

# Social Interaction and Marx's Theory of Alienation

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## I. Introduction

Many of the commentators on Marx and alienation tend to privilege two conceptions of alienation found in Marx's work.<sup>1</sup> Some describe alienation as consisting in an individual's lack of fulfillment or self-realization in capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> This conception of alienation involves individuals' separation from their "species-being" – a term of art Marx adopted from Feuerbach. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,<sup>3</sup> Marx understands species-being as comprising the features of human beings that distinguish them from other animals, and from these features, derives an ideal image of a flourishing human life. Capitalist society, it is said, is one in which the vast majority of people are unable to exercise and perfect their distinctly human capacities. In this account, alienation is principally an evaluative notion. To say that someone is alienated is to say that he is not living a life worthy of his humanity.

The other conception of alienation many commentators see as central to Marx's general account consists in the worker's separation from his products.<sup>4</sup> For some,

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean to suggest that these two accounts are mutually exclusive. A number of these commentators attend to aspects of both conceptions. I am merely pointing to the two conceptions of alienation that commentators traditionally understand as most central to Marx's account of alienation.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Allen Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), chap. 2.; Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), chap. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, *1844 Manuscripts* or *Manuscripts*.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Levine, "Alienation as Heteronomy," *The Philosophical Forum* 8 (1978): 256–68. Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), chap. 2.; Joachim Israel, *Alienation from Marx to Modern Sociology: A Macrosociological Analysis*. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), 36–45.

alienation consists in the fact that the products of the worker's labor belong to the capitalist. The worker, according to this view, is separated from that which belongs to him. As Shlomo Avineri writes, "the most obvious phenomenal expression of alienation is the worker's inability in capitalist society to own his product of work."<sup>5</sup> For others, mere separation is not enough: it is the domination of the worker by the products of his own labor that constitutes his alienation: "a kind of separation *cum* subordination," as one reader notes.<sup>6</sup> In both variants of this account, the paradigm case of alienation occurs in the labor process.

Although these conceptions of alienation are certainly at the center of Marx's account of alienation in 1844, it seems to me that the literature on alienation has paid insufficient attention to what, I suggest, is the most enduring and stable conception of alienation across Marx's work: the rule of self-produced alien powers over society.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, my aim will be to offer the beginnings of an interpretation of this idea of alienation. Here, I will pay particular attention to the issue of how we ought understand the thesis that the powers that dominate us are of our *own* making.

As with so much of Marx's theoretical apparatus, the idea of alienation has been the subject of considerable controversy, playing a central role in the disagreement about whether there are, so to speak, two (or more) Marx's. For those like Althusser, alienation is a concern of the immature Marx, before he abandoned his fleeting interest in "old

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<sup>5</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Levine, "Alienation as Heteronomy," 256.

<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that this conception of alienation has not been noticed. Various commentators discuss this conception of alienation, but largely in passing (see, e.g., John Plamenatz, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 125.) Two works that treat this conception of alienation as more central to Marx's account of alienation are: J. Wolff, "Playthings of Alien Forces: Karl Marx and the Rejection of the Market Economy," *Cogito* 6, no. 1 (1992): 35–41.; Richard Schmitt, "Marx's Concept of Alienation," *Topoi* 15 (1996): 163–176.

philosophical themes.”<sup>8</sup> Others, often armed with the *Grundrisse*, argue that alienation remains a critical concept in Marx’s so-called mature writings in political economy.<sup>9</sup> My own view is that the textual evidence is too overwhelming to maintain any longer that Marx jettisoned the idea of alienation in his later writings.<sup>10</sup> I assume rather than defend this view in my paper. Nonetheless, it should be evident in the course of this paper that contrary to the claims of those like Althusser, an account of alienation is very much present in Marx’s latter critique of political economy.

I will also depart from some who defend the continued relevance of alienation in Marx’s later economic thought. Some interpreters take the 1844 view to be the official view, proceeding to search for evidence of this account in Marx’s later writings. I have no major *a priori* objection to such an approach, but I do think that such an approach will tend to result in obscuring the ways in which Marx modifies his conception.<sup>11</sup> My interpretation of Marx’s account of alienation privileges Marx’s writings from 1845 into the economic writings of the late 1860s. For many readers of Marx, this is likely, to put it mildly, a surprising choice for a study that purports to be about Marx’s idea of alienation. Marx’s 1844 writings in Paris are the *locus classicus* of studies on his account of alienation and not without good reason. In them, we find Marx’s most extensive and arguably most rhetorically forceful exposition of alienation in all of his writings. The account of alienation Marx outlines in the *Manuscripts*, for many, is Marx’s account

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<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, chap. 4.

<sup>10</sup> For the most part, I will not make explicit arguments on behalf of this view. Nevertheless, since my interpretation of alienation draws primarily on Marx’s writings from 1845 into the late 1860s, much of the textual evidence I bring to bear on behalf of my interpretation should suffice as, at least, a *prima facie* substantiation.

<sup>11</sup> An example of this, I think, is found in Martin Nicolaus, “Foreword,” in *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 50–51.

alienation. In my view, much of what he writes in the *Manuscripts* do not form an integral part of his considered account of alienation, which, I suggest, first appears in *The German Ideology*.

In this paper I begin to develop an account of Marx's idea of alienation, which challenges the primacy of the 1844 account of alienation. In my reading, Marx is not only concerned with the exploitation of the working class, but also the incredible power impersonal forces exercises over society under capitalism. These powers, Marx thinks, are not forces of nature but rather products of our own activity.<sup>12</sup>

In Section II, I provide a brief overview of Marx's account of alienation in his 1844 writings in Paris. Since these texts often serve as the primary source material for the standard interpretations of alienation, I highlight aspects of this account that represent significant points of continuity and discontinuity with the account that emerges in *The German Ideology*. In Section III, I argue that we should understand the claim that alien powers are self-produced as the claim that these powers are constituted by the mutual interaction of individuals. In Section IV, I expand on this account by arguing that the mutual interaction thesis I attribute to Marx plays a central role in his account of the alienation of capital.

## **II. Alienation in 1844**

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of Marx's account of alienation as presented in the Paris writings of 1844: *1844 Manuscripts* and *The Comments on James Mill*. This overview will help illuminate the ways in which the post-1844 account of

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<sup>12</sup> In another paper, I will consider how we ought understand the nature of the domination that Marx has in mind. In the present chapter, my immediate concern is elaborate on how we ought understand the thesis that the powers that dominate us are of *our own making*.

alienation I attribute to Marx represents a distinctive account of alienation, irreducible to the 1844 iteration, on which so many interpretations of Marx's account rely. In the "Alienated Labor" segment of the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx identifies four aspects of people's alienation in capitalist society: their alienation from their own productive activity, fellow members of society, the products of their labor, and their "species-being."<sup>13</sup>

The first kind of alienation in Marx's account involves the relationship between workers in capitalist society and their productive activity, or, the act of labor itself. Marx includes a number of different features of the condition of workers in capitalist society under the banner of the alienation from productive activity. Workers do not "confirm" themselves in their work; they experience their work as misery; their physical and intellectual capacities are stunted; their work is not freely chosen; and their work belongs to another.<sup>14</sup> Here, Marx points us to at least three kinds of concerns about work in capitalist society, drawing our attention to the content of the work, the conditions in which people work, and the compulsory nature of the work. Although when we ordinarily say that we are alienated from something, we imply, at minimum, some kind of separation from that thing, it is worth noting here that there is no meaningful sense in which alienation from productive activity involves a separation. A background view about what constitutes meaningful work does most of the heavy lifting. This view, as I discuss below, is contained in Marx's notion of species-being.

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<sup>13</sup> In Marx's own exposition, he presents these aspects in the following order: 1) the products of labor; 2) productive activity; 3) "species-being;" and 4) from fellow members of society. For some who think that these four aspects of alienation form a unified theory of alienation, the order of Marx's presentation is important in the unfolding of his "dialectical" argument. I do not think there are compelling reasons to take this to be so. I have presented them in a different order simply because it serves my ends here.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 274–5.

Marx also holds that individuals are alienated from each other. Although Marx had not put these concerns in terms of alienation, in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and *On the Jewish Question*, written a year before, he had already raised serious concerns about the rise of civil society and its deleterious effects on social bonds. He had condemned civil society as “the sphere of egoism, the *bellum omnium contra omnes* [war of all against all],”<sup>15</sup> where social interaction was mediated by egoistic self-interest. In 1844, his continuing concern with the atomization of society is apparent: now described in terms of individuals’ mutual alienation. In the “Alienated Labor” segment of the *Manuscripts*, Marx refers specifically to the worker’s subordination to the capitalist. That the worker’s labor is not free, that the products of his labor confront him as hostile alien entities, Marx says, can only mean that others (i.e., capitalists) have power over him. But his comments elsewhere point to a much more universalized conception of mutual alienation, characterized by the constant struggle between private interests.

The worker’s alienation from the product, in my mind, is the most significant point of contact between the 1844 account of alienation and the one that I claim Marx begins to prefer in the following year. In a representative passage, he writes:

[T]he object which labor produces — labor’s product — confronts it as an *alien being* [*fremdes Wesen*], as a *power independent* of the producer ... So much does the appropriation of the object appear as alienation [*Entfremdung*] that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the domination [*Herrschaft*] of his product, capital. All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world, which he creates over and

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 50 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1975).

against himself, the poorer he himself — and his inner world — becomes, the less belongs to him as his own.<sup>16</sup>

The language Marx uses to describe alienation, as some commentators have insisted, is largely metaphorical, and it is not always clear what concrete phenomenon Marx has in mind.<sup>17</sup> A clue to understanding what Marx means when he says that the worker's products confront him as alien powers is found in the statement which precedes his exposition of alienation: "We start," Marx writes, "with a contemporary fact of political economy."<sup>18</sup> Marx's stated methodology in this section of the *1844 Manuscripts* is not to challenge the dogmas of political economy by offering a substantive political economy of his own, but to expose the contradictions of political economists by probing their own commitments.<sup>19</sup> In many instances, this involves re-describing the claims of political economy in the value-laden terms of alienation. In capitalist society, Marx observes, an increasingly small group of people, the capitalists, come to own all of the means of production. In order for the vast majority of people to satisfy their basic needs, therefore, they must work for the capitalists: the worker must sell his "labor-power" (in Marx's later terminology) to the capitalist, for which, he receives a wage in return. The capitalist profits by selling the worker's products, and begins the circuit anew, thus increasingly reducing the bargaining position of the worker.

Finally, the worker is said to be alienated from his "species-being." For Marx,

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<sup>16</sup> "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 272.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Plamenatz, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*, 125.; Levine, "Alienation as Heteronomy," 256.; Wood, *Karl Marx*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 271–272.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Marx writes, "We started from the presuppositions of political economy. We accepted its vocabulary and its laws. We presupposed private property, the separation of labor, capital, and land, and likewise of wages, profit, and ground rent; also division of labor; competition; the concept of exchange value, etc. Using the very words of political economy we have demonstrated that the worker is degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity that the misery of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and size of his production..." (Ibid., 270.).

species-being refers to the essential features or capacities of human beings: those that Marx thinks constitute the essential differences between human beings and other animals. Setting aside Marx's apparent conflation of the capacities that distinguish humans from animals with the capacities whose proper exercise would constitute a life of human flourishing,<sup>20</sup> what is important for my purposes is that Marx's concept of species-being specifies an ideal of human flourishing. This ideal is the evaluative criterion in the background of each of the other three aspects of alienation. Human flourishing consists, in part, in the free, conscious exercise of one's physical and mental capacities in productive activity. Workers are alienated from their productive activity in capitalist society because their work does not take on this character. Likewise, for Marx, the realization of species-being consists in participating in communal relations, in which individuals do not see their own interests as separate from the interests of others. Individuals are alienated from each other so far as independent private interests mediate their interactions. Given the extent to which Marx's conceptions of alienation in 1844 depend on his ideal of species-being, it should not be surprising that he significantly modified his conception of alienation, upon distancing himself from the notion of species-being in the following years.

Two final comments are worth making before moving on. First, as we have seen, much of the 1844 account of alienation concerns the standpoint of the worker vis-à-vis his productive life. There are certainly hints of universal alienation as when Marx describes the mutual alienation of individuals, but for the most part, the worker is the

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 225–226.

subject of alienation.<sup>21</sup> In *The German Ideology*, I suggest, Marx's conception of alienation expands in scope, where all are involved in the production of alien powers which rule over society. Second, each of these aspects of alienation supposedly involves the separation of things that belong together (although it is hard to see how the alienation from productive activity involves separation in any meaningful sense). In the account of alienation, Marx subsequently formulates, however, the notion of separation ceases to have much significance.

### **III. Alienation and Mutual Interaction**

Although one can dispute -- and countless pages have been spent doing so -- the extent to which Marx abandons the Feuerbachian humanism evident in his early writings, there is no denying that by the end of 1845, he had started to develop a theoretical outlook significantly different in orientation from the one that informed his writings in Paris. Reflecting back on *The German Ideology* more than a decade later, Marx famously writes that in it he and Engels had sought to "settle accounts with [their] former philosophical conscience."<sup>22</sup> In *The German Ideology*, we find a self-conscious attempt on the part of Marx and Engels to dispense with "philosophical phraseology," or the "traditionally occurring philosophical expressions such as 'human essence, 'species', etc."<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Marx does say that the capitalist, too, is alienated in capitalist society, but the manuscript cuts off before his proposed explanation.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 286.

<sup>23</sup> "The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets.," in *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 235. Although these comments do not refer explicitly to the *1844 Manuscripts* -- since the *Manuscripts* were unpublished notebooks, there would have been no need to do so -- it is clear that they could just as easily apply to them and the account of alienation expounded therein. In this passage and elsewhere, they imply that Marx's previous writings were simply encumbered by the unfortunate use of such *language*, obscuring the "real trend of thought"

conception of alienation we find in the *German Ideology*, accordingly, I claim, no longer depends on the paradigm of species-being.<sup>24</sup> On my reading, the general formula for Marx's post-1844 account of alienation is this: alienation consists in the domination of individuals by powers they themselves have produced.<sup>25</sup> In another paper, I consider how we should understand the nature of the domination involved in alienation, but here, my aim is to make sense of Marx's claim that the powers that rule over society are, in some sense, self-produced.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that this conception of alienation retains the general *form* of what Marx considered an aspect of alienation in 1844: the worker's alienation from his products. In both cases, alienation refers to a type of social phenomena in which people are dominated by impersonal entities of their own making. Despite the form this account of alienation shares with the 1844 account of alienation from the product, it is important not to conflate the latter into the former. It is tempting to do this – and those who understand alienation

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contained in the writings. Here, I think they are downplaying the role of *concepts* like species-being in Marx's early writings.

<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere in the *German Ideology*, Marx, in a marginal note to a passage on the division of labor becoming a power over individuals they are no longer able to control, writes, "This 'alienation' ['Entfremdung'] (to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers) can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises" (48; cf. 88-89; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 249.). This passage is sometimes used as evidence for the thesis that Marx abandoned the concept of alienation after 1844, but an alternative interpretation, compatible with the claims of this paper, is available. Marx has reservations about using the term, given its contemporary essentialist connotations.

<sup>25</sup> My view is that the evidence from Marx's subsequent writing on alienation suggests that he largely stabilizes his general conception of alienation as the subjection to self-made impersonal entities. This seems to me a welcome discovery so far as it helps to attenuate some of the worries that Marx's apparently overly inclusive category of alienation makes it difficult to see how the various phenomena it marks out might be said to be meaningfully of the same kind.

<sup>26</sup> According to my reading, for individuals to be alienated, it is necessary and sufficient that they meet two criteria: 1) They produce alien powers and 2) these alien powers dominate them. In this section, I assume the second condition is met in the examples I discuss in order to investigate the first thesis. Questions like whether it is possible or desirable to overcome alienation, of course, cannot be properly assessed without an account of the domination. I should add that these two criteria are not independent of each other. Although whether powers are dominating will not have any bearing on the issue of whether they are self-produced, whether a constraining power is the product of human activity may help to determine whether it counts as domination, depending on the account of domination.

primarily in terms of the relationship between producers and products, I suggest, succumb to this temptation --- because, in part, Marx continues to use the language of production. When Marx and Engels write, for instance, that “The consolidation of what we ourselves produce into a material power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations ... is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now,”<sup>27</sup> it is easy to think that economic phenomenon they have in mind is the capitalists’ appropriation of the workers’ products.

The inadequacy of such a narrow construal of production, however, is evident when we consider the phenomenon to which this passage refers: the division of labor. “The division of labor,” they write,

offers us the first example of the fact that ... as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and common interest ... man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him.<sup>28</sup>

For my present purposes, we can set aside the question of what exactly Marx and Engels find objectionable about the capitalist division of labor. More important to my argument in this chapter is that it is evident that Marx and Engels, here, are describing the social division of labor as a self-produced alien power. That Marx and Engels understand the relationship between the members of capitalist society and its division of labor as an instance of alienation should make clear that it cannot be correct to conceive of alienation simply in terms of capitalists’ appropriation of workers’ goods. The division of labor is not the product of the worker’s labor in any ordinary sense. Most obviously, it is not an exchangeable good that an individual has expended physical or mental energy to create. Rather, it forms part of the social structure in which individuals produce. The division of

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<sup>27</sup> “The German Ideology,” 47–48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

labor in a society is the way in which social labor is organized and distributed. Second, the division of labor is not result of the workers' activity alone. In what sense, then, is the division of labor a product of people's activity?

One possible answer that we can rule out because it manifestly does not apply to the division of labor within capitalist societies is that the division of labor is determined by the intentional design of individuals. If anything, this more resembles what Marx seems to have in mind, in some places, concerning the division of labor in post-capitalist society. But, of course, this cannot be what Marx and Engels have in mind when describing the division of labor as an alien power.

Marx and Engel's discussion of the alien powers generated in market exchange helps to further shed light on how to understand the idea that alien powers that govern society are self-produced. They write that the "powers" of the world market, which are "born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and ruled men as powers completely alien to them."<sup>29</sup> "How does it happen that trade," they ask,

which after all is nothing more than the exchange of products of various individuals and countries, rules the whole world through the relation of supply and demand — a relation which, as an English economist says, hovers over the earth like the fate of the ancients, and with invisible hand allots fortune and misfortune to men, sets up empires and wrecks empires, causes nations to rise and disappear...?<sup>30</sup>

In their suggestion that the powers of the world market arise from social interaction and that trade "is nothing more than" the exchange of commodities by people, they provide us with an important clue. Both of these claims point to the idea that large-scale economic

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 51–2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 48.; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Niolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 158. Ibid., 160–161.

phenomena are, at bottom, the consequence of the cumulative economic interactions within society.

Their allusion here to Adam Smith is significant and worth some consideration. Smith's importance to Marx is certainly well-known, but it is much less noticed to what extent Marx's account of alienation draws from Smith's theoretical assumptions. The above passage comes at the end of a substantial exposition about the rule of alien powers. We should not miss, of course, their ironic appeal to the invisible hand in this context, but nevertheless, I suggest, the passage helps to reveal a deep connection between Smith's idea of the invisible hand and Marx's conception of alienation.

Adam Smith's famous notion of the invisible hand, I suggest, serves as an important theoretical precursor to Marx's account of alienation. Smith's basic thesis is that in commercial society, individuals by pursuing their own interests -- as if guided by an invisible hand -- serve the public interest. "The study of his own advantage," Smith writes, "naturally, or rather necessarily leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to society."<sup>31</sup> The invisible hand, of course, is a metaphor: it describes the relationship between individuals and society as it might appear to people prior to scientific reflection. The study of economy reveals how the workings of the market mechanism explain the coincidence of private and public interest.

For Smith, the invisible hand is a salutary one. The market mechanism of commercial society achieves a reconciliation between individuals' pursuit of self-interest and the public interest.<sup>32</sup> Each individual, in pursuing his or her self-interest, contributes

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Toronto: Random House, 2000), 482.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion about reconciliation in Adam Smith and Hegel, see: Frederick Neuhouser, "The Idea of a Hegelian 'Science' of Society," in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), 281–296.

to the benefit of society as a whole. Clearly, this is not the point of agreement between Smith and Marx.<sup>33</sup> In Marx and Engels' reference to the invisible hand in the passage cited above, they drop any connotations of the harmonization of individual and societal ends, choosing to highlight instead, the magnitude and arbitrariness of the influence of supply and demand on society.

Of interest here, however, is what Marx's account of alienation has in common with Smith's notion of the invisible hand. My contention is that Marx and Engels' description of alienation adopts the standpoint of political economy in that it conceives of large-scale economic phenomena as the cumulative and unintended result of the individual interactions within the economy. Murray Milgate and Shannon Stimson attribute to Smith, "the idea that aggregate social outcomes were at once the product of the action of individual interests and yet not necessarily the same as those intended by individuals actors."<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that Smith was not unique among political economists in understanding commercial society in these terms. This view of society was central to the enterprise of political economy -- or the science of society -- at large.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the idea that large-scale social forces were constituted by the cumulative series of individual economic activities yet operated independently of individual wills to produce determinate outcomes formed one of the key presuppositions that made a science of society possible. One of the tasks of the political economist was, precisely, to reveal the

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<sup>33</sup> In *Grundrisse*, Marx writes, "Each pursues his private interest and only his private interest; and thereby serves the private interests of all, the general interest, without willing or knowing it. The real point is not that each individual's pursuit of his private interest promotes the totality of private interests, the general interest. One could just as well deduce from this abstract phrase that each individual reciprocally blocks the assertion of the others' interests, so that, instead of a general affirmation, this war of all against all produces a general negation." (*Grundrisse*, 156.).

<sup>34</sup> Murray Milgate and Shannon C. Stimson, *After Adam Smith: A Century of Transformation in Politics and Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 82.

<sup>35</sup> For a useful account, see, *Ibid.*, chap. 2–5.

hidden causal circuits connecting the individual constituents of the economy and the workings of the economic system.

Where Smith saw order, Marx sees a society dominated by impersonal economic forces. Nevertheless, the idea that social forces operate independently of the will of individuals, despite being produced by them, was one that remained with Marx. At the end of the 1850s, in *Grundrisse*, he writes:

As much, then, as the whole of this movement [i.e. the circulation of commodities] appears as a social process, and as much as the individual movements of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an alien social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them.<sup>36</sup>

Here, we arrive at one of Marx's clearest statements of the idea of the self-production of alien powers. Recall, Marx's earlier concerns about the atomization of civil society and the mutual alienation of individuals in bourgeois society. There, Marx's position was primarily an evaluative one from the standpoint of species-being: the interaction of interdependent individuals indifferent to each others' ends failed to live up to the demand that individuals live within substantive communal relations. In this later conception of alienation, however, the character of the relations between individuals -- their "collisions" -- *explains* social phenomena; namely, the rule of alien powers over society.

By the time of *The German Ideology*, Marx was already a couple years into his

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<sup>36</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 196–7.

intensive study of political economy.<sup>37</sup> In the year leading up to the writing of *The German Ideology*, Feuerbach and, hence Marx (whether explicitly or by implication) had come under increasing attack from the “German theoreticians.”<sup>38</sup> Accused of being a “Feuerbachian dogmatis[t],”<sup>39</sup> and put on the defensive by Max Stirner’s bombshell publication of *The Ego and Its Own*, Marx, I suggest, found useful theoretical resources in political economy to reformulate his account of alienation, shed of its “human religion.”<sup>40</sup> Stirner, explicitly referring to Marx, had attacked the invocation that “I become a real species-being.”<sup>41</sup> Stirner’s criticism of this demand was striking, for his charge was essentially that such demands were alienating: “The human religion,” he wrote, “... separates my essence from me and sets it above me ... because in general it makes some of what is mine, out of my qualities and my property, something alien.”<sup>42</sup> Marx’s reformulation of the conception of alienation, as I have understood it, was a response to such charges. Even in some of Marx’s comments on overcoming alienation, one sees his commitment to the ontology of political economy. Subordinating the powers that have hitherto dominated human beings, Marx and Engels write, “can be expressed ... in a speculative-idealistic, i.e., fantastic, way as ‘self-generation of the species’ (‘society as the subject’) and thereby the *consecutive series of interrelated individuals* can be

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<sup>37</sup> For details on Marx’s sources during this period, see: Allen Oakley, *Marx’s Critique of Political Economy: Intellectual Sources and Evolution: 1844-1860*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> For a brief but illuminating account of these final moments of the disintegration of Young Hegelianism, see, John Edward Toews, *Hegelianism: The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1841* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 364–369.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in: David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography*, 4th ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 134.

<sup>40</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

regarded as a single individual, which accomplishes the mystery of generating itself.”<sup>43</sup>

Although a complete challenge to the dominant paradigms of understanding alienation – the worker’s alienation from his products and the alienation from species-being – will require a consideration of Marx’s thoughts on domination, we already have reasons to be skeptical that these paradigms adequately grasp Marx’s post-1844 account of alienation. As I have argued in this section, for Marx, the nature of our interpersonal interaction in capitalist society explains the emergence of the impersonal powers that govern society. Our mutual interaction constitutes the very powers that dominate us.

#### **IV. Alienation from capital**

I have argued thus far that we ought understand Marx’s thesis about the self-production of alien powers as the claim that alien powers arise from the mutual interaction of individuals in society. But my account faces a considerable challenge: it seems to fly in the face of Marx’s exposition of the wage-laborer’s alienation from capital. In Marx’s earliest writings on political economy in 1844, as we saw, he understood the worker’s alienation from the product as a primary form of alienation in capitalist society. In his later economic writings, too, Marx, on numerous occasions, refers to the products of labor confronting workers as hostile alien powers. Whereas the notion of species-being virtually disappears from Marx’s account of alienation after the *Manuscripts*,<sup>44</sup> the concern with the worker’s alienation from the product persists. For instance, in *Capital I*, Marx quotes Von Thünen approvingly, for having asked the right question:

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<sup>43</sup> “The German Ideology,” 52. (emphasis added).

<sup>44</sup> There are notable, but nonetheless anomalous exceptions in *Grundrisse*.

If we now return to our first inquiry, where we showed that capital itself is only a product of human labor ... it seems quite incomprehensible that man can have fallen under the domination of capital, his own product, and can be subordinated to it; and as in reality this is indisputably the case, the question involuntarily forces itself on us: How has the worker been able to pass from being the master of capital – as its creator – to being its slave?<sup>45</sup>

This passage unequivocally recalls the worker's alienation from the product we first encountered in *1844 Manuscripts*. Marx's endorsement of these questions, suggest that Marx still conceives of alienation as the worker's enslavement to his products. This presents a challenge to the account I advance above, because, in the case of capital, the alienated individuals seem to be producers of alien powers in the narrow sense. That is, the products of their labor in the labor process become dominating powers independent of them. At first glance, then, it is difficult to see how the account I advance above is compatible with the alienation of capital. In this section, I argue that not only is my interpretation compatible with the alienation of capital but that it is also essential to fully understand the alienation of capital.

Before I begin, I should add some caveats. First, I am not arguing, by any means, that Marx is not especially interested in the condition of the workers. Although I do not go into that here, Marx clearly thinks that the way in which the working class is dominated is orders of magnitude worse than the way in which capitalists are dominated. What I hope to point to here is that the dominating powers, are nevertheless, mutually constituted. Second, I am also not arguing in this section that Marx does not think the workers are exploited. In fact, part of my suggestion here is that exploitation and

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in *Capital*, 772 n.9. Marx remarks, "It is to Thünen's credit that he asked this question. His answer is simply childish." See also Karl Marx, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Ernest Mandel, trans. Rodney Livingstone, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 989–995.

alienation concern different features of the capitalist process of production.

It is helpful to begin with Marx's model of industrial capitalist production. The capitalist purchases two kinds of commodities: labor-power and the means of production (in Marx's notation,  $M-C$ , representing the purchase of commodities ( $C$ ) for a sum of money ( $M$ )). The capitalist organizes the production process and the worker, using the means of production, produces commodities for the capitalist. The capitalist then sells these commodities for a profit ( $M-C-M'$ ). The difference between  $M'$  and  $M$  is the surplus value. Capital, for Marx, is exchange value utilized for the purposes of expanding exchange value. So in the simple model we are considering, when the capitalist uses the surplus value to purchase more commodities to renew capitalist production, this surplus value assumes the form of capital. So, too, the commodities the worker produces assume the form of capital (commodity-capital) when sold by the capitalist in the circuit of industrial production.

The question, for Marx, is what accounts for the difference between  $M'$  and  $M$ . Marx's answer is that the source of surplus value can be found in labor-power. Unlike other commodities, labor-power has the ability to produce value greater than value at which it exchanges. Simply put, the worker is able to produce commodities whose exchange-value is greater than the exchange-value that the capitalist advances as a wage ( $M-C-C'-M'$ ). The capitalist, thus, according to Marx, extracts surplus-value from the worker. The extraction of surplus-value, Marx terms, exploitation.

To return to the alienation of capital, recall that the worker is said to produce capital, and capital is precisely what dominates the worker. As Marx writes, "the worker himself constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that

dominates and exploits him.”<sup>46</sup> With the above model of capitalist production in hand, we are now in a position to see in what sense the worker produces the objects that come to dominate him. In the process of production, the worker produces commodities whose exchange-value is greater than exchange-value the capitalist advanced. The worker produces the objects that dominate him so far as he produces surplus value in the circuit of capitalist production.

But from the description of the process of production, we have already seen that the capitalist is, at least, involved in the process. In fact, it is necessary that he fulfill his function as capitalist for there to be capital at all. Recall Marx’s conception of capital as exchange-value utilized for the end of increasing exchange value. Without the capitalist purchasing commodities and selling commodities for the purpose of making a profit, the product of the worker’s labor could not, by definition, take on the form of capital. I am not saying, here, that the capitalist productively contributes to the expansion of value – this would contravene one of the tenets of Marx’s labor theory of value: that only labor produces value. Rather, I mean to point to the conditions of possibility of anything assuming the form of capital at all.

To pursue this further, we should consider the capital-relation. Marx frequently claims that capital *is* a social relation (capital *consists in* the capital-relation). This seems a good place to start, since, the idea of a social relations may be amenable to that of mutual interaction above. If the capital-relation is constituted by the interaction between laborers and capitalists, then, it follows that capital – which, we are positing here is by definition the capital-relation – is constituted by the relation between laborer and

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<sup>46</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1:716.

capitalist.

But this is not a wholly satisfactory account of the way in which capital is a self-produced alien power. The reason for this is that there is good reason not to accept the definition of capital as a social relation. It is difficult to see how capital understood as exchange value used for the sake of expanding exchange value counts as a social relation. Instead, we ought understand the claim that capital is a social relation to be shorthand for the claim that things can only assume the form of capital within certain social relations. I take it that this is what Marx has in mind when he says, for instance:

Capital ... is a social relation of production. It is a bourgeois production relation, a production relation of bourgeois society. Are not the means of subsistence, the instruments of labor, the raw materials of which capital consists, produced and accumulated under given social conditions, in definite social relations? Are they not utilized ... in definite social relations? Is it not just this definite social character, which turns the products serving for new production into capital?<sup>47</sup>

In my view, this idea that capital can only assume the form of capital within the capital-relation is the key to understanding the alienation of capital. Elsewhere, he writes:

A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a *slave* in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes *capital* only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than *gold* in itself is *money* or sugar the *price* of sugar.<sup>48</sup>

This is not, by any means, a trivial point for Marx. In his works on political economy, he repeatedly criticizes bourgeois political economists for using economic categories in the abstract as if their referents could exist outside of specific social relations: he writes, “the

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<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 9 (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 212. See also, “capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character... It is the means of production monopolized by a certain section of society, confronting living labor-power as products and working conditions rendered independent of this very labor power which are personified through this antithesis in capital. It is not merely the products of laborers turned into independent powers, products as rules and buyers of their producers, but rather also the social forces and the ... form of this labor, which confront the laborers as properties of their products here” (Capital vol. 3).

<sup>48</sup> See also: *Grundrisse*, 239, 265.; “Results,” 997–998.

whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmonious of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting.”<sup>49</sup> In Marx’s view, when political economists employ economic categories like capital ahistorically -- as when, for instance, they refer to the instruments of production used in pre-capitalist societies as capital -- they smuggle in ideological legitimations of the existing social relations.

The products of the worker’s labor are “converted” into capital by virtue of the fact that production is subordinated to the capital-relation. Without the capital relation in which capitalists and workers confront each other as owners of the means of production and labor power, the worker’s product could not assume the form of capital. Marx’s examples are helpful. A person is a slave only by virtue of his place in certain social relations. If we remove the relations of mastery and slavery, he loses his status as slave. The same, for Marx, applies to capital. Things can only assume the status (and power) of capital within the capital-relation. The capital-relation, we could say, constitutes the products of labor, as capital. Therefore, although it is true to say that Marx thinks that only the worker produces surplus-value, which the capitalist exploitatively extracts, we must look to the social relations presupposed by the capitalist process of production, in order to see how capital can exist as a dominating social power at all. In my view, then, underlying the worker’s alienation from capital is a more fundamental alienation in which the mutual interaction of individuals (workers and capitalists alike) constitutes capital as an alien power. Consider what Marx and Engels write in *The Communist Manifesto*:

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<sup>49</sup> *Grundrisse*, 85.; see also, e.g.: *Capital*, 1:96, 103, 169, 175.

Capital is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, *only by the united action of all members of society*, can it be set in motion. Capital is, therefore, not a personal, it is a social power.<sup>50</sup>

I take this to be a confirmation of the reading I advance here. Not only do they claim that capital is a collective product, but also that “in the last resort” it is the result of the activity of all members in society. I have tried to claim that we might think about the production of capital from the standpoint of two different levels of analysis: on the one hand, the production of surplus value in the production process; on the other, the production of the form capital in general. For this reason, I do not think Marx is inconsistent to hold at once that the workers produce capital and that capital is a collective product. In the passage above, it seems that the phrase “in the last resort”, might indicate that Marx, himself, explicitly understands the production of capital from two standpoints as well.

In addition to the account of the constitution of capital I have considered above, there is one remaining item to consider regarding the alienation of capital: the reproduction of the capital-relation itself. In Marx’s words,

The capitalist process of production ... seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-laborer.<sup>51</sup>

Marx sometimes says that individuals’ social relations confront them as alien powers. I understand these statements as different in kind from Marx’s species-being idea of our alienation from communal relations. When Marx says that people are alienated from their

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<sup>50</sup> *The Communist Manifesto*, 236.

<sup>51</sup> *Capital*, 1:724.

social relations, I take him to have in mind the process of the reproduction of described above. At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction I elided above. Social relations, for Marx, comprise the economic structure of a society. As such, we can distinguish between the mutual activity of individuals within certain social relations and the relations themselves. The relations of production, akin to institutions, are embodied by the individuals currently occupying its various roles, but as a set of relations, they continue to persist, even when these individuals are replaced. Individuals, by their mutual interaction as owners of labor-power and owners of means of production, sustain the capital-relation itself (the capital-relation, in turn, constitutes the individuals as wage-laborers and capitalists, but I set aside that matter here). Marx writes:

the result of the process of production and realization is, above all, the reproduction of the *relation of capital and labor itself, of capitalist and worker*. This social relation, production relation, appears in fact as an even *more important result of the process than its material results*. ... the worker produces himself as labor capacity, as well as the capital confronting him, while at the same time the capitalist produces himself as capital as well as the living labor capacity confronting him. Each reproduces itself, by reproducing its other, its negation. The capitalist produces labor as alien; labor produces the product as alien. The capitalist produces the worker, and the worker the capitalist etc.<sup>52</sup>

Here, perhaps, we have an analogue to Marx and Engels' account of the division of labor as an alien power in *The German Ideology*. Our mutual interaction with each other within certain relations has the effect of sustaining or reproducing the relations themselves. These relations then exercise a kind of power over individuals, defining the conditions in which they relate to others. Participants in the capital relation, then, produce capital as a power over them as well as the capital-relation.

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<sup>52</sup> *Grundrisse*, 458. (second emphasis added).

To conclude my analysis, I offer some remarks on a question that has been lurking in the background of much of my discussion. In my discussion of Marx's post-1844 conception of alienation, I have insisted that individuals' mutual interaction produces alien powers. Yet I have not said much in the way of specifying the content of this mutual interaction. In the previous section, I suggested that the relevant kind of interaction might be the market exchange between mutually indifferent individuals. So far as commodity exchange goes, this is, perhaps, a sufficient enough description of the content of the mutual interaction that produces alien powers like supply and demand. However, in this section, in addressing the alienation of capital, I have implied that a more determinate conception of the mutual interaction is responsible for the production of capital: in particular, the interaction that comprises the capital-relation. In the rest of the section, I gesture at an account of the content of the capital-relation.

Although the idea of social relations of production is a vital component in a number of Marx's most important theories (e.g., his theory of history and his theory of society), he rarely elaborates on the content of these relations. There are, however, a number of clues Marx gives – in his comments on the commodity-relation, in particular -- that are useful resources for filling in the details of the content of the social relations of production. He writes:

In order that ... objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in these objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other, and alienate his own, except through an act to which both parties consent. The guardians must therefore recognize each other as owners of private property. This juridical relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two

wills which mirrors the economic relation. The content of this juridical relation (or relation of two wills) is itself determined by the economic relation.<sup>53</sup>

That Marx is describing here the commodity-relation (and its legal expression) is evident in his reference to the economic relation – a term he uses synonymously with the social relations of production -- at the end of the passage. When a person exchanges a good with another person, he enters into a relation with that person and vice versa. This relation is at once practical and recognitive. It is practical because it is a relation in which the parties treat each other or “behave” towards each other in a certain way. The involved parties refrain from seizing the goods in the others’ possession and give the goods in their possession to the others in exchange for something in theirs. This relation is recognitive because the parties behave this way towards each other in virtue of a status they accord each other. As Marx writes:

Although individual A feels a need for the commodity of individual B, he does not appropriate it by force, nor vice versa, but rather they recognize one another reciprocally as proprietors, as persons whose will penetrates their commodities. Accordingly, the juridical moment of the Person enters here, as well as that of freedom, in so far as it is contained in the former.<sup>54</sup>

I understand this first sentence to be a description of the commodity relation and the second to be an analogue to Marx’s suggestion in the previous passage that the legal moment “mirrors” the economic relation. (This is important because the legal relation is a part of the superstructure and must be distinguishable from the social relations of production which comprise the economic structure). In the commodity-relation, one refrains from appropriating the other’s possession, not because, for example, one fears reprisal but because one views the other as the kinds of beings “whose will resides” in the

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1:178. (also, Engels, MECW 20: 268)

<sup>54</sup> *Grundrisse*, 243.

objects of possession.<sup>55</sup> The juridical relation, then, is not merely the codification of de facto “effective control”<sup>56</sup> over possessions reinforced with legal norms: the mutual legal recognition of each other as owners of private property mirrors the mutual recognition contained in the commodity-relation. Andrew Chitty, who has made a powerful case for a cognitive account of social relations of production, argues that social relations of production involve “factual recognition.” Factual relations of production, he defines as, “my acting towards you in just the same way, but *with or without* any underlying cognitive recognition.”<sup>57</sup> It is difficult to see how non-cognitive recognition should be understood as a species of recognition at all.<sup>58</sup> He derives his interpretation from a passage in which Marx describes participants in the commodity relation as “tacitly recogni[zing] each other as equal persons and owners of the respective goods to be exchanged.”<sup>59</sup> But Marx uses similar language elsewhere that doesn’t seem to imply non-cognitive recognition:

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<sup>55</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the parties of the commodity-relation abstain from calculations of utility. One exchanges goods with another because the goods one receive are of more value to one than the goods with one departs. In the commodity-relation, whether one ought exchange goods in order to obtain the goods of value or obtain the goods in some other manner (e.g. coercively) is not subject to calculations of utility.

<sup>56</sup> G.A. Cohen interprets relations of production as relations of de facto power over the means of production. See, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, Expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chap. 3, 8. My account, here, is very much at odds with Cohen’s view, but I can do no more than make a case for its initial plausibility. The force of Cohen’s interpretation rests largely in the fact that he is able to present a globally coherent account of the various pieces of Marx’s theory of history. A fuller defense of my interpretation would require more comment on how this account might be compatible with the tenets of Marx’s theory of history.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Chitty, “Recognition and Social Relations of Production,” *Historical Materialism*, no. 2 (1998): 57–97.

<sup>58</sup> Contrary to what Chitty suggests, I do not think a “Factual recognition” account, ultimately, can serve as an alternative to Cohen’s. It is unclear that there is any significant difference between de facto relations of possession and relations in which individuals treat each other *as if* they recognized each other as proprietors. (Chitty does differ from Cohen in that he sees relations of production not as relations of possession, but relations of “producing-for and transferring-the-product to”.)

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in: Chitty, “Recognition and Social Relations of Production.” Chitty has another motivation for this interpretation. For readers of Marx, it will be evident that my interpretation of social relations of production as cognitive relations comes up against a considerable difficulty. Some commentators, implicitly and explicitly, assume that cognitive relations would impermissibly introduce superstructural

“Things are in themselves external to man, and therefore alienable. In order that this alienation (Veräuserung] may be reciprocal, it is only necessary for men to agree tacitly to treat each other as the private owners of those alienable things, and, precisely for that reason, as persons who are independent of each other ... The constant repetition of exchange makes it a normal social process.<sup>60</sup>

Given the remarkably similar nature of these passages, it does not seem that we should over extrapolate too much from the phrase “tacitly recognize.” In my reading, individuals “tacitly agreeing” to treat each other as owners consists in them recognizing each other as proprietors: they accord to each other the status of proprietors. This agreement is tacit because it does not involve explicit consent or contract. This is how I suggest we ought understand the mutual interaction involved in the production of alien powers. In the capital-relation, individuals recognize and treat each other as owners of capital and labor power in their market relations and as owners of the products of labor and commodities capable of producing value in their production relations. The societal repetition of this mutual interaction is precisely what produces capital and the capital-relation as alien powers.

## **V. Conclusion**

It may seem that we have arrived at a rather toothless result. For many contemporary observers of social life, it is, perhaps, a truism that the social and economic forces that exercise so much influence in our lives cannot but be, at bottom, the consequence of the

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elements into the base (see the exchange between Lukes and Cohen: Steven Lukes, “Can the Base Be Distinguished from the Superstructure,” *Analyse & Kritik* 4 (1982): 211–222; G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap. 2..) Marx does make clear that morality, ideology, theories of freedom, and so on are part of the superstructure, but it does not seem to me that there is definitive evidence that simple cognitive norms are precluded from the base.

<sup>60</sup> *Capital*, 1:182.

ongoing social interaction of individuals, who, themselves, are determined, in part, by these social forces. The implausible ontological and metaphysical assumptions of a certain kind of Hegelianism – those against which I have suggested Marx’s concept of alienation was a reply -- do not grip many of us today. This paper has been an exercise in the interpretation of Marx. As such, my aim was primarily exegetical. I have tried to make sense of a feature of Marx’s theory of alienation that I think is insufficiently appreciated (or explained) in the literature on the topic. Nonetheless, my account here, I think, invites a legitimate concern: why go through the trouble of offering this revisionist reading of Marx, if the result is to diminish much of the critical content in his theory of alienation? After all, the more straightforward interpretation of the worker’s alienation from the product or the alienation as blocked flourishing seems to at least have the virtue of having something to say about the conditions of exploitation or domination faced by the many on the wrong end of a capitalist economy.

To conclude the paper, I offer at a few replies (some of which, I develop further in other parts of the dissertation). My first reply to these worries is simply to remind the reader of the work this paper is supposed to do. Here, I have tried to make sense of the notion that alien entities are self-produced. One should not conclude from this that all social phenomena will then count as alienating, since we could, in principle, explain all social phenomena in terms of mutual interaction. For people to be alienated, in Marx’s sense, they must both produce these alien powers and be objectionably subject to them. Crudely, to use one of Marx’s own examples, we might think that language is constituted by our mutual interaction, yet nevertheless not think of it as alienating, since we are not

objectionably subject to it. Nevertheless, a version of the above worry might still persist: if domination is the distinguishing condition, why is the self-production thesis important?

The importance of the self-production thesis is twofold. First, as I try to argue in the next chapter, I take it that it matters to Marx, from the standpoint of freedom, that certain forces that exercise influence in our lives can be shown to be the product of our activity. There is, or so I will argue, a qualitative difference for Marx, with respect to our freedom, whether we are constrained by the powers of nature or by powers we have constituted. Finally, the self-production claim serves a genealogical purpose for Marx. In capitalism, he sees a form of social organization in which powerful economic forces take on the character of natural forces or “the fate of the ancients.” Marx insists on reminding us that the powers and relations that govern our world are historical products and products of our activity. His purpose in doing so is to suggest that that men and women are not condemned by supernatural or natural forces to suffer their conditions of domination for eternity.

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