deny that humans have the common predicate of being ‘human’, he simply denies that this can be raised into universality in the one-sided way done by Feuerbach and Bauer when they talk about ‘Man’.²⁴ This kind of hypostatisation is really just another form of alienation, he argues.

However, alienation also plays a key role in earlier texts by Stirner (few as they might be). In the 1842 article “Art and Religion”, Stirner examines the relationship between theory and practice, a common theme to the Young Hegelians. Similar to August von Cieszkowski in his defining work *Prolegomena to Historiosophy* (1838), Stirner identifies practice with art and theory with religion, especially Christianity. (This is something he will return to over and over again in *The Ego and Its Own*, e.g., in his description of a human life, in his distinction between ‘the Ancients’ and ‘the Moderns’, and in his description of ‘Negroidity’ and ‘Mongoloidity’.)

In art, Stirner argues, the artist fashions an inkling of ‘another side’ to human life (*Jenseitiger*) into a definite form, or *Gestalt*. By doing this, he creates an ideal for man, a more perfect version of being human, which is separated out from human life itself. It becomes the ideal of an Other, which stands opposite or opposed (*Gegenüber*). This othering of the human life is the source of much despair, because, as Stirner writes, “it is fearful to be *outside of oneself*, having yourself as an Object, without being able to unite with it, and as an Object set over and against oneself able to annihilate itself and so oneself.”²⁵ This is what gives rise to religion, Stirner argues. It takes the ideal created by the *praxis* of art and

²³ Frederick Beiser, “Max Stirner and the End of Classical German Philosophy”, in *Politics, Religion, and Art. Hegelian Debates*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 289.

²⁴ Jacob Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me. The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018), 56-57.

²⁵ Max Stirner, “Art and Religion”, in *The Young Hegelians. An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Stepelevich (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 328.

displaces into the realm of *theoria*, and by this the object comes to dominate even the artist himself, who “falls before it on his knees”, as Stirner writes.²⁶

This is, of course, a clear-cut case of an application of a concept of alienation like the one that has been described above. A product of human activity—in this case artistic practice—which takes on an independent reality, comes to stand outside its creator, from whom it gets its content (the *Jeinseitiger* has its origin in the artist on ‘this side’), and finally ends up holding power over and dominating its creator.

In the final paragraphs of “Art and Religion” the door is kept open for philosophy as the remedy to this malady, similar to Bauer’s emphasis on the philosophical practice of critique. However, throughout most of the text Stirner emphasises the practical activity of the artist as the way to end the power of the object over him; the artist is to “take back his art unto himself”, as Stirner writes.²⁷ However, by the time we get to *The Ego and Its Own* three years later, philosophy is out the window and all emphasis is on the appropriating practice of the artist who has now been transformed into the character of the Owner.

The concept of *ownness* (*Eigenheit*) is Stirner’s solution to the problem of universal and particular, which is made pertinent by his anti-universalist criticism of Feuerbach and Bauer. By consuming the alienated form, whether of “God, emperor, Pope, fatherland”,²⁸ what Stirner calls ‘spooks’, in an act of appropriation or *using up*, the negativity of the owner is emphasised through their power to withdraw from their own property. It is a reversal of the power dynamic between universal and particular; rather than the I being consumed by universals such as ‘man’ or ‘society’, it instead consumes them and uses them up.²⁹ In Stirner’s own words:

I no longer *humble* myself before any power, and I recognize that all powers are only my power, which I have to subject at once when they threaten to become a power *against* or *above* me; (...) All powers that dominate me I then reduce to serving me.³⁰

How this is to be understood in practical terms is always a bit hazy with Stirner, but it leaves no question about the role that alienation plays in the development of his concept of a free

²⁶ Stirner, “Art and Religion”, 331.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. Steven Byinton, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.

²⁹ Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me*, 80 f.

³⁰ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 282.

life for the unique I. And so, (a) not just religion but all spooks are an externalisation of the individual. The state, for example, is, even in a form where it perfectly expresses the collective will of every single one of its members, still a despotic spook: it imposes on me to bind me today by my will of yesterday.³¹ And (b) the content of this externalisation is “my *qualities* (humanity, majesty, etc.)”, which are “exalted to something existing of itself”.³² And finally, (c) these come to dominate me and hold power over me:

Right where an end ceases to be *our* end and our *property* (...) where it becomes a fixed end or a – fixed idea; where it begins to inspire, enthuse, fanaticize us; in short, where it passes into our *stubbornness* and becomes our – master.³³

* * *

As I hope to have shown, both Stirner and Bauer apply the same concept of alienation as Feuerbach in the development of their theories. It is a concept that originates with Hegel, but which the Young Hegelians take to applying much more widely. I specifically chose Bauer and Stirner because they even apply the concept of alienation in direct opposition to Feuerbach, whom Bauer views as the prime Spinozist in the Young Hegelian movement, and whom Stirner sees as the chief cultist in the ‘cult of abstract Man’, to borrow a phrase from Marx. But plenty of other examples could have been chosen: In the second volume of his *Two Years in Paris* (1846), Arnold Ruge analyses nationalism as an expression of alienation: “an abstract and imaginary entity which they have created for themselves, and to which they are prepared to sacrifice themselves,” and he identifies the objective of his proposed humanism as the oppression of *all possible alienations* through the passage from civilised society, which is characterised by generalised alienation, to a ‘humane’ society.³⁴ Or we could have talked about Moses Hess in his 1845 essay “On the Essence of Money” where he applies the concept of alienation to the social question and argues that the social essence of man as ‘intercourse’ (*Verkehr*) is alienated in the form of money.³⁵

³¹ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 175.

³² Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 245.

³³ Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 58.

³⁴ Lucien Calvié, “Ruge and Marx: Democracy, Nationalism, and Revolution in Left Hegelian Debates”, in *Politics, Religion, and Art. Hegelian Debates*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 311.

³⁵ See, Moses Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, in *Philosophische und sozialistische Schriften 1837-1850. Eine Auswahl*, ed. Wolfgang Mönke, 329-347 (Vaduz: Topos Verlag, 1980). Though it should of course be noted that

The point is that even as they develop different and conflicting theories and analyses, these Young Hegelians all apply the concept of alienation in the same technical way while doing so: Through their activity, humans creates something and imbues it with content, it then comes to stand outside them as an independent object, and as such it gains command over them and dominates them. That is the basic structure of alienation. And, I argue, if we keep this in mind—rather than the specific content of Feuerbach’s anthropological theory of human nature—it will make for a much more fruitful discussion of the role of alienation in Marx’s later work.

IV.

So, I turn now, finally, to Marx. There is no question about the role that alienation plays to the so-called ‘young Marx’. For a while at least in 1844 he is a committed Feuerbachian, and, possibly inspired by Hess, he employs the theoretical apparatus of Feuerbach to social and economic questions, most famously in the Paris manuscripts of 1844, in the so-called “Alienated Labour” fragment. I will not go through all of it here—I assume it to be well-known—but simply quote from what I think is Marx’s own most succinct summation of his theory, found in a different 1844 manuscript, viz. the so-called *Excerpts from James Mill*:

The *relation* between things, human dealings with them, become the operations of a being beyond and above man. Through this *alien mediator* man gazes at his will, his activity, his relation to others as at a power independent of them and of himself – instead of man himself being the mediator for man (...) Hence this *mediator* is the lost, estranged *essence* of private property, private property *alienated* and external to itself; it is the *alienated mediation* of human production, the *alienated* species-activity of man.³⁶

It should not be necessary to demonstrate how this is not only an application of Feuerbach’s anthropological theory (‘species-activity’) but also conforms to the general concept of alienation in a technical sense described above.

Turning to the later Marx the question of course arises whether the concept of alienation is still present in the mature critique of political economy, specifically in *Capital*. On the one hand there are theoretical humanists who argue for a continuation thesis with

Hess is, by 1845, a committed Feuerbachian and actively employs the conceptual apparatus of Feuerbach as well. However, I would argue that his use of the concept of alienation simultaneously conforms to the general pattern that I have identified here.

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Excerpts from James Mill’s Elements of Political Economy*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Penguin Books/NLR, 1992), 260-261.

regard to Marx's humanist account of alienation, and on the other hand we have Althusserians and other theoretical anti-humanists who argue for some version of a 'break' between the earlier, humanist Marx and the mature critic of political economy in whose work this kind of moralising, ethical humanism has no place. However, both of these accounts rely on an understanding of alienation as tied to some kind of specific *human nature*. As Michael Heinrich says, "*reality is measured and criticised by being compared to an essence which is opposed to it*".³⁷

While this is undoubtedly true in 1844, where Marx relies on Feuerbach's anthropological account of human nature or essence as a species-being, this is, as we have seen, in no way a necessary feature of alienation viewed as a technical concept. Stiner, for example, applies it in the same way as Feuerbach, but does so in ardent opposition to any idea of essence or human nature whatsoever. And yet, *structurally* he understands and applies alienation in the same way. Taking this into account it becomes possible to claim at the same time *both* that Marx abandons his previous Feuerbachian theoretical framework in 1845, *and* that alienation is still playing an active role in the theoretical developments found in his critique of political economy – albeit 'only' as a *technical* concept.

The most obvious example of alienation in *Capital* is the discussion of commodity fetishism in chapter 1, section 4. It is, for example, the only part of *Capital* that has found its way into Marcello Musto's recent compilation of the primary source material for Marx's discussions of alienation.³⁸ The product of labour (i.e., human activity), which is really just "an ordinary, sensuous thing" suddenly, when we view it as a commodity,

changes into a thing which transcends consciousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.³⁹

However, the content of these mysterious ideas actually comes from its originator, the labourer: "the commodity reflects the social characteristic of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves".⁴⁰ It is this ability of the dead product of

³⁷ Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert. Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition* (Münster: Westphalisches Dampfboot, 1999), 103. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx's Writings on Alienation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

³⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books/NLR, 1990), 163-164.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 164-165.

labour to take on this ‘fantastical form’, which has nothing to do with its physical properties, that Marx denotes as ‘fetishism’. However, the social relation that is expressed in this fetishistic way is that of *value*. This value-form, more abstractly speaking, in turn comes to dominate the originator of the product, as they are made subservient to it in their labouring activity. The secret of political economy is that its categories generally take this form of *real abstractions*: “forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective”,⁴¹ they have a kind of ‘spectral objectivity’ (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*). Even though they are fantastical abstractions, and even though their power is the result of “magic and necromancy”,⁴² *they none the less exert power over us*. As Michael Heinrich says, “we are not dealing with [a] ‘mental abstraction’ but with a ‘real abstraction’, by which we mean an abstraction that is carried out in the actual behavior of humans, regardless of whether they are aware of it”.⁴³

As I’ve said, this is perhaps the most well-examined example of alienation in *Capital*, not least given that it formed the basis for Georg Lukács’s whole theory of reification and as such was basically the starting point for the whole tradition of ‘Western Marxism’, or whatever we might want to call it. It also does not take much imagination to see how it conforms to the model of alienation as a technical concept that I have put forward in this paper. Instead, I therefore want to draw attention to two other examples of how this concept can also be seen to be at work in *Capital*.

The first is the discussion of capital as an *automatic subject* in chapter 4.⁴⁴ While this idea is more developed in *Grundrisse*, it is explicitly present in *Capital* as well – in the basic definition of capital as a social phenomenon, no less. While we should be careful to note that Marx only employs this terminology when he is discussing capital’s fetishistic surface appearance in circulation, not its essential workings in the sphere of production, that does not take anything away from the argument I present here: Alienation can still play a generative role in the theoretical development of *that* specific argument, even if there is also some other, deeper meaning to how capital functions.

Recognition as a subject is precisely what is at stake in Hegel’s depiction of the struggle for life and death in the ‘Lordship and Bondage’ section discussed earlier, and in Marx’s description of capital as an automatic subject we also have such an oscillation

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital*, 169.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 49.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 255.

between different roles as was found there. In the pages leading up to the comment that capital is an automatic subject, Marx has given us both the general formula for capital (M-C-M') and introduced the concept of surplus-value, and it is this processual movement which turns money into capital.⁴⁵ This in turn transforms the owner of the money from the subject of the process into merely an object; it is only as he makes the objective content of circulation into his own subjective purpose, i.e., as “the conscious bearer [*Träger*] of this movement [that] the possessor of money becomes a capitalist.”⁴⁶ Instead, the ‘dominant subject’ (*übergreifendes Subjekt*) is now capital itself. The money-owner no longer uses capital to enrich himself but is instead being used by capital to facilitate its continued self-valorisation. But this new ‘automatic subject’, capital, to which the money-owner is now a slave, must also continuously externalise itself. Only by continued metamorphoses into the money and commodity-forms respectively is capital able to sustain its self-valorisation. It is through this process that capital is able to move independently of the capitalist who has been reduced to a bystander in the process.

What is happening here? Precisely this: The product of the money-owner’s activity, capital, takes on a life outside of him; while it only has a content because it is given one by the money-owner (he is, after all, still needed as its *Träger*), the roles have—just as in Hegels dialectic between lordship and bondage—been reversed and the object has become subject, exercising its power over the capitalist. This is, I argue, an analysis that would not be possible to carry out without the active—if implicit—application of alienation in the technical sense.

A final example: In the chapter on machinery (ch. 15), Marx discusses the machine as a “means for producing surplus-value”.⁴⁷ In chapter 12, he has provided an explanation of relative surplus-value, and in the following chapters Marx provides a historical presentation of how the technological development necessary to increase it has occurred. This is the purpose of the chapters on machinery and industry. (Similarly, chapter 10 is a historical exposition of the extraction of absolute surplus value as described in chapter 9.)

As Søren Mau has argued, if Marx has any specific idea of human nature in *Capital*, it is as a *tool-making animal*.⁴⁸ It is a peculiar feature of the human body that we rely on extra-somatic limbs, or tools, to survive. This makes us biologically underdetermined. As

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 252.

⁴⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 254.

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 492.

⁴⁸ Mau, *Stummer Zwang*, 104 ff.

Andreas Malm laconically comments in *Fossil Capital*, “Because the tools are one with the bodies of the birds, they cannot be concentrated. No master woodpecker can collect bills and pile them up on a central site and tell the other members of the population, their faces strangely flat, to submit to his command”.⁴⁹ However, that *is* the reality of human production, and this is what opens up the possibility of property relations and thus exploitation of surplus-labour. In a modern, capitalist society, these tools take the form of means of production, which (to Marx at least) means *machines*. Not only does the human body has the peculiar reliance on extra-somatic limbs, it is also peculiar in the sense that *the labour it performs can be diverged from the motive force of that labour*. In other words, living labour can be replaced with the dead labour of machines.⁵⁰ This is the nature of the machine, according to Marx: it represents the separation in the labour process of the worker from the motive force of labour.

The difference between a tool and a machine is precisely that in a machine, the ‘tool’ is no longer in the hand of the individual labourer but instead they become a tool of the mechanism.⁵¹ As Marx says:

In handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow (...) [It] is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker (...) Owing to its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the worker during the labour process in the shape of capital, dead labour, which dominates and soaks up living labour-power.⁵²

Here, again, we have no trace of human ‘nature’ or ‘essence’, except in the underdetermined form of the human producer as a ‘tool-making animal’. And yet, we unmistakably have a case of alienation. The labourer produces an object, a tool – a machine. It is ‘dead’ or ossified labour, i.e., it’s content is derived from the labourer’s activity. This machine then takes on a life of its own; rather than the labourer being the subject making use of the machine as a tool, the roles are reversed, the labourer is reduced to an object, an appendage to the machine. This product of the labourer’s activity thus takes on an independent life of its own in which it

⁴⁹ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital. The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 279.

⁵⁰ Mau, *Stummer Zwang*, 123. Cf. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 315.

⁵¹ Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 110.

⁵² Marx, *Capital*, 548.

comes to stand opposite the labourer and ‘dominates’ him, as Marx explicitly says. Again, I argue that this analysis exists independently of any anthropological or transhistorical concept of human nature such as species-being, but that it is *not* possible without making use of the technical concept of alienation.

V.

What I hope to have shown in this paper is thus the following: That to Marx and the other Young Hegelians, ‘alienation’ is not a theory but *a technical concept*, which can be applied in the development *of* theories.

Marx’s appropriation of Feuerbach’s ‘theory of alienation’ is thus mislabelled; what Marx takes over for a period of time in 1844 is the *anthropological* theory that is the result of Feuerbach’s specific application of this technical concept in an analysis of religion by way of his other theoretical presuppositions. Therefore, it is entirely possible for Marx to abandon this theory as he abandons those theoretical propositions (and as he has abandoned other theoretical propositions before and since) *without for that reason giving up the technical concept of alienation*, which he instead applies to other objects of analysis and criticism based on new or different theoretical propositions.

Given the theoretical propositions of the materialist conception of history, broadly speaking, Marx is able, e.g., to apply the technical concept of alienation in the analysis of the commodity form in order to arrive at the theory of commodity fetishism and reification (to borrow Lukács’s terminology). Even if he does not specifically call this ‘alienation’—even if he is not consciously aware of it—that is what is happening at the end of *Capital* chapter 1. And in chapter 4. And in chapter 15. And...

So, in dealing with the problem of alienation in *Capital*, the question should not be whether or not Marx is rehearsing the specifically Feuerbachian application of this concept as a theory of the alienation of species-being, but rather whether Marx himself is applying this technical concept in order to develop new theories – just as the other Young Hegelians also applied this concept when developing their own, often explicitly anti-Feuerbachian theories.

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