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Discussion

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The Democratic Theory of the Early Marx

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Abstract: This article presents a novel reading of Marx's early, pre-1844, democratic theory, and its connection with his early views on alienation. It argues, contra established readings, that Marx had a properly developed theory of alienation prior to his famous *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*; that this theory is not centred solely on a critique of the modern state, or Hegel's conception thereof; that it consists in suppressing a human species-essence for participation in collective deliberation and decision-making via people's subjection to external power and domination; that it therefore applies widely both to the modern state and the capitalist economy, as well as to feudalism; and that this sheds light on the connections between Marx's theory of alienation on the one hand, and his early conception of non-alienated society, democracy, on the other. This will help us better to understand the relationship of Marx's to other, especially radical enlightenment, political thought.

1 Introduction

Marx's thoughts on alienation have been among his most interesting and enduring ideas, influencing a wide range of work in philosophy, sociology, and critical theory; and they continue to be discussed by politically engaged philosophers, economists, and anthropologists.¹ Among many others, Marx's theory of alienation played an important role in influencing the first generation of Frankfurt school critical theorists, although, unfortunately, none produced a focused study on the topic. It also inspired a wide range of sociological work, especially in the United States². In France, after Sartre's attempt at uniting Marxism and existential-

¹ Some of these include Holloway 2010, Graeber 2009 and Lebowitz 2010.

² Israel 1971.

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ism,³ study of Marx's early work often suffered under the Althusserian orthodoxy according to which the "true" or "real" Marx must be understood as the "scientific" Marx after the supposed "epistemic break" with the earlier, more humanist and philosophical one prior to 1845;⁴ although there were notable exceptions such as Jean Baudrillard,⁵ Henri Lefebvre,⁶ and situationists such as Guy Debord,⁷ and the situation has improved in recent years. In the English-speaking world, both in translated and in Anglo-American writings on the subject, a variety of work in philosophy, politics, and history has discussed Marx's early work, including his views on alienation, in considerable detail; and much of it has been very good.⁸ However, even most of this literature tends to suffer from three errors with respect to Marx's writings on alienation prior to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, which in turn lead to two further interpretative weaknesses. These errors and weaknesses have effects not just for how we understand Marx's early work and its development, but for what Marx's later views on alienation consist of and how they relate to other aspects of his thought. What are the mistakes I think are prevalent in this literature?

The first error is the assumption, clearly on display in commentators such as Georg Lukacs, John Plamenatz, and Lucio Colletti, that Marx has one and only one theory of alienation, which is shared across writings such as the 1843 notebooks on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, *On the Jewish Question*, and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.⁹ This assumption is rarely stated explicitly, but it is clearly evinced in these thinkers' works, as well as in others'. Second, there is the widespread view that, regardless of whether or not Marx had a distinct early (i. e. pre-1844) theory of alienation, his pre-1844 thoughts on alienation were centred solely on a critique of the modern state, or of Hegel's conception thereof.¹⁰ For instance, István Mészáros, one of the most insightful commentators on Marx's theory of alienation, writes that during the period of writing his notes on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* Marx not only "focused primarily on the problems of the state",¹¹ but further that the problem of alienation here "is considered basic-

3 Sartre 1960.

4 The most iconic statement of which can be found in Althusser 1966.

5 Baudrillard 1998.

6 E.g. Lefebvre 2014.

7 Debord 1995.

8 See the notes below.

9 Lukacs 1974, Plamenatz 1975, Colletti 1992, and Sayers 2011.

10 McGovern 1988, Teeple 1984, Mészáros 1972, Hyppolite 1969), Berki 1990, and Breckman 1999. Against this view, see Draper 1977.

11 Mészáros 1972, 68.

ally from a legal-institutional standpoint”.¹² There is a double error in this sort of reading: first, they misunderstand what Marx means by “the state” (der Staat), restricting it merely to what we might term the polity; they then go on to misconstrue Marx’s concern as being with juridical and political conditions instead of social relations and processes. This view is more widespread than the last one, and continues to be widely held. It is often combined with the third error I wish to challenge, namely the view that alienation, according to the early Marx, is fundamentally about some sort of “split” distinctive of contemporary civil society and/or the state, which the modern state, *pace* Hegel’s claims to the contrary, is unable to transcend.¹³ Tucker, for instance, writes that the early Marx’s “model of political alienation follows the Feuerbachian model” in that, *inter alia*, it is a view in which “alienated man is a divided being living two lives”, one in the state where he lives a communal life, and selfish and egoistic one in the sphere of civil society.¹⁴ In a slightly different vein, Hudis writes that at this point in time Marx considers civil society to represent the “*separation or alienation of humanity from its communal essence*”, rendering it a merely “*abstract subject*” and that this means that “its product, the state, must necessarily assume an abstract form as well”.¹⁵ As we will see, Marx certainly believes that modern society sees a certain kind of “split” between modern civil society and the state, and that this affects us moderns. However, it is wrong to claim that this forms a part of what Marx considers alienation to be. The latter two points have contributed to a partial neglect of what the early Marx writes about how a modern civil society or economy is alienated – and, importantly, that Marx does so prior to his economic studies. Moreover, the thinkers I have mentioned have tended either to underestimate or to misunderstand the difference between the first theory of alienation Marx articulated in his pre-1844 writings and the second one presented in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Concomitantly, the connection between Marx’s theories of alienation and the conceptions Marx develops of what a future society would look like has often been overlooked. Even the accounts provided in some of the finest recent works¹⁶ on these issues could, in my view, be improved by taking an even closer look at the systematic connections between the early Marx’s first theory of alienation and his conception of democracy.

¹² Mészáros 1972, 70.

¹³ Duquette 1989, Hudis 2013, McGovern 1988, Tucker 1970 and 1972, and Avineri 1968.

¹⁴ Tucker 1970, 104.

¹⁵ Hudis 2013, 49.

¹⁶ E.g. Leopold, 2007, Hudis 2005, Sayers 2007 and 2011.

In order to remedy this situation, I will eschew further discussion of the Marx literature in favour of a detailed analysis of the original texts, the aim of which will be to bring out five distinct but connected theses: (1) that the early Marx did in fact have a theory of alienation distinct from the one he developed in the 1844 manuscripts; (2) that this theory is not centred solely on a critique of the modern state or polity, or Hegel's conception thereof; (3) that the early theory of alienation centred on the suppressing of human species-powers principally by their being subjected to external power and domination, rather than consisting in some kind of "split" between citizen and private person distinctive of the modern civil society/state complex; (4) that this in turn means that Marx's first or early account of alienation applies much more widely than merely to *capitalist* civil society or economy, but also, for example, to its form of state or polity and to feudalism; and (5) that this can help us explain the deep conceptual and theoretical connections between the early Marx's critical theory of alienation and his conception of a non-alienated society, democracy. When we reconstruct the early Marx's views on alienation and democracy in this way, we can properly appreciate the systematic nature of his early work, and its significance within the wider history of radical democratic social and political thought.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 unpacks the early (pre-1844) Marx's conception of human nature and alienation through a reading of his discussion of feudalism. It argues that by "der Staat" Marx does not mean what we would term a state or polity, but rather the public concern or public affairs, and thus that Marx's concern with universal participation in the deliberation and decision-making of "der Staat" amounts to a concern with such participation in social life *tout court*. This is important for the early Marx because it is through such participation that human beings are able to realise or exercise their species-being or nature, the thwarting of which constitutes alienation. Despite numerous points of contact, this theory of alienation is markedly different from the four kinds of alienation discussed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* onwards, and is a diagnosis which applies not only to the state or polity, but to the capitalist economy and feudal society as well. With that in mind, sections 3 and 4 discuss how Marx's analysis diagnoses both the modern state and the modern economy as alienated, showing that in both cases alienation consists in these institutions' thwarting of the human species-essence through the forms of domination and subjugation they involve, and not through any sort of internal "split". With this critical diagnosis of contemporary society in place, I turn, in section 5, to show how this can help illuminate the connections between what Marx says about the diagnosis of alienation in his earliest works and his conception of its cure, democracy. We will thus have a new and improved understanding of the true nature and scope of the democratic project that the young Marx was

pursuing in political theory, its nature as a continuation and further development of certain strands of radical enlightenment thought, and a better perspective on Marx's development and its significance within broader strands of radical, especially radical enlightenment and Young Hegelian, social and political thought.

2 Human Nature, Alienation, and Feudalism

The earliest of one of Marx's two main terms for alienation, "Entfremdung" (the other being "Entäusserung"), initially appears not as a term denoting a diagnosis of commercial or capitalist society as such, but as a term used, compared to the 1844 manuscripts at least, both more broadly and more sparsely, and with virtually no explication. This being said, "Entfremdung" clearly invokes a connection with freedom and subordination, as well as with powers universal to, and distinctive of, human beings as a species. More precisely, it has to do with our internal powers for conscious participation in social or communal deliberation and decision-making, without the exercise of which we are reduced to mere animals. Since it is never discussed on its own, the meaning of "Entfremdung" in Marx's early writings must be unpacked along with the concrete diagnosis of past and present forms of society that it is used to refer to.

Let us begin with Marx's claim that feudal society of the Middle Ages constitutes a perfection of "Entfremdung". Just as in modern society, the feudal "political constitution was the constitution of private property, but only because the constitution of property was political".¹⁷ In other words, the basic nature of feudal society, according to Marx, is the result of the nature of a particular form of private property. Private property here denotes property in land and other means of production, rather than mere personal property. This usage was well-established and prevalent at the time. But if the nature of feudal society was the result of the feudal form of private property, this was, Marx claims, only so because the control over such property was, by its very nature in this form of society, a political thing. To say that such control is at the same time a political thing means that such property relations essentially involve legislative, juridical and, ultimately, coercive military/police powers. These coercive powers formally recognise and are an inherent part of the set of social relations defined by these property relations. In other words, in feudal society there was no sharp separation between the legal and explicitly coercive polity on the one hand, and the economy on the

¹⁷ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 90; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 33.

other, between state and civil society – a point to which Marx returns throughout his early notes. Thus, in feudalism according to Marx, the forms of economic control over productive resources were at the same time directly forms of political and legal power and domination. He elaborates on this point as follows:

In the Middle Ages there were serfs, feudal property, trade guilds, scholastic corporations, etc. That is to say, in the Middle Ages property, trade, society and man were *political*; the material content of the state was defined by its form; every sphere of private property had a political character, or was a political sphere, in other words politics was characteristic of the different spheres of private life. [...] In the Middle Ages the life of the people was identical with the life of the state [i. e. political life]. Man was the real principle of the state, but man was *not free*. Hence there was a *democracy of unfreedom*, a perfected system of alienation. The abstract reflected antithesis of this is to be found only in the modern world. The Middle Ages were an age of *real* dualism; the modern world is the age of *abstract* dualism.¹⁸

This quotation will require some unpacking. To begin, the term “state” (der Staat) here refers not to the institutional structure that is the polity, but rather to whatever is of general public concern. I believe that Marx’s use of the term “der Staat” here is his translation of *res publica*, which means public matters or things, or public affairs. This reading sits well both with the letter to Ruge in 1842,¹⁹ where Marx discusses his plans for the first Hegel critique and complains about the lack of an adequate German translation for the Latin term. It is further supported by Marx’s use of “the state” throughout his early *Rheinische Zeitung* journalism of 1842–3 where it is used in just this sense²⁰. Correspondingly, Marx contrasts, *inter alia*, the law of a state for its citizens to the law of one party or faction against another,²¹ and distinguishes between a state on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the “state organ” (Staatsorgan),²² “government” (Regierung),²³ or “state administration” (Staatsverwaltung).²⁴ Elsewhere, especially in his 1843 notes on Hegel, Marx repeatedly uses the term “political state” (der politische Staat) to denote a modern polity distinct from the economy, as opposed to the “Staat” as such.²⁵ Last, the reading of “der Staat” as a translation of *res publica* denot-

¹⁸ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 90; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 33; square brackets in the original. English translation modified from “estrangement” to “alienation” as Marx uses the two terms interchangeably and basically synonymously – a fact which is worth conveying for the purposes of this section.

¹⁹ MEGA₂ I, 3, 22.

²⁰ For particularly good examples of this not referred to below, see MEGA₂ I, 1, 153, 156, and 276 f.

²¹ MEGA₂ I, 1, 108.

²² MEGA₂ I, 1, 108.

²³ MEGA₂ I, 1, 164, and 285.

²⁴ MEGA₂ I, 1, 124.

²⁵ See Chitty 2006, Draper 1976, and McGovern 1988.

ing public concern/affairs is confirmed by Marx's explicit statement that "der Staat" simply is the matter of general concern: "the *state* is the 'matter of general concern', and in reality by 'matters of general concern' we mean the state".²⁶

Clarifying this definition of "der Staat" allows us to see what Marx means when he writes that the material content of "der Staat" in feudalism was defined by its form, and that every sphere of private life had a political character. All of this simply means that the social relations and institutions that make up the social structure of a feudal society were all subject to legal and political recognition, definition, and maintenance backed up by coercive military/police force. Consequently, every sphere of a person's life was formally and politically recognised as the kind of thing that it was: social roles like serfs, free men, noblemen, chattel, guild apprentices, guild masters, and so on, were all subject to formal, though distinct, kinds of legal/political recognition, definition, and enforcement. Moreover, different aspects of a person's life were not only recognised by systems of law, but by different systems of law: as a member of a free city one fell under the city's laws and legal codes; as subjects of a monarch one fell under the monarch's laws and tribunals; as members of a particular religion one fell under religious laws and courts; as guild members under the guild's; and so on. Each aspect of a person's life, in being recognised, defined, and subject to enforcement in this formal legal/political sense, had therefore an immediate political character; each such aspect was therefore potentially subject to political control; and there was no distinct polity which was clearly distinct and separated from these various other social relations and institutions. The later parts of the above-cited passage will become clearer once we look at a bit more of Marx's discussion.

Marx goes on to write that:

In the original models of monarchy, democracy and aristocracy there was at first no political constitution as distinct from the real, material state and the other aspects of the life of the people. The political state did not yet appear as the *form* of the material state. Either the *res publica* was the real private concern of the citizens, their real content [as among the Greeks] [...]. Or else the political state was nothing but the private caprice of a single individual so that, as in Asiatic despotism, the political state was as much a slave as the material state. The modern state differs from such states with a substantive unity between people and state [...] in [...] that the constitution itself develops a *particular* reality alongside the real life of the people and that the political state has become the *constitution* of the rest of the state.²⁷

²⁶ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 187; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 127.

²⁷ Marx, *CHDS* in Marx 1992, 90 f.; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 33 f. Note how *res publica* is used interchangeably with "der Staat".

What Marx is saying here is that in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and so forth, man was the principle of the state in the sense that people's everyday, material lives were identical with their political lives. Either the state as public concern was the real public concern of (all of) the people, or it was the concern merely of a minority (either of a small group or of an individual) and those who did not participate were not, in Marx's terminology, members of the state (=the public concern) at all. In either case those who participated actively in various kinds of social decision-making controlled social life (relatively) transparently and in its entirety.

What would it mean to be a proper part of the state in this sense of public concern? First, we note, "[d]eliberation and decision are the means by which the state becomes *effective* as a real concern".²⁸ If someone is a part of the state, then:

it is obvious that their very *social existence* already constitutes their *real participation* in it. [...] To be a conscious part of a thing means to take part of it and to take part in it consciously. Without this consciousness the member of the state would be an animal.²⁹

In short, to be a member of a state in this sense means, to Marx, that one is a conscious participant in society's deliberation and decision-making. This conscious participation in social life is also connected with the distinction between humans and animals: without being able to realise or actualise our species-specific powers of conscious participation and deliberation in social decision-making we are rendered less than fully human, insofar as we are not able to exercise the powers universal among, distinctive of, and unique to our species. This, I contend, constitutes the core of Marx's first theory of alienation. As I will show shortly, these species-specific powers are thwarted in societies which do not allow them to be realised or actualised. The kinds of societies that thwart these species-specific powers are societies which are alienated.

Accordingly, the Middle Ages constitute a perfection of alienation in the sense that it perfects a system of exclusion of the people from any exercise of their critical human powers of conscious, social/collective deliberation, and decision-making. Without venturing into any detail about Marx's conception of freedom, we can say that feudalism constitutes a "*democracy of unfreedom*" due to the fact that, in such a society, in principle every person is subject to the power of another – only, perhaps, excluding the supreme monarchs. This subjection to the power of another, in turn, entails that subjects are, individually and as

²⁸ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 187; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 127.

²⁹ *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 187; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 127. Emphases in the original.

a society, denied collective self-rule and self-direction which, I believe, is what Marx at this stage holds freedom to consist in.³⁰

3 Alienation in the Modern Polity

What, then, of the modern political state and civil society? If we now have some idea of what alienation, in this early sense, consists in, and of why feudal societies are alienated, why is it that Marx thinks that the modern state and civil society are alienated? To answer this question, I must first go through why, and in which ways, Marx thinks that modern societies differ from feudal ones. With that in place, we can say something about why human beings are alienated in modern society as well. As mentioned in a quotation above, Marx believes that the modern world develops the separation between a polity – i. e. legislature, judiciary, and executive – outside of, and at least formally distinct from, material economic life – i. e. the other social relations and institutions within and through which human beings live their lives. This process of abstraction of the polity from civil society or the economy, begun under absolute monarchy and then perfected by the French Revolution, has transformed the estates (Stände), the previous locus of social organisation, into social classes devoid of juridical and political recognition, definition, and enforcement. This had, in Marx's view, "accomplished the separation of political life and civil society".³¹ Expanding on this, Marx writes that modern civil society,³² i. e. the contemporary capitalist economy:

30 This entails that the power of conscious deliberation and decision-making in social affairs which is universal among, distinct of, and unique to human beings just is the power (potential) of being free and living freely. The essence of humanity, in this sense and on this conception, is freedom. This comes across, albeit indirectly, in the *Rheinische Zeitung* articles on the freedom of the press in MEGA₂ I, 1, 121–69. Freedom is further identified as the essence of man in MEGA₂ I, 1, 143. For a beautiful connection between freedom, democracy, modern Christianity, and mere animal existence, see MEGA₂ III, 1, 48–53.

31 Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 146; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 89.

32 It must be borne in mind that the term "civil society" (bürgerliche Gesellschaft) among German thinkers such as Marx and Hegel is significantly different from the ways in which that English term is used today. Today "civil society" is commonly used to refer to organisations and movements outside of both the proper capitalist economy and the state structure, such as athletic associations, NGOs, popular movements, etc. "Bürgerliche Gesellschaft", however, was employed by 19th Century German thinkers as a translation of the term "civil society" employed, in particular, by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, etc, where the term simply referred either to the economic base of a society (hence Ferguson's "Essay on the History of Civil Society"), or, more narrowly, to the economic base of specifically commer-

[...] is distinguished from that which preceded it by the fact that civil society does not sustain the individual as a member of a community, as a communal being [*Gemeinwesen*]. On the contrary, whether an individual remains in a class or not depends partly on his work, partly on chance. The *class* itself is now no more than a *superficial* determination of the individual, for it is neither implicit in his work, nor does it present itself to him as an objective community, organized according to established laws and standing in a fixed relationship to him. It is rather the case that he has no real relation to his substantive activity, to his *real* class. [...] The civil society of the present is the principle of *individualism* carried to its logical conclusion. Individual existence is the ultimate goal; activity, work content, etc. are *only* means.³³

Here Marx is saying that the advent of bourgeois civil society breaks up various traditional forms of community – whether alienating and oppressive or not – and imposes a kind of isolated atomism in a separate economic sphere. Earlier divisions between and within such concrete communities – guilds, social ranks, etc. – are abolished in law and broken up in reality. This, in turn, leaves an economy where one's labour, position, and so on are, at least to a much greater extent, merely the effect of a combination of individual endeavour and abilities on the one hand, and fortune of circumstances and events on the other. Since the socio-economic existence and the social divisions into classes that a modern economy entails are no longer acknowledged, shaped, and regulated directly (i.e. hands-on) by law, they lose their political character and thus their aforementioned “*real* dualism”.

This is not at all to say that economic life is, or must be, unregulated *per se* in such a society. All it means is that a person's position within a web of social relations, and the subsequent ways in which that person may or may not be able to interact with other members, live their lives when outside, for example, a workplace, and how they might move around from one position to another (e.g. from an employed worker to an independent craftsman to a small manufacturer) are not themselves explicitly recognised, defined, and enforced by legal/political means. Under feudalism, by contrast, the way one addresses and interacts with others of the same or different ranks, the ways in which one may or may not move from one social position to another, and even the way one dresses can be the explicitly subjected to legal/political recognition, definition, and enforcement. There are no doubt exceptions to the claim Marx is making here, but the existence of exceptional cases should not blind us to the broad accuracy of his general

cial – i.e. capitalist – society. This is the sense in which Hegel uses the term, and which Marx adopts from him.

33 Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 147 f.; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 90.

claims. Now, let us return to the issue of the split between the political state (or polity) and civil society (or economy), and the atomism of the latter.

Recall that, according to Marx, one's material life, i. e. one's everyday interactions with others, is an essentially social or collective thing, defined by the social relations and structures within and through which it is lived. Insofar as one's material or day-to-day life is, to a large extent, one's working life, this atomisation of an economic sphere entails that people's communal economic life becomes, to them, merely a matter of securing their own individual needs and interests. One's concrete activity, work, its content, etc. thus become mere means for securing purely individual ends. As Marx writes, the "atomism into which civil society is plunged by its *political* actions" is a necessary consequence of the fact that the "community" or "communistic entity" within "which the individual exists, civil society, is separated from the state."³⁴

On the other hand, by the same token modern society separates out an independent polity distinct from, and in opposition to, a capitalist economy. In contrast to the atomised and anti-social rat-race a person finds him- or herself in *qua* member of a capitalist economy, in this abstracted political sphere "he is the imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty, he is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality."³⁵ This appearance is, of course, merely illusory, and this, in turn, generates Christianity in its modern form:

In the so-called Christian state it is *alienation* [*Entfremdung*] which carries weight, and not *man himself*. The only man who carries weight, the *king*, is specifically distinct from other men [...]. The members of the political state are religious because of the dualism between individual life and species-life, between the life of civil society and political life. They are religious inasmuch as man considers political life, which is far removed from his actual individuality, to be his true life and inasmuch as religion is here the spirit of civil society and the expression of the separation and distance of man from man.³⁶

We see here why it is that people are alienated in a modern state or polity: human beings themselves carry no weight within it, which means simply that they do not participate in any meaningful way when it comes to its deliberation and decision-making on its public affairs or concerns. Instead, only the monarch has such powers, and that person is explicitly distinct from all others.³⁷ We see here that

³⁴ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 147 f.; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 90.

³⁵ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 220, MEGA₂ I, 2, 149. Brackets in the original. English translation modified from "estrangement" to "alienation".

³⁶ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 225; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 151 f.

³⁷ Note that I here use the words "powers" and "forces" interchangeably when discussing what Marx refers to as "Kräfte"; I use two different English words largely for stylistic reasons.

the modern polity is alienated just because its inhabitants are subject to external domination and subjugation, thwarting their species-essential powers of conscious participation in social deliberation and decision-making. What about the modern economy?

4 Alienation in the Modern Economy

Whereas the system of feudal estates “separates man from his universal essence” and thereby “transforms him into an animal that is identical with its own immediate determinate nature” – thus constituting a merely “*animal history* of mankind, its zoology” – modern society makes the “opposite mistake”: it “isolates the *objective* essence of man, treating it as something purely *external* and material. It does not treat the content of man as his true reality”.³⁸ The “content” in question here concerns the social or material content of human beings, namely their participation in a nexus of social/communal relations and institutions within and through which they live their lives. This material content refers, in particular, to the domains of everyday production (e.g. of goods and services) and reproduction (e.g. the making, maintaining, and rearing of children). Whilst feudal society subjugates and dominates all of its subjects, modern society, i.e. a capitalist economy and the modern state, abstracts (i.e. separates) the latter from the former. Further, in its modes of (political and religious) consciousness modern society treats the economy as something merely external and material. More precisely, in modern societies the systems of thought and belief that develop about humanity, human life, etc. do so from the points-of-view of the Christian religion and/or of the abstracted political sphere. As a result of this, they tend to conceptualise production and reproduction as something external to the real nature of human life and society, and as nothing more than a necessary precondition of little or no further consequence.

As, however, this realm of economic life is what constitutes the objective essence of man inasmuch as it is what constitutes our day-to-day lives, the modern age, construing everyday economic life as something external and merely material, fails to treat this objective essence or nature of man as our true reality. Note that the contradiction here is not one merely between modern forms of consciousness and the realities of economic life. Instead, it is a contradiction between these forms of consciousness *and* a *merely political* political practice on

³⁸ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 148; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 90. My brackets.

the one hand, and the material realities of the economic existence in modern civil society on the other. It is in this sense that the modern age is the age of “*abstract dualism*” mentioned above: the modern age is the age of a dualism of the political and the economic spheres where the one is abstracted from the other. This, in turn, causes a split and contradiction within the members of such societies:

The perfected political state is by its nature the *species-life* of man in *opposition* to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist *outside* the sphere of the state in *civil society*. [...] Where the political state has attained its full degree of development man leads a double life, a life in heaven and a life on earth, not only in his mind, in his consciousness, but in *reality*. He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers.³⁹

In addition to the alienation in the political sphere already discussed, modern civil society and its abstracted polity are alienating in that they first destroy any kind of conscious community or collective organisation of economic life. This includes destroying any recognition of this sphere as the true or material reality of human existence, i. e. as the material or economic base on which the other organs of society are built. Second, in the economic sphere one not only debases oneself to a mere means, comes to see others, and collective association in general, as mere means to advance one’s own interests, and so forth, but one also, crucially, becomes a “plaything of alien powers”.⁴⁰ Why is this so?

According to the early Marx, people in capitalist societies are unable to exercise or express their internal species-essential powers for conscious participation in the deliberation and decision-making of their social existence. This is because any collective entities, through which people might do so, are politically eliminated from the (capitalist) economic sphere, and because this sphere furthermore subjects persons to forces outside and seemingly independent of their own. Since this realm, and the alien powers it imposes, are also outside the scope of political decision-making, due to its restriction to matters of polity, no merely political republic (a. k. a. no merely political state), and therefore no merely political solution, can overcome alienation. By contrast, an envisioned political democracy can overcome alienation, Marx believes, only by making the economy once again subject to the conscious, collective deliberation and decision-making of (all of) the people. Only this would remove the atomisation of civil society, render it the object of the public concern, and eliminate its distinct alien forces and impera-

³⁹ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 220; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 148 f.

⁴⁰ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 220; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 148 f.

tives. This, in turn, entails revoking the abstraction of the political state from its economic foundations; in other words, it entails the elimination of any distinct political apparatus.

The foregoing discussion has shown that the early theory of alienation that Marx operated with prior to 1844 had alienation consisting in the subjection of human beings to external (or seemingly external) powers dominating and subjugating them, thereby thwarting their species-essential powers of conscious participation in social deliberation and decision-making; it thus does not in itself involve any sort of internal or external “split”. This early theory of alienation is obviously distinct from the four kinds of alienation discussed in 1844, and thus distinct from that later theory of alienation. We have also seen that this theory of alienation does not apply only to the modern state, or Hegel’s conception thereof, but much more widely to both the modern capitalist economy and to feudalism. I have thus demonstrated the truth of (1)–(4) mentioned in the introduction above. It remains only to show (5), that this view can help us explain the deep conceptual and theoretical connections between the early Marx’s critical theory of alienation and his conception of a non-alienated society: democracy. Among other things, this will bring out the connection between Marx and earlier Young Hegelian and especially radical democratic enlightenment thought.

5 Democracy and the Overcoming of Alienation

It should be pointed out that the broad outlines of Marx’s positive political programme seem to have been well-established long before he articulated his first theory of alienation. The latter begins to develop in his 1843 notebooks on Hegel,⁴¹ and is then more fully elaborated in *On the Jewish Question*. However, there is solid evidence in Marx’s earliest letters, his doctoral dissertation, his early journalism, and from the radical company he kept whilst at university, that he subscribed to a core of radical democratic doctrines historically continuous with what Jonathan Israel calls the “Radical Enlightenment”.⁴² The radical enlightenment, according to Israel, stretches through thinkers such as Diderot, d’Holbach, Helvétius, Paine, Wollstonecraft and many others, all the way back to van den Enden and Spinoza. The core doctrines associated with this branch of thought, from which

⁴¹ Note that alienation, i. e. “Entfremdung”, does make sporadic appearances in earlier writings like his doctoral dissertation.

⁴² Israel 2001, 2006, 2009 and 2011.

the young Marx seems rarely to have deviated, are as follows: substance monism and atheism – including a denial of all gods, magic, angels, demons, and souls; a secular ethics, and a commitment to the general interest; democratic republicanism;⁴³ a commitment to freedom and equality (especially before the law); full freedoms of speech, press, association, and conviction, including broad religious tolerance; complete secularisation of government and law, as well as of society in general; feminism; anti-racism; and a wider commitment to legal and social equality across race, gender, ethnicity and religion. Documenting this in detail is, naturally, far beyond the scope of this section, but it is worth noting that Marx in fact had a clear and strong set of political commitments before he worked out his first theory of alienation.

Nevertheless, Marx's radical vision of democracy is presented as the solution to alienation – just as communism is from 1844 onwards – and it is in this context that it shall here be examined. Marx holds that, in contrast to all other political forms, in “a democracy the constitution, law, i. e. the political state, is itself only a self-determination of the people and the determinate content of the people”.⁴⁴ Its “formal” principle is therefore identical with its “material” principle.⁴⁵ In other words, the institution that claims to rule for and on behalf of the community of individuals really does so. How? By virtue of the fact that its actions reflect the wishes or desires of the people which are subject to it and that it does so as an appropriate and transparent consequence of the conscious participation of those people in its deliberation and decision-making. This conception of democracy is humanist in the sense that it both conceives of human beings⁴⁶ as, and makes it the case that human beings really are, the “one and only” subject of the political process; thus “democracy proceeds from man and conceives of the state [=the public concern] as objectified man”.^{47,48}

⁴³ Marx does, as I will shortly point out, have a stronger conception of “democracy” than a merely democratic republicanism since he recognises the existence and importance of a separate economic sphere – as many earlier enlightenment thinkers either do not do, or do not do adequately – as a result of which he explicitly criticises mere democratic republicanism in favour of a democratic which encompasses all of social life. However, his views on the democratisation of social life seem perfectly in line with the points many of these earlier thinkers were trying to make.

⁴⁴ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 89; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 32.

⁴⁵ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 88; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 31. My square brackets.

⁴⁶ Note that the term Marx uses in these kinds of statements, *der Mensch* (literally the human being, almost always translated as “man”), is gender-neutral, unlike its English or French counterparts.

⁴⁷ Marx, *CHDS* in Marx 1992, 87; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 31.

⁴⁸ McLellan 1970, 150.

This conception of democracy is clearly very closely related to that of other radical democrats such as Spinoza,⁴⁹ and consists above all in the participation of all in the deliberation and decision-making in the affairs of “der Staat” in the sense of the public concern/affairs – i.e. in the subjection of all social activity to the collective rule of its participants. Furthermore, this vision of democracy expresses a return to “the organic community typified by the city-states of Antiquity” [as such Marx] [...] “distinguishes *between* ‘democracy’ and the ‘political republic’”.⁵⁰ The aforementioned social or “communistic essence” of society is thereby re-appropriated by all of the people. Thus the various social forces created by, and inherent in, human society are no longer wielded by alien powers external and opposed to that of the vast majority of the population – whether these powers be those of a capitalist economy over workers in it, those of an absolute monarch over his or her subjects, those of a privileged feudal nobility over their serfs, etc. Instead, these social powers are taken over by the body of the people, subjected to their rule, and thereby transformed into powers under their own command.

We must note, however, that Marx’s conception of democracy is largely one of what I shall call institutional substance rather than of institutional form. By institutional form I mean the concrete rules or procedures according to which an institution is organised. In contrast, by institutional substance I mean the content that a given institutional form produces, realises, or achieves. Institutional substances, in this sense, are realisable in multiple ways: a genuinely direct democracy, for instance, may be realised through the instantiation of a number of distinct institutional forms or procedures, such as simple majority voting, supermajority voting, strict consensus decision-making, and many more.

On the other hand, any given institutional form may fail to realise in one context the institutional substance that it realises in another one. For example, whilst ancient Athens and (hypothetical) ancient Coruscant may have identical institutional forms – same constitution, rules, laws, decision-making procedures, etc. – the latter may have substantially different institutional substance owing, for example, to an extreme inequality of wealth giving rise to the buying and selling of votes, thereby subverting the potential for genuine direct democracy

⁴⁹ Marx’s notes on Spinoza’s works in MEGA₂ IV, 1, 233–76, should here be noted, along with the fact that Marx was, throughout his life, an avowed fan of many radical-democratic writers such as Diderot. The way he discusses democracy is essentially identical to the one he discusses in his notes on Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, see MEGA₂ IV, 1, 240 f. (785). The view that Marx’s discussion of democracy is heavily indebted to Spinoza is far from new. See Igoin 1977, Matheron 1977, Balibar 2008, Abensour 2004, and Kouvélakis 2003.

⁵⁰ Colletti 1992, 41.

which is actualised in Athens. In the sense of institutional political forms Athens and (hypothetical) Coruscant may, indeed, be identical; but the addition of one further factor makes it the case that the substance of their respective polities differs significantly.

Finally, a distinction between institutional form and institutional substance is always a contextual one. If we are interested in whether a group, or collection of groups, is democratic or not, it makes sense to consider democracy as the institutional substance, and different decision-making procedures as the institutional forms which may or may not – and may or may not to various extents – realise this institutional substance. But we may, by contrast, be interested in a different question concerning the same group; we may, for instance, be interested in whether or not the group's decision-making procedure works by consensus or not – or, if it does operate by consensus, we may be interested in which forms or procedures bring this about. In one case, the consensus decision-making procedure might take place in the absence of any explicit formal rules and without any specialised functions. In another case, it might involve official functions (rotating or not) like facilitators, timekeepers, and vibe watchers, it might involve a rigorous four-step (or more) process, it might or might not utilise a range of hand signals, and so forth. The distinction between the institutional substances on the one hand, and the institutional forms which may or may not realise them on the other, is thus contextually determined: It is determined by the things we are interested in investigating (democracy, consensus decision-making), and the questions we wish to ask about them.

When, rarely, Marx sets out an institutional vision, it is almost always⁵¹ one of institutional substance rather than of institutional form. Above all, this is because the question he is interested in is what a fundamentally new and better kind of society would have to be like. More proximately, when it comes to his early theory of alienation and democracy, he is concerned with what kind of basic social organisation – however realised – can be expected to eliminate alienation. Marx consequently specifies what human society needs to be like in order to be considered a democracy (or, later, communism) and fulfil its institutional promise, but he does not provide a specification of the unique institutional forms through which this is to be instituted in modern societies. His vision of democracy in terms of institutional substance at this stage – namely, as a radical democrat – includes, strictly speaking, only the vision of subjecting every major aspect of social life to participatory democratic control.

⁵¹ Leopold 2007 and Hudis 2013 point to some rare instances.

Having said this about the primary focus on institutional substance, Marx's notes do offer some reflections on the necessary and possible institutional forms of democracy, and these are worth noting. First, Marx's vision of democracy continues the Young Hegelian and Radical Enlightenment strand of secularisation not just of political institutions, but of human thought and life *tout court*. From his discussion of the United States and engagement with Bauer in *On the Jewish Question*, it is clear that he supports both the secularisation of all major social institutions such as the state, whilst going further to assert that humanity must be freed from religious illusions in general. This is a project which can only be brought about by removing the social bases which give rise to it, and which Marx believes can occur only in a real democracy. Second, although Marx is aware of the potential problems involved in representation,⁵² he does not view representation as inherently suspect. Instead, what is essential for Marx is *not* any question of direct or representative democratic forms, but the extension of voting rights as a means to the extension of real participation in the political process.⁵³ Third, both here and in his discussion of democracy what is at stake is the full political participation of all adult persons – at no point are exceptions made along lines of race, religion, gender, nationality, or anything else. Fourth, Marx thinks of democracy not just in terms of participatory decision-making, but also in specifically deliberative terms. Certain particular freedoms – and especially the freedom of the press – are thus considered absolutely vital for any free and democratic society. This is demonstrated particularly strongly in the early *Rheinische Zeitung* articles on the freedom of the press.⁵⁴ Fifth and finally, unlike the modern republic, democracy for Marx does not involve an essential contradiction between the private and particular interests on the one hand and general ones on the other because no separate economic sphere is excluded from communal rule.⁵⁵

With an understanding of Marx's notion of democracy in place, we can see how it is connected with his early understanding of alienation and its overcoming. A democracy overcomes alienation simply by being a democracy. Alienation, in this early theory, consists in human beings being subjected to the social powers they create and which have become powers seemingly external to and independ-

⁵² E.g. MEGA₂ I, 2, 130 and 133; cf. MEGA₂ I, 1, 285.

⁵³ In the passage cited Marx is, of course, discussing the perfection of the political state and not of a democratic society – though he believes the former will bring about the latter.

⁵⁴ MEGA₂ I, 1, 121–69. See also some of the discussions on the ban of the *Leipziger Allgemeinen Zeitung* in MEGA₂ I, 1, 291–3, and 328–33, as well as, in a slightly different context, MEGA₂ I, 1, 313–8. See Hardt 2000, 85, 100.

⁵⁵ Marx, *CHDS*, in Marx 1992, 145–7; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 90f. See also Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 220; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 148f.

ent of their creators – whether in the hands of a king, the nobility, or the impersonal forces of a capitalist economy. These powers then come back to dominate and subjugate people, which thwarts the exercise and expression of their human species-essential powers of conscious deliberation and decision-making in social life/in public affairs, thus rendering them alienated. Since democracy consists in subjecting every major aspect of social life to the conscious, collective deliberation and decision-making of all of its participants, there are no such external social powers or forces to which people are subjected. As such, a democracy is a kind of human society which allows the human species essence to be exercised and expressed. As a result, a democratic society is necessarily unalienated.

The creation of a properly democratic society, therefore, logically entails the overcoming of alienation. Marx sums this up as follows:

Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognised and organized his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political force*, only then will human emancipation be completed.⁵⁶

The elimination of alienation in general entails, for Marx, the simultaneous overcoming of religion. And the elimination of the specific kind of alienation that a modern polity and economy generates entails the corresponding supersession of modern Christianity by way of realising its “spirit” in the real, secular world:

The religious spirit can be realized only in so far as that stage in the development of the human spirit of which it is the religious expression emerges and constitutes itself in its *secular* form. This happens in the democratic state. Not Christianity but the human foundation of Christianity is the foundation of this state [...].

The sovereignty of man – but of man as an alien being distinct from actual man – is the fantasy, the dream, the postulate of Christianity, whereas in democracy it is a present and material reality, a secular maxim.⁵⁷

Here I take Marx to mean that a democracy brings about the “sovereignty of man” in the secular, i. e. real and material, world by eliminating the domination and subjugation of human beings by external and independent powers. Being the masters of their own social existence, the citizens of a democracy are no longer impelled to believe in unfounded illusions to give them a false feeling of sovereignty.

⁵⁶ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 234; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 162f.

⁵⁷ Marx, *OJQ*, in Marx 1992, 225 f.; cf. MEGA₂ I, 2, 151 f.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that, by 1843, Marx has a critical diagnosis of alienation centred on how modern society – both the polity and the economy – by its very nature thwarts the important, universal, and distinctive human power for conscious deliberation and decision-making in social or collective life, rather than consisting in any kind of internal or external “split”. This diagnosis applies not only to the modern state, but also to the capitalist economy and to feudal society. Finally, I have shown how this can illuminate Marx’s radical enlightenment conception of democracy: democracy, as he conceives of it, is articulated as the full re-appropriation of individual and collective human powers, rendering all of society subject to its participants’ conscious deliberation and decision-making, thus exercising or realising their species-essence. I have thus demonstrated the truth of points (1)–(5) outlined above. These points are important if we are to fully appreciate the early Marx’s work and thought; and they are essential if we are to understand the significance of the early Marx’s work in the context of the history of social and political theory.

The systematic nature of the early Marx’s thought makes it clear why Marx, upon developing a new theory of alienation in 1844, moves to a different vision of a future society: the new diagnosis requires a new conception of a cure to overcome it. Having both a critical diagnosis and a vision for its cure, Marx’s quest moves to finding an agent capable of bringing the cure about. After all, a cure is not a real cure if it is impossible to administer. Being disillusioned with the approach of the other Young Hegelians, he discovers, by October 1843, the proletariat as a potentially revolutionary agent. With this discovery, along with his first forays into political economy and connections with communist proletarian organisations, Marx begins to develop a new diagnosis of modern society from the point-of-view of this revolutionary agent or class. This new diagnosis becomes the second theory of alienation; and corresponding to this new diagnosis he presents his new conception of its cure: communism.

I have deliberately de-emphasised certain aspects of Marx’s thought deeply influenced by Hegel and other idealists (such as Kant and Fichte) and German (especially Young Hegelian) materialists and the extent of his debts to these other thinkers and traditions. I have done so not because these are in any way un-influential or unimportant, but in order to bring out the systematic nature of the early Marx’s thought in its own right and on its own terms. From the perspective of the wider idealist and materialist traditions that Marx was part of, I think that this focus has at least one major virtue: it shows how one very important figure, infused with idealist and materialist thought, made the transition from more familiar radical enlightenment political commitments, via a systematic investiga-

tion into the ways in which modern society thwarts the exercise and expression of the human species-essence of freedom, to a focus on the economy, class, and the practicalities of socialist or communist revolution. Many thinkers around him trod a similar path; none trod it quite like Marx did.⁵⁸

CHDS Marx, K. *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*. In Marx 1992.

MEGA₂ *Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels*. Berlin, 1975 –

OJQ Marx, K. *On the Jewish Question*. In Marx 1992.

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⁵⁸ This article is developed from a chapter of my PhD thesis *Democracy, Socialism, and Human Development: A Realist and Comparative Critique of Capitalism* and has benefited from the thoughtful comments and general help and advice given to me by Professor Raymond Geuss and Dr. Lorna Finlayson, my supervisors. Part of the material has been presented at conferences, including at the *Power and Representation Conference* by RIPPLE (Research in Political Philosophy Leuven) in Leuven, June 2014, and at the *Amsterdam Forum for Political Philosophy Conference* at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, in June 2015. I am grateful to the participants of those conferences for their helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Giladi for all of his comments on and help with this article.

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