

# Further Reflections on Work, Alienation, and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx

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Recent issues of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* have contained several articles dealing with a variety of significant topics in the writings of Marcuse and Marx, including excellent discussions on work, freedom, alienation, human emancipation, historical "projects," and technological rationality.<sup>1</sup> Taken together these essays illustrate the controversial nature of these subjects, and, the sound merit of these efforts notwithstanding, I believe the authors would be the first to agree that what has been written is not the final word.

A point of argument is Edward Andrew's contention that Marx "did not believe, as does Marcuse, in the abolition of work, in complete automation."<sup>2</sup> I will try to show that, contrary to this consideration, Marx and Marcuse are in complete agreement regarding the desirability of and the necessity for the abolition of work. This agreement naturally extends to the common underlying assumption pertaining to the domination of nature and the development of a completely automated society. A careful and thorough reading of the *Grundrisse* would easily sustain this interpretation, which is, in fact, so incontestable on the basis of that particular work that further reluctance to accept it is tantamount to intellectual luddism. Over a decade ago Ernest Mandel convincingly argued a similar position while relying heavily on Marx's other middle writings and *Capital*.<sup>3</sup> But the real difficulty presenting the greatest obstacle to reaching an accord among Marx scholars on whether his socialist man becomes increasingly homo ludens or remains continually homo faber is the task of reconciling the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* with the later works. Once again the question of continuity in Marx's work arises, but it results this time from a lack of uniformity in interpretation.

In my opinion, there is also evidence in the *Manuscripts* suggesting that what Marx means by nonalienating human activity is similar to Marcuse's notion of play, but in no respect resembles Andrew's understanding of Marx's notion of work as being "either an activity of freedom or of bondage."<sup>4</sup> Human freedom for Marx is not realized through "radical improvements in the conditions under which men labour,"<sup>5</sup> but requires free activity to be differentiated qualitatively

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the article focused upon here, Edward Andrew, "Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx," iii (June 1970), 241-56, see also in this JOURNAL, Bentley Le Baron, "Marx on Human Emancipation," iv, (Dec. 1971), 559-70; J.J. Clarke, "The End of History: A Reappraisal of Marx's Views on Alienation and Human Emancipation," iv (Sept. 1971), 367-80; Bernard Solasse, "La démarche critique d'Herbert Marcuse ou un nouveau type de critique sociale," ii (Dec. 1969), 448-70; for a critique of Andrew's article, see William Leiss, "Technological Rationality: Notes on 'Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx,'" iv (Sept. 1971), 398-400.

<sup>2</sup>"Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx," 242.

<sup>3</sup>*Marxist Economic Theory* (New York, 1968), ii, 679-86.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew, "Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx," 242.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 245.

from work. Using this reassessment of the relationship between work and freedom, I would like to offer a brief suggestion for future reconsideration of Marx's concept of man, which is likely to be more compatible with life in a society freed from work. If we continue to maintain that work for Marx can become an end in itself, then there is indeed "a vacuum in the Marxist utopia. Unless there is no utopia, unless history is never abolished, unless labor continues to be ... some other and truer definition of the essence of man must be found."<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting a revision of Marx's ideas on work and freedom, but arguing that no new definition of the nature of man is needed beyond Marx.

In his introduction to his edition of *The German Ideology*, C.J. Arthur remarks that although Marx was quite clear in his characterization of alienation and its relation to private property, he failed to provide a clue to its origin.<sup>7</sup> Arthur notes the following passage from the *Manuscripts*: "Just as we have found the concept of private property from the concept of estranged labor by analysis, in the same way every category of political economy can be evolved with the help of these two factors; and we shall find again in each category, e.g. trade, competition, capital, money, only a definite and developed expression of the first formulation."<sup>8</sup>

Arthur erroneously concludes from this statement that as "Marx allows, this kind of analysis still leaves the problem of the roots of estrangement in the process of human development; but unfortunately the manuscript breaks off unfinished before he begins to answer this question." Yet, that Marx believed he had provided sufficient explanation for the genesis of alienation is clearly and explicitly indicated by his statement near the end of "Alienated Labor": "How does it happen, we may ask, that *man alienates his labor*? How is this alienation founded in the nature of human development? We have already done much to solve the problem in so far as we have transformed the question concerning the *origin of private property* into a question about the relation between *alienated labor* and the process of development of mankind. ... This new formulation of the problem *already contains the solution*."<sup>9</sup>

Thus Marx unmistakably confirms that his analysis of alienated labour discloses the sources and the very beginnings of alienation in human development. In addition, the analysis circumscribes the properties of work, illuminates its affinity or lack of affinity for unalienated human expression, and determines the position of labour in his vision of a free society.

Just as private property is derived from alienated labour (actually implied in the concept of alienated labour), so is alienation derived from the labour process; "For labor, *life activity, productive life*, now appear to man only as a means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain physical existence."<sup>10</sup> Hence, alienation originates in the act of sustaining life – which is the origin of labour itself. Compare this point to Marx's statement in *The German Ideology* that "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means

<sup>6</sup>Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middletown, Conn. 1970), 17.

<sup>7</sup>(New York, 1972), 19.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, (London, 1959), quoted in Arthur, *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Marx, *Early Writings*, 133 (italics added in last line).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

## Considérations additionnelles sur les concepts de travail, d'aliénation et de liberté chez Marcuse et Marx

*Le socialisme tel que décrit par Marx donnerait-il naissance à un « homo ludens » ou à un « homo faber » ? Cette question a fait l'objet d'une vigoureuse controverse entre les critiques de l'œuvre de Marx depuis plus d'une décade, controverse qui portait principalement sur les premières œuvres de Marx dont l'absence de rigueur philosophique pouvait accréditer les interprétations les plus diverses. Une lecture attentive du Grundrisse de Marx, écrit dont on a peu fait cas jusqu'à tout récemment, permet de résoudre la controverse. Le présent article analyse le concept de travail chez Marx, tel qu'exposé dans le Grundrisse, et établit un rapport d'identité entre ce concept et la notion marcusienne de « loisir » (play). Il appert que Marx et Marcuse partagent la même opinion sur la nécessité de l'abolition du travail tel que nous l'avons connu jusqu'à présent, de même que sur les postulats ayant trait à la domination que l'homme est appelé à exercer sur la nature et au développement d'une société complètement automatisée.*

*De plus, l'auteur suggère que certains passages des Manuscrits économiques et philosophiques permettent de croire que ce que Marx entendait par « l'activité humaine non-aliénante » peut également se rapprocher sensiblement de la notion marcusienne, de « loisir » (play) mais diffère en tout point de l'entendement que Edward Andrew avait de la notion marxienne de « travail » (work) comme « activité soit de liberté, soit de servitude ». La liberté humaine, selon Marx, n'est pas engendrée par les « améliorations, même radicales, des conditions du travail », mais elle repose plutôt sur la liberté des activités elles-mêmes, liberté qu'il est qualitativement impossible de retrouver dans le « travail ».*

*A partir de cette réévaluation des rapports entre le travail et la liberté, l'auteur suggère une reconsidération de notre entendement du concept marxien de l'homme afin de le rendre plus compatible avec une pratique sociale qui serait libérée du travail.*

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to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.”<sup>11</sup> The real and primary external attribute of labour is reduced to a definite utility that marks the historical feature of all other types of alienation and forms their bases. Consequently, alienation occurs in any human labour process whereby the products and therefore the activity of labour assume a utilitarian character. Though utilitarian labour constitutes the origin of alienation, it is not easily superseded, for it is obviously recapitulated in every stage of history that requires socially necessary work. Alienation thus continues into communist society, for although “communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principal of the immediate future, [it] is not itself the goal of human development – the form of human society.”<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, socio-economic reorganization under communism would have taken strides to eliminate most social and political manifestations of alienation, particularly those caused by the separation of the ownership of the means of production from the working classes; those caused by the existence of private property; and those forms that resulted from the oppressive specialization and regressive egoism of bourgeois capitalism, which robbed man of his political role and subordinated his public existence to private interests. But the genuine preconditions for freedom suppose the realization of an historical project far in advance of a communist system, for “man produces when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom from such need.”<sup>13</sup> At the very least, to be “free from physical need,” that is, free from the necessity of producing to satisfy such needs,

<sup>11</sup>Ed. R. Pascal (New York, 1967), 16.

<sup>12</sup>Marx, *Early Writings*, 167.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 128.

presumes the partial elimination of scarcity through the domination of nature and an automated economy artificially producing basic human requirements.

We must first conclude from this examination of the *Manuscripts* that the fulfilment of authentically free and unalienated labour requires that the utilitarian character of work be eradicated. But it does not *necessarily* follow for Marx, as it does for Marcuse (and this point is decisive), that automation is the equivalent of the elimination of all work. It is conceivable that labour *might* persist in a society that has succeeded in annulling its utilitarian value through the realization of an advanced historical project. Man, freed from need, might continue to produce the identical objects he produced when there existed a need for them. Objects of human production would no longer possess a use value, in fact, all relative criteria distinguishing the worth of one object over another would disappear. All products would be, regardless of previous standards, human products. The constitution of work would continue essentially unchanged, with the important exception that labour would be stripped of all ulterior and utilitarian purpose, and working conditions would be improved.

Such reasoning bears three principal weaknesses. If labour were perpetuated beyond the utilitarian need for it, labour as life activity, as productive life, would be gratuitous. Secondly, labour must always be studied in relation to man's creative faculties. Utility is a trait Marx ascribed to labour by virtue of the type of basic need it satisfied *and* the creative powers it did not. The abolition of the utilitarian quality of labour would not alter its fundamental relationship to man, that is, it would still not avail man of the opportunity to labour as a means of artistic or creative expression. Finally, the rather paradoxical development of labouring for the sake of labouring, though its utility is precluded by automation, conflicts with Marx's, as well as Marcuse's, belief in a broadly based aptitude for human expression realized in a fully matured communist autarchy. The paradox can be further resolved through the following suggestion for a reassessment of Marx's concept of man.

The expressions that have been used to describe Marx's definition of the essence of man have been extremely vague and abstract, almost entirely void of intelligible empirical content, and have at best been impressionistic. Andrew says, for example, that Marx believed that through work "men objectify their 'subjectivity,' externalize inner needs and talents, actualize their potential, give concrete form to their latent capacities, or realize their human nature. Productive activity is men creating and defining themselves; it is the means whereby men obtain an identity."<sup>14</sup> *Subjectivity, inner needs and talents, potential, latent capacities, and human nature*, are cryptic and relative terms that fail to distinguish between alienating or free activity and could be applied to either condition with equal plausibility. I will not go into Eric Fromm's well-known description, but it is similarly obscure to the point of being tautological; for example, he says; "What Marx means by 'species-character' is the essence of man ..."<sup>15</sup> Innumerable examples of cloudy sketches of Marx's notion of human personality could be provided, but it is unnecessary. What I mean to underscore, however, is a lack of certainty about what Marx meant by man's true identity.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew, "Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx," 244.

<sup>15</sup>*Marx's Concept of Man* (New York, 1971), 34.

These encumbered descriptions are not initially problematic in the interpretations themselves, for the difficulty is obviously inherent in Marx's patently metaphysical portrayal of human nature, which often lacks philosophical rigour and clarity. It is conceivable that Marx as dialectician was reluctant to furnish an answer to the question of man's historically matured capabilities. A detailed specification would surely place his concept in danger of obsolescence in the future. For this reason it may be unfair or even presumptuous to consider Marx's vision of a future society. In the same vein, there was certainly a lack of evidence prohibiting Marx, or anyone else for that matter, from developing an accurate and plausible formulation of the nature of man. But, besides the obvious empirical difficulties, certain tendencies did manifest themselves in the early industrial age permitting Marx to generalize in *The German Ideology*, depicting man, for example, as doing "one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic." This passage has been construed in many ways, though most commentators agree that Marx is analogically alluding to the profile of human activity under communism.<sup>16</sup> However, if we compare this excerpt from *The German Ideology* with Marx's contemporaneous and trenchant observation in *Capital*, we begin to recapture the complete significance of Marx's ontology. "Modern Industry ... imposes the necessity of recognising ... variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes ... Modern Industry, indeed, compels society ... to replace the detail worker of today ... by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers."<sup>17</sup>

Both of these passages should be meaningfully understood symbolically or figuratively rather than literally, as they imply a sort of non-exclusive, non-fixated social activity that suggests a multiplicity of human potentialities bordering on Proteanism. The metaphor, Protean, is in this context a more meaningful expression than "species-being."<sup>18</sup> There is no danger of falsely concretizing Marx's notion of man; its content is merely defined through the negation of the existing division of labour. Man individually performs at will the activities mankind executed as a collectivity.

This metaphorical view of Marx's concept of man contains two concrete aspects. Although this view remains indefinite in so far as explicit categories of human action are not prescribed, in a free society the ranges of human action are determined by the individual's free will, and not by material or other external

<sup>16</sup>See, *ibid.*, 42; Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1968), 231; Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York, 1970), 186, and fn. 7, under "Endnotes," pp. 267-68; Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston, 1968), 278-79.

<sup>17</sup>International Publishers ed. (New York, 1970), I, 487-88.

<sup>18</sup>The term Protean is not being employed as a surrogate for species-being. I have resorted to the use of metaphor to clearly illustrate and to emphasize the autonomous character of human freedom in Marx, as opposed to its social character, which is more properly distinguished by "species-being," "species life," or "species-consciousness." See Bottomore's fn. 2 in his edition of *Early Writings*, 13.

necessities. Necessity serves as the determinant for action as long as utility is the rationale for social organization. The abolition of utilitarian labour ushers in the realm of free choice, which is only qualified by a residual factor – free forms of human expression will not correspond to activity conditioned by physical need. Secondly, the perpetuation of labour in a society that has eliminated its necessity would constitute the perpetuation of alienation. This point is confirmed by Marx when he declares that utilitarian work “is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labor*. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion *it is avoided like the plague*.”<sup>19</sup>

Marx demands, in a free society, the complete departure from past manifestations of human powers and demands that nonalienating activity must be qualitatively differentiated from work.

It is quite apparent in *Capital* that Marx is an ardent proponent and zealous advocate of the benefits issuing from automation. He at once recognized the staggering contrast between the “cyclopean” potential of machinery as opposed to the comparatively meager productive output of archaic manufacturing processes. The superiority of machine over man is resolutely affirmed, a superiority engendering the emancipation of the process of production from the “restraints of human strength,” from “organic” limitations that “cripple” modern industry.

Marx’s exceptionally detailed and exhaustive documentation of the abuse of machinery under capital should not be confused with an indictment of machinery per se. Through a rather elementary dialectical exposition, Marx discloses “the economic paradox, that the most powerful instrument for shortening labour-time, becomes the most unfailing means for placing every moment of the labourer’s time and that of his family, at the disposal of the capitalist for the purpose of expanding the value of his capital.”<sup>20</sup> Thus when the reader is cautioned and instructed that it is “an undoubted fact that machinery, *as such*, is not responsible for ‘setting free’ the workman from the means of subsistence,”<sup>21</sup> Marx’s argument also implies that machinery, as such, is also not responsible for the workman’s enslavement. Marx was sympathetic to and patient with a distressed and apprehensive working class mistakenly directing “their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves”;<sup>22</sup> striking out blindly and ignorantly by “smashing machinery to pieces, setting factories ablaze,” at a modern industrial system that mercilessly displaced their labour with the machine, reduced their earnings below the level of subsistence, and forced them to seek occupations that failed to take advantage of their skills, for he realized that it “took both time and experience before the workpeople learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which

<sup>19</sup>Marx, *Early Writings*, 125 (italics added in the last line).

<sup>20</sup>*Capital*, I, 408.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 441 (italics added). Note, too, in this passage, the deliberate equation between “machinery” (automation), “setting free” the workman, and freedom from providing for a “means of subsistence.” In other words, automation under communism or socialism becomes singularly responsible for man’s liberation from utilitarian labour.

<sup>22</sup>Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, ed. Samuel Beer (New York, 1955), 18.

they are used.”<sup>23</sup> No doubt Marx would be less patient with his modern interpreters who today fail to make this distinction.

In order to realize its end, human labour must then bring about its own negation by transferring its duties and obligations to machinery. Marx saw this transference as an inevitable development in bourgeois economy, and through it a sizable proportion of man's total time is converted into free time. Under ideal conditions all the individual's time would become free time, but until such a completely automated state is achieved, society would economize or distribute time to meet the general material needs and to facilitate the further development of man's higher faculties. In any case, time would be maximized to meet the real needs of the individual.

Marx emphasizes the importance of the relationship between freedom and the social organization of time. In *The German Ideology* he describes history in terms of a series of successive confrontations of each generation of men with a predetermined set of objective material conditions. These objective factors place a limitation upon the orientation of man's intellectual and physical energies, in that they must be brought to bear and concentrated on the provision of the means for material production through the transformation of nature. Man's time must therefore be rationalized to meet the priorities determined in light of external conditions. His maturation is constrained within time and it is not until he is released from the organization of a time continuum shaped by need that he may begin to develop freely. This last supposition is supported in the *Grundrisse*. “If we suppose communal production, the determination of time remains, of course, essential. The less time society requires in order to produce wheat, cattle, etc., the more time it gains for other forms of production, material or intellectual. As with a single individual, the universality of its development, its enjoyment and its activity depends on saving time. In the final analysis, all forms of economics can be reduced to an economics of time.”<sup>24</sup>

Automation, using the least time society requires to produce necessities, would ideally allow man to be completely free from the world, from any exogenous considerations in the cultivation of his powers. Without the necessity for response to the outside world, man is transformed into a completely independent and autonomous figure. He is no longer dependent upon nature or upon other men as in the process of production. His will and action have no specific goals or aims, and the ranges of human development would be, in principle, limitless. Protean becomes a symbol for the general manifestation of human powers that have no direction, no purpose other than manifestation itself. Thus man's abilities will be fully exhibited, he “will live in display rather than need”;<sup>25</sup> his creative faculties and potentialities will be given, in Marcuse's sense, “free play,” they will “be represented and judged *not in terms of [their] usefulness, not according to any purpose [they] may possibly serve ... [but] represented as free from all such relations and properties.*”<sup>26</sup> Obviously, progress, real “human” progress, continues beyond the domination of nature.

<sup>23</sup>Marx, *Capital*, I, 429.

<sup>24</sup>Ed. and tr. David McLellan (New York, 1971), 75–6.

<sup>25</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York, 1962), 171.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 162 (italics added).

We see that for Marcuse and Marx unconditional development of man's noetic talent is in irreconcilable opposition to work. It is often assumed that because the elimination of labour depends upon the achievement of an automated society, an achievement that is concomitant with a highly centralized control and administration of technology, that the centralization of decision-making might well constitute the further alienation of the means of production from the major segments of society. But, as Marx explained in the *Grundrisse*, automation results in alienation when the disposable time it creates (capital creates "despite itself") is reconverted into surplus labour. Where automation supposes the elimination of all labour, it is proper to conceive of the separation of an automated means of production from the individual to be the same as his separation from work. Since the separation from work establishes the conditions of freedom, the centralized supervision of technology is in harmony with the individual's free will. It does not necessarily follow that in a technocracy the "physical" separation of the individual from the productive process is a violation of his sanction, for this separation is itself sanctioned and ratified by all those concerned with a free and unfettered human state of affairs.