
Marxism as Psychodrama

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For better or for worse, Karl Marx's countless hours of lonely labor in the British Museum proved not to have been in vain; he is indisputably one of the most influential thinkers of the modern era. How ironic that Marx, for whom philosophy and the life of the mind were mere epiphenomena, mere by-products of more or less autonomous material forces, should so clearly demonstrate the power and force of intellect and imagination.

Why did Marx so move the world? Did he shed new light on the human story, plumb its mysteries to previously unsounded depths? Marx himself viewed his contribution as "real positive science,"¹ as the dissemination of objective truth; he had the utmost scorn for those content with mere "illusions of speculation." Yet mountains of books have been written refuting his critique of political economy and his philosophy of history, and few people today would concur in Marx's self-characterization.

Indeed, the thunderheads of furious moral judgment that tower over Marx's "metaphysical treatise in economic disguise"² seem more the mark of the prophet than of the man of science. Not surprisingly, then, certain scholars have come to regard Marx as a religious thinker or moralist who merely employed the language of science, and especially the idiom of political economy, in elaborating an essentially poetic or mythological vision.³ Marx, on their view,

¹ Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 181.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ See Leonard P. Wessell, Jr., *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony and the Proletariat: The*

was less a social scientist than a visionary myth-maker who believed himself engaged in a life-and-death struggle against a world which was evil in its fundamental constitution. Drawing on the analysis presented in Robert Tucker's *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, this article aims to elucidate the nature of Marx's economic theory by exploring its meaning as myth and symbol. Marxian economics, I hope to show, is less a scientific theory than a mythical psychodrama whose theme is the salvation of mankind through the triumph of human creativity over egotistical greed.

Alienation

*Marx takes
idea of "self-
alienation"
from Hegel.*

The philosophy of Karl Marx cannot be understood apart from its Hegelian underpinnings, for its master concept remained from beginning to end the idea of "self-alienation" that Marx took from Hegel. To summarize briefly Hegel's view: to him, God (*Geist*, Spirit) appeared to be an "infinite, all-embracing self or *subjective being* . . . motivated by the urge and need to become conscious of itself as a world-self." In order to realize such self-consciousness, Spirit "must express itself, assume various concrete objective forms"; it thus externalizes or objectifies itself as nature and as man ("spirit in the act of becoming conscious of itself as spirit"). According to Hegel, then, the subject-object relation of normal experience represents Spirit's self-alienation or self-estrangement. Moreover, the Hegelian Spirit, having objectified itself, subsequently confronts the objectified world it has formed as non-self or 'other,' indeed, as a hostile negation of the self. The alien objectivity of the phenomenal world, however, is an illusion that must be dispelled through rational comprehension; and man's task (as "finite self-conscious Spirit") is to apprehend the actual subjectivity of the seemingly objective phenomena encountered in existence. For Hegel, in short, self-alienation is overcome through an act of cognition—through recognizing that the "objective world [is] the product of Spirit's own activity of self-externalization. . . ." ⁴

The Hegelian process whereby man "transcends" the alien objectivity of the phenomenal world is, then, a dialectical one that involves the reconciliation of the seeming contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and that is characterized, moreover, by

Mythopoetic Origins of Marxism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); and Tucker, *Ibid.*

⁴ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 47-51.

aggressiveness and self-aggrandizement. Hegel endows *Geist* with an all-consuming urge to incorporate the entire world within the self, an urge to submerge everything in pure ego. Indeed, as Spirit progressively incorporates the objective world as its possession, the world itself “becomes poorer and poorer in objectivity. . . . [The ego, on the other hand,] having negated the object as object, emerges enlarged, richer in subjective content or ‘spiritual substance’ than before.”⁵ The Hegelian Ego waxes as the objective world wanes.

As we shall see, Marx’s concept of self-alienation and his portrait of the alienated man are patterned after Hegel’s conception of self-alienated Spirit, with one significant twist. Hegel conceived of man as “God in his self-alienation.” Marx came to believe, however, that Hegel had things more or less upside down: God, Marx had learned from Feuerbach, was nothing more than “man . . . in his self-alienation.” In other words, Spirit does not form man, but man’s imaginative activity, his projection of his own powers and abilities into some illusory spiritual Beyond, forms his conception of God. For Marx, in short, God was dead; and man must henceforth be regarded as the “highest divinity”⁶ for man.

*Man as man’s
“highest
divinity.”*

On Marx’s view, there were not two worlds, the spiritual and the material, but only one—the ‘real’ material world where stands “actual, corporeal man, on firm and well rounded earth, inhaling and exhaling all the natural forces.”⁷ The proper starting point for thought was, accordingly, not God or Spirit but “real man on the foundation of nature.” Thus Marx, in opposition to Hegel, came to deny the primacy and causality of spiritual consciousness; only in Hegel’s dream world, he insisted, could consciousness transcend all barriers, for mere thought “in no way keeps [such barriers] from continuing to exist for *real* man in wretched *experience*.”⁸

Marx’s system, then, should be regarded as a peculiar interpretation of Hegelianism and, in particular, as an elaboration of Hegel’s

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶ Karl Marx, cited in Wessell, 65. Marx expressed his position in the preface to his doctoral dissertation: “Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus: ‘In simple words, I hate the pack of gods’, is its very own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not recognize human self-consciousness as the highest divinity”

⁷ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 85; hereinafter cited in the text as “M.”

⁸ Marx, cited in Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 98. In several places below I shall use Tucker’s translations of passages in Marx.

“fundamental category”—self-alienation. Indeed, the concept of alienation came to dominate Marx’s vision. He came to apprehend the entire world as little more than a “field of alienation,” to perceive self-estrangement as an all-pervasive characteristic of life that infected every aspect of human existence—religion, government, law, morals, the family, and economic activity.

Marx believed that the most extreme and significant expression of human self-alienation was to be found in the economic realm, and he turned to the study of economics with the express intent of formulating his preconceived theory of alienation in the idiom of political economy. Indeed, he regarded this endeavor as merely one aspect of a more comprehensive project—a “criticism of every single sphere of . . . human existence under the aspect of estrangement.”⁹ Marxian economics, in short, did not emerge from a dispassionate search for knowledge; the language of economics was the medium through which Marx unconsciously dramatized his inner struggle, the struggle of an alienated self to realize fullness of being.

Marxian Mythology

The “decisive characteristic of mythic thought,” writes Tucker, is “that something by nature interior is apprehended as exterior, that a drama of the inner life of man is experienced and depicted as taking place in the outer world.”¹⁰ By this criterion, Marxian economics may be regarded as full-fledged mythology. Marx, of course, believed he was describing reality from a scientific point of view. Yet he lost sight of the fact that the reality he apprehended was not a universal social reality but his own more particular ‘inner reality.’ What he actually described, in other words, were the subjective forces that constituted his own ‘alienated’ psyche, conceived and perceived, however, as objective social forces. Indeed, Marx seems completely to have entered into his own story, to have lost the ability to discriminate between inner and outer events.¹¹ As we have seen, Hegel had portrayed the universe as a subjective process; Marx’s inversion of Hegel led him to confuse his own subjective process with the social and political universe.

⁹ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Tucker notes how often Marx insists that one can observe the historical movement that is “going on under our very eyes” or that is “taking place before our very eyes” (Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 225).

The Characters of the Marxian Drama

Marxian economics, then, may be viewed as a reformulation of Hegelian metaphysics into a mythical psychodrama whose main characters—My Lord Capital and the Proletarian Worker—represent conflicting aspects of the human psyche. Neither Marx's conception of the capitalist nor of the worker were of empirical origin; both entities were, rather, mythical symbols that represented the outer manifestation of Marx's inner struggle between discordant psychic forces, namely, a self-aggrandizing ego and a victimized yet rebellious creative self. These, in turn, were derived from the Hegelian model. Hegel's aggressive and all-consuming Spirit was transformed into a self-aggrandizing human ego impelled by a boundless acquisitive lust; Hegel's alienated non-self was transformed into an inner creative self "annihilated" or "negated" by the forces of egoistic greed. Marx then projected these inner elements of the psyche—the ego and the creative self—onto the external social order: the 'capitalist' became his symbol for the voracious ego, the 'proletarian' for the creative self. The result was an imaginative vision that led to the dualism of contending forces within the alienated self's being misperceived as a dualism of social forces or class struggle within society.

*Inner conflict
as outer class
struggle.*

Marx's attempted solution to his personal alienation, in short, was to 'dump' his inner conflict onto society; one suspects that in so doing he relieved himself of an unendurable psychic tension. No longer were the egoistic and intuitive elements of the psyche apprehended as aspects of the self which must be integrated and reconciled; they were now perceived as attributes of the exterior social order. Such a 'solution,' of course, does not alter the condition that in Marx warfare between labor and capital is an essentially psychological and not an economic phenomenon.

Capital

The villain of Marx's story is, of course, the capitalist—My Lord Capital. The Marxian capitalist (the personification of the self-aggrandizing ego) is a semi-human creature with a "vampire thirst for the living blood of labor"¹² worked up by his insatiable desire to own and possess things. He is the diabolical Enemy of human self-

¹² Marx, cited in Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 221.

realization, the (Hegelian-Spirit-like) monster who knows no limits to his passion for self-expansion.

Greedy ego transformed into an 'other.'

Marx projected the all-consuming, greedy ego he apparently experienced within his own psyche onto another entity outside himself. Indeed, the personal ego was endowed with a life of its own and magically transformed into an 'other'—the Capitalist—who alienates man from himself, dehumanizes him, and takes away his freedom. As we shall see, the inner creative self received a similar treatment at Marx's hands: it was externalized and transformed into the alienated worker.

It should be mentioned that Marx was not consistent in viewing the capitalist as evil. As will be discussed later, for some purposes he portrayed him rather as the blameless agent of inevitable historical change.

The Proletariat

The hero of the Marxian morality play is the class of Collective Workers—the proletariat—who were for Marx the creative self that is "annihilated" or "negated" by the "inhuman power" of the greedy capitalist/ego.¹³ The Marxian proletarian is a worker who externalizes or objectifies his being or human essence in the material things he produces, things which thus embody, as Marx put it, the worker's "congealed" being.

The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour. . . . The performance of work appears in the sphere of political economy as a vitiation of the worker, objectification as a loss and as servitude to the object. . . .

The worker puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the less he possesses. . . . The more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes, [and] . . . the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes. . . . (M, 71-72)

According to Marx, moreover, the product of proletarian labor—the objectified being of the worker—is appropriated by the capitalist. In this manner, the capitalist (like the Hegelian Spirit) grows ever richer and more substantial at the expense of the worker

¹³ We note that Marx's conception parallels Hegel's idea that the alien objective world (Marx's alienated laborer/creative self) is negated or annihilated by the Spirit (Marx's capitalist/ego).

(Hegelian objectivity). Indeed, for Marx, the proletariat suffers such an impoverishment of being in the very act of production that he becomes a “non-man”; the proletariat as a class represents nothing less than the obliteration of man and his displacement by non-man. In order to understand how Marx reached such a devastating conclusion, I must examine his conception of alienated labor in some detail.

The Nature of Alienated Labor

For Marx, alienated, estranged labor results whenever men must work from necessity and not from the joy of spontaneous creation.

[Alienated labor is a consequence of] the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, *i.e.*, it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. (M, 74)

Alienated labor is bound up in Marx’s mind with the division of labor and professional specialization characteristic of the modern economic process; such, he believes, prevent men from employing the totality of their creative powers. Under capitalist relations of production, men are unable to participate in the creation of a meaningful whole, a product that expresses their being. They become, instead, cogs in the wheel of industry, wage-slaves who produce disconnected bits of ‘things’ which are, moreover, appropriated by the capitalist. Under such conditions, man’s creativity, and thus his humanity, is destroyed. For, on Marx’s view, the defining attribute of the human species is its capacity and need to engage in “free, conscious activity”—“free creativity in which a person feels thoroughly at home with himself, enjoys a sense of voluntary self-determination to action, and experiences his energies as his own.”¹⁵ Thus he in whom such creativity has been destroyed—the proletariat who is forced to work in order to survive—becomes, in effect, non-human.

Marx believed, moreover, that the proletariat worker necessarily experiences the phenomenal world—the objectification of his productive powers—as both “hostile and alien.”

¹⁵ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 134.

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists outside himself, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him. The life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (M, 72)

“Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual—that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity” (M, 74)—in the same way, Marx believed, the worker apprehends the appropriated fruits of his labor as a threatening ‘other’ that dominates his existence. However, unlike Hegel, Marx does not attribute the alienated character of the world to its objectivity *per se*, but to the fact that its objectivity is the outcome of an alienated *act* of production. In other words, for Marx, alienation originates “within the producing activity itself”¹⁶; the objective world, he says, is only a “résumé” of that activity.

The alienation of the object of labour merely epitomizes the alienation, the externalization, in the activity of labour itself. The alien character of the product of labour . . . is, therefore, a reflection of the self-alienation of man in the labour process. The alien object is a mirror for man, a reminder as it were, of his own experience of alienation in the activity of producing it. The world becomes an alienated world because man’s world-creating productive activity is alienated labour.¹⁷

The Plot

Why have so many men been forced to submit to such deadly alienating labor? According to Marx, the forces which drive and sustain the capitalist relations of production are ultimately to blame for man’s dehumanization. For the dynamics of capitalism are such that an insatiable greed, a lust for sheer acquisition, necessarily and inevitably overwhelms the genuinely human need for creative fulfillment and self-expression. The requirements of ‘the system’ force capitalists to make ever-more-inhumane demands on labor in order to drive down costs and increase profits; as a result, more and more workers become less and less human.¹⁸ Concomitant to this process,

¹⁶ Marx, cited in Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 133.

¹⁷ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 134.

¹⁸ We note the similarity between this conception and Hegel’s view that the Ego (Marx’s capitalist) waxes as the objective world (Marx’s creative self) wanes.

Marx claims, the means of production gradually become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands; thus more and more members of the capitalist class are thrown into the ranks of the proletarian nonmen. Eventually the system collapses in a violent cataclysm, and the proletariat/creative self re-appropriates the material means of production from the capitalists/ego. In so doing it re-appropriates its own alienated being (embodied in capital—the objectification of its labor), and the original fullness of human being is (miraculously) restored.

Moreover, in throwing off the dominance of the voracious capitalist/ego, proletarian man recovers the fullness of human being for *all* persons, for in overthrowing the order that made him an alienated being, the proletarian frees the capitalist who has been enslaved to that order as well. Communism, in short, is the fulfillment of what for Marx was a universal spiritual imperative—the need to end man’s self-estrangement. Its victory, he believed, meant an end to mankind’s heretofore universal alienation and suffering and the emergence of a lovely new world characterized by conscious creativity and the fulfillment of aesthetic value.

The Marxist battle between labor and capital was waged, then, on behalf of the good creative self whose spontaneous self-expression, whose very being, had been “annihilated” by the demands of the bad all-controlling ego; the triumph of proletarian labor over capital symbolizes the liberation of inner creativity from the deadly grip of greed and possessiveness. Yet Marx, having denied the primacy of consciousness and thought, and having transferred the drama from the interior to the exterior order, was firmly convinced that this (psychological) battle must be waged on what he regarded as the only real front—the material political-economic front. Hegel’s endeavor to achieve freedom by the appropriation of the seemingly objective world through acts of cognition was dismissed by Marx as a metaphysical illusion: “In order to transcend the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is completely sufficient. It takes actual communist action, [however,] to transcend actual private property” (M, 99). Real freedom, he believed, must be gained by real action—the actual physical appropriation of the alienated labor embodied in capital.

The Nature of the Communist Paradise

As mentioned previously, however, Marx’s vision of communism

*Marx's vision
not economic.*

nism was not essentially economic but philosophical or religious. That is why he never discussed questions of economic organization or distribution or any of the other concerns that have so occupied modern socialist and communist thinkers. Socialized production was not, to Marx's mind, an end in itself but the means whereby each person could fulfill and express his creative nature. It is true that communism meant the end of private property and compulsory labor, but Marx strove for their "abolition" because he believed this would introduce a new realm of *being*, a new realm of creative freedom. Communism meant for him, in short, the reintegration of man and the end of human self-alienation, or in Marx's own phrase, the "annihilation of *the alienated* character of the objective world."¹⁹ Thus it "no more occurred to him to investigate the distribution problem than it would occur to a Christian theologian to include in his treatise a section on the distribution problem in paradise. Marx simply takes it for granted that under communism there will be an abundance of goods for all."²⁰

According to Marx, all of pre-history (that is, all time prior to the anticipated communist revolution) was characterized by the state of unreality and alienation I have discussed. This is because pre-historical man never achieved the realization of his human nature, a nature, as we have seen, characterized by its capacity and need for free creative activity. However, the new communist order, the final stage of history, will be one where

productive activity will become joyous creation. Man will produce things spontaneously for the sheer pleasure it gives him to do so, will develop his manifold potentialities of action and response, and will cultivate his sensibilities in every sphere. He will cease to be divided against himself in his life-activity of material production, and will no longer experience this activity as activity of and for another alien, hostile, powerful man independent of him. Consequently, the products of his activity, the objectifications of himself, will no longer confront him as alien and hostile beings. They will mirror for him the joys of free self-activity instead of the agonies of alienated labour.²¹

According to Marx, all of this merely represents the fulfillment of

¹⁹ Marx, cited in Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 157.

²⁰ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

man's (heretofore negated) true being. All history has been leading up to the communist moment when man begins universally to participate in the free, spontaneous creativity that is his birthright.

The communist world of Marx's vision, then, is a paradisaical 'realm of freedom' that replaces all former 'realms of necessity.' Freed from physical need and compulsory labor by socialized production, each person will be able fully to develop *all* of his abilities, exercise *all* of his faculties, and pursue *all* of his interests; man can ". . . hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, . . . [and] criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, . . . critic" and so on. He can, like a Rousseauistic hero, follow his impulses and inclinations at will, secure in the knowledge that in so doing he is contributing to the full development of all. Indeed, perception and sensuality, corrupted in all former greed-driven societies, will themselves be transformed, for communism means nothing less than the "complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes. . ." (M, 87). Formerly, economic considerations distorted human perception; human beings were unable to see the beauty of things for their monetary value, the true worth and being of another person for his economic role and status. In overcoming egotistical possessiveness, however, human vision broadens and deepens. Moreover, possession—property—will no longer be requisite to pleasure; man will learn fully to gratify his senses through sensory and cognitive, and not physical, possession. With the abolition of alienated labor (and thus egotism), selfishness, greed, lust, ugliness, and other disfigurements of the spirit are, in effect, abolished as well; communist man can follow his natural bent, creating beauty and happiness wherever he goes. The communist order is a secular paradise as envisioned by the kind of romantic imagination that Irving Babbitt calls "idyllic."

*Marx's debt
to Rousseau.*

The Appeal of Marxism

In Marx's vision of the aesthetic paradise of creative freedom lies both his appeal and his pathos. It also reveals how far advanced was the flight from reality for both Marx and his many followers. How could this fabulous vision so move the world?

Various answers have been offered. First, it has been suggested that Marxism was a response to the profound spiritual disorder of the modern era and, in particular, to the erosion of the authority of

the Christian worldview. Eric Voegelin and others have argued that the Christian yearning for transcendent fulfillment did not disappear with the decline of Christianity but was merely transformed into the yearning for an earthly order of paradise peopled with utterly transfigured men.²² Various forms of political messianism, of which Marxism was undoubtedly the most influential, arose during the nineteenth century to both express and fulfill that yearning. Marxism, on this view, should be regarded as a “socialist secularization of [Christian] eschatology.”²³

It does seem that the “religious essence” of Marxism goes far to explain its appeal to modern man. There is ample testimony to the fact that the “new [Marxist] revelation” had a powerful effect on those searching for a “faith to live for.”²⁴ Andre Gide was not alone in believing that the “plan of the Soviet Union seem[ed] . . . to point to salvation.”²⁵ Moreover, the sense of “emotional fervor and intellectual bliss”²⁶ experienced by many converts to Marxism and the “passionate hope” aroused by its promise of unity and ultimate justice are clearly religious, or at least pseudo-religious, in character. Spiritual longing resonated to its “call to the experiences of the disinherited,”²⁷ and many individuals were only too eager to follow Marx into the promised land.

For people must have meaning and purpose. If they no longer apprehend a spiritual, transcendent purpose they will manufacture an earthly, immanent one. If they can no longer believe in a transcendent source of order, in a providential divine plan, they will endow some temporal authority with the power to design and impose some sort of ‘meaningful’ and ‘purposeful’ plan. A source of order such as that provided by Marxism and its variants offers a semblance of security to persons who fear that no one is steering the ship. That order without supernatural or conscious human design is possible is not commonly accepted.

Marxism also had profound imaginative appeal to all those who

²² See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1949.

²³ Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 10.

²⁴ Koestler, in Richard Crossman, ed. *The God that Failed* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 20, 16; see Richard Wright, in *The God that Failed*, 115.

²⁵ Andre Gide, in *God that Failed*, 176.

²⁶ Koestler, in *God that Failed*, 20.

²⁷ Wright, in *God that Failed*, 118.

yearned to escape from the burden of freedom and responsibility; it is in important respects the philosophy of escapism *par excellence*. For, according to Marx, individuals are powerless to determine their experience. Consciousness, he taught, is an effect, not a cause; moral freedom and responsibility are *bourgeois* illusions. Through his eyes, both capitalist and proletarian appear as little more than blameless puppets, automatons serving the autonomous needs of an 'alien' and 'inhuman' social force; the root cause of all personal unhappiness and misfortune is found outside the actor, in the evil "system." His philosophy thus spoke loud and clear to all those who wished to regard themselves as helpless victims or who sought a way of overcoming alienation that required no moral work of self-liberation on the part of the individual.

Work of self-liberation evaded.

No doubt many converts to Marxism were deluded idealists who yearned for the land of milk and honey, artists and intellectuals who dreamed of effortless creativity, and spiritually desolate persons desperate for meaning and purpose. Marxism also had a special appeal to the envious and resentful, as well as the economically uninformed and the politically ambitious. Whatever the reasons for Marx's appeal, the myriad socialistic schemes that abound in our era seem to indicate that they remain a significant force in modern times.

The Source of Marx's Alienation

There is no doubt that Marx's theory of alienation articulated a real experience. What, however, was the source of such a profound alienation from both self and society? I would suggest that Marx's sense of estrangement and non-being stemmed from his conviction that "[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."²⁸ This statement succinctly expresses Marx's fatal error: he refused to recognize the primacy of consciousness in the formation of personal and social experience.

Primacy of consciousness not recognized.

Marx's central belief was that human consciousness and the systems of value embodied in religion, art, law, philosophy, and so forth are mere epiphenomena determined by the "real" conditions

²⁸ Karl Marx, "Marx on the History of His Opinions," in Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 4.

of existence—the material forces of production and the economic relations that prevail in a given society. As the material base changes, so he believed, the “ideological superstructure” changes. Marx’s major mistake, it seems, was to take to heart Feuerbach’s advice to “turn his gaze from the internal to the external”; in denying the reality of the inner life and the potency of spirit and mind, he ended up in a prison of his own design.

For Hegel may have been correct to suggest that the entire phenomenal world is the product—the externalization or objectification—of essentially spiritual activity. Although an in-depth discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay, I would suggest that material reality is not real in the Marxian sense, that is, it is neither primary nor determinative; the real action, the action that determines all phenomenal experience, takes place first of all within the consciousness. The materialized “thought-entities” (M, 111) that constitute the phenomenal order are consequences and not causes; they are spiritual consciousness in form.

Hegel regarded the universe as a subjective process and the physical world as the objectification of Spirit; he failed to emphasize, however, that human beings, themselves materialized “spirit,” are endowed with the ability and indeed the need to externalize or objectify their consciousness. Humans must create as they have been created. That is to say, consciousness necessarily and inevitably materializes itself in form; thought, belief, expectation, and intent more or less automatically coalesce into objects in space and events in time.²⁹ Each person, then, encounters himself in encountering the objective world, for reality is a kind of living feedback mechanism whereby man experiences the consequences of his belief. Thus Hegel was not wrong to point out that “[t]he aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and . . . to find ourselves at home in it: which means no more than to trace the objective world back to . . . our innermost self.”³⁰ What he should have stressed to avoid confusion

²⁹ A process governed, of course, by objective laws and bounded by certain “root assumptions”—the “set criteria of reality” that frame the limits to human creativity and “operate as organizing, psychic, and physical frameworks” (Jane Roberts, *The Nature of the Psyche: Its Human Expression* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 29.

³⁰ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 49.

was that we must trace our personal and social experience back to our beliefs, expectations, and intent.³¹

Contrary to Hegel and Marx, however, I would argue that the process of self-objectification or externalization is not intrinsically one of *alienation* but of *self-expression*. The phenomenal world (including the product of Marx's "alienated" labor) is the symbolic representation of being, couched in the living language of 'objects' and 'events.' Such phenomena are, like language proper, media of communication and expression, the form the soul assumes while participating in the world of space and time. There is, in short, no reason to believe that Spirit or soul perceives its objectification as alien; it recognizes and knows itself in form. Only an overgrown ego oblivious to its nature and cut off from its inner source (God, Marx insisted, was dead) may be confused in that manner. Moreover, why should the process of self-externalization entail, as Marx claimed, the vitiating of being? This would be the case only if there were some finite quantity of energy and spirit which was used up in the creative process, not if the fount of being is inexhaustible.

Self-objectification is self-expression, not alienation.

Finally, I would suggest that the Hegelian and Marxian notion of "annihilation" is entirely inappropriate in regard to spiritual or any other sort of development. Comprehension has nothing to do with 'appropriating' or 'negating' or 'incorporating' either the external order or the personal ego; this is the pernicious language of an ego impelled by the desire to possess and dominate (Marx did know something about the characteristics of an ego driven by a passion for "infinite self-aggrandizement"). The ego, however, may not be inherently voracious, grasping, and deadly even in a capitalist society; such characteristics may be the consequence of unchecked willfulness, ignorance, and fear on the intuitive, creative aspects of the psyche. Perhaps the way to tame such an ego is less the violence to matter and spirit recommended by Marx and Hegel than personal effort, understanding, and reassurance.

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³¹ Indeed, Marx himself clearly demonstrated the determinative essence and creative power of consciousness and conviction. As he brooded more and more on the "massive fact" of alienation, he experienced an ever-greater sense of personal alienation; as I have discussed, he came to perceive alienation everywhere. All evidence that may have contradicted his belief was ignored or discounted. In denying the primacy and efficacy of consciousness, he painted himself into such a desolate corner that he could see no way out save for massive violence.

Anyone who has dispassionately examined the nature of the economic process with a disinterested eye cannot help being amazed by the hold that Marx's fabulous scheme has had on the modern mind. The explanation for his influence, it seems, is to be found in the fact that Marxism is not chiefly about economics after all, but about the liberation of creativity and the fulfillment of spiritual longing.

Source of fulfillment lies within.

The astonishing appeal of Marxism indicates that Marx put his finger on a sore spot of modern civilization, one undoubtedly related to a lack of personal fulfillment and to confusion regarding the nature and purpose of existence. Yet Marx and his followers looked for the solution to problems like these in precisely the wrong place—the exterior order posited by their materialist philosophy. Their strong affirmation of that order disclosed a serious misunderstanding of the sources of historical change. Attributing social problems to impersonal, external causes, Marx could never offer real solutions. Such solutions as there may be lie within the spiritual and psychological order whose existence and efficacy Marx emphatically denied. Creative fulfillment and purposeful existence are fruits of spiritual effort and comprehension, of discerning the “meaning . . . that connects the individual with a greater creative pattern,”³² and not of material manipulation. If the Marxist experiments of the twentieth century have taught us anything, it is that we misconstrue the nature and role of human consciousness at the greatest peril to soul and civilization.

For all his ranting and raving, Marx did wish to engender a social order within which human creativity can flourish. This, perhaps, is his saving grace. And, of course, many of the trouble-spots he identified remain thorny difficulties: deadening labor is still with us; the ego is still in the saddle; extraneous coercion is in no danger of withering away. Perhaps we would all do well to remember that economics and politics are about much more than matter, utility, and power; they are about the interaction of spirit and form as they merge in the world of time and space. Surely the fulfillment that all seek depends upon our efforts better to comprehend the nature of human being and the “deeper, more supportive reality”³³ that is both its source and end.

³² Roberts, *Psyche*, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.