

*They Took Paradise and Made it a Capitalist Venture:
Marxian Alienation and a Post-Edenic World*

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In the beginning, “the individual [regarded] the soil as belonging to him, and [found] in it raw material, instrument, and means of subsistence not created by labor but by earth itself,” and it was good.¹ In order for a myth to retain power, it must remain relevant. The *Adamic Myth*, with its foundational creation story, endures as one of the most potent myths in American culture, one that has the power to inspire an entire generation, as exemplified by the Crosby, Stills and Nash lyric - “*And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.*”² Despite the fact that Marxian thought is typically regarded Promethean, “that human progress hinges on the subjugation of nature,” Marx’s outlook on nature is essentially Edenic.³ Not in the theological sense, of course, his materialist mindset prohibits such idealist tendencies. Neither is his perspective the byproduct of reactionary sentiment, the likes of which he contends lies at the heart of utopian thought. Although never explicitly stated, the aforementioned link to Eden stems from the foundational concept of Marxian thought, alienation.

On its surface, the *Adamic Myth* speaks of evil’s entrance into the world and the subsequent fall of humanity. Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden after partaking of the fruit God specifically forbids them to eat. Consequently, they are punished with, among other things, a new-found susceptibility to death, pain in

¹ Marx, Karl. *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. Translated by Jack Cohen. International Publishers, 1964. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/precapitalist/ch02.htm> (accessed: March 28, 2015).

² Mitchell, Joni. “Woodstock.” *Ladies of the Canyon*. Los Angeles: A&M Studios, 1970.

³ Burkett, Paul. *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. 147.

childbirth for Eve, and more relevant to the topic at hand, *a life of toil for Adam* (emphasis mine). Following this turn of events, God “drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”⁴ The first-order meaning can, of course, be seen as an explanation for why things are the way they are, why pain is involved in childbirth, why we must work for a living, etc. It is very tempting for the reader to feel answered and read on without engaging the second-order meaning, but that is literally skimming the text’s surface. When the *Adamic Myth* is read as myth rather than simple narrative, Adam and Eve’s banishment points toward a more profound second-order meaning, one which addresses the human condition, that of exile and the very human feeling of alienation.⁵ And therein lays the parallel between Eden and Marxian thought as it pertains to nature.

This essay constitutes a study of Marx’s concept of alienation, specifically its culmination in man’s relationship to nature. Over the course of this analysis, I consider Marx’s definition of alienation, beginning with how it affects human beings at both the individual and social level. I proceed by examining the ways alienation is reflected in the forms of ownership that develop over the course of history, continuing with an exploration of the practical manifestations of man’s alienated relationship to nature.

⁴ “Genesis 3:24.” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version*. Ed. by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.

⁵ Ricoeur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston: Beacon, 1967. Print.

I conclude by touching upon communism's foundational principle, to reconcile an alienated humanity, noting why Marx sees communism as the answer.

As suggested above, alienation constitutes the thread that runs throughout Marx, economical, psychological, sociological alienation and ultimately estrangement from nature as well. Marx associates alienation with the division of labor, and private property, both of which culminate in Capitalism, and defines it as follows:

... the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer... The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object... The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.⁶

Marxian alienation pertains to the relationship between humans and the objects they produce. Within the Capitalist economic structure, the worker does not labour in an effort to create a product he will then sell to another individual. Rather, he works in order to acquire the means to live, the "food, drink, clothing and shelter" to which Engels refers at Marx's graveside.⁷ Marx's proletariat can only achieve this by selling his labor (which produces the product in question) to a capitalist for a wage. It is in this regard that "labor's product" becomes "a *power independent* of the producer." If the

⁶ Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. "Estranged Labour." *Collected Works Volume 3, Marx and Engels 1843-1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan and Dirk J. Struik. New York: International Publishers, 1975. 272. As cited in Vogel, Steven. "Marx and Alienation from Nature." *Social Theory and Practice*. Vol. 14, No 3. (Fall 1988). 367.

⁷ Worsley, Peter. *Marx and Marxism*. New York: Routledge, 1982. 39.

product is not produced, the worker does not acquire the means to live. Not only has the worker been separated from his labor, which has become a product to be bought and sold, the product (the sum of the worker's labor/time/life expended to produce it) belongs to the capitalist, along with any and all profits gleaned from its sale.

The proletariat is clearly economically alienated. Not only are profits garnered from the fruits of his labor unavailable to the worker, with an eye toward continued profits, the capitalist to whom he sells his commoditized labor manipulates the wage system he labors under. Under this scenario, the laborer is not in control of his own livelihood. As the expression goes, "there are only so many hours in a day," and therefore a limited number of labor hours to be sold. Consequently, the proletariat's standard of living, if not very survival, is determined by the capitalist for whom he labors, and as Marx explicitly states, "the *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things."⁸

Such circumstances also have psychological repercussions for the laborer. As suggested in the adaptation of the *Adamic Myth* above, "through production, nature appears as his work and his reality."⁹ Estranged labor, however, prohibits the worker from seeing himself reflected in a world his labor has produced, thereby alienating the worker from himself. Marx declares that laboring under such conditions ultimately

⁸Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. "Estranged Labour." *Collected Works Volume 3, Marx and Engels 1843-1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan and Dirk J. Struik New York: International Publishers. 1975. 272.

⁹ *Ibid.* 277.

“ruins his mind.”¹⁰ Alienation not only distorts self-perception, but alters how the worker creates and articulates himself through his work.¹¹

When alienated from himself, man is also estranged from other men. Marx asserts that “when man confronts himself, he confronts the *other* man. What applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man’s relation to the other man, and to the other man’s labor and object of labor.”¹² One repercussion of this social alienation is that labor ceases to be a collective common activity. Rather, estranged, commoditized labor generates social conflict by playing workers against one other in what has come to be known as a competitive labor market.

In addition to the social interactions mentioned above, Marx maintains that man’s relationship with his world includes nature in the immediate, physical sense, stating:

Nature is man's *inorganic body*—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die.¹³

He further specifies, “that man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.”¹⁴ Consequently, alienation resulting from estranged labor carries over into man’s relationship with

¹⁰ Ibid.274.

¹¹ Ibid, 274-277.

¹² Ibid, 277.

¹³ Ibid. 276.

¹⁴ Ibid.

nature. Therefore, as the worker becomes increasingly estranged from the products of his labor, nature becomes progressively detached from the worker, devolving into nothing more than a means of subsistence.¹⁵

Marx observes that man acting on nature also changes himself, a state of affairs reflected in the examination of Marxian alienation above. He notes the difference between man's "instinctive form" of labour (which remains on the animal level), and the one we are currently "dealing" with by comparing a bee and an architect.¹⁶ The difference, Marx asserts, lies in man's ability to "not only effect a change of form in the materials of nature," but to "realizes his own purpose in those materials," unlike a bee whose work is purely instinctive —in other words, consciousness.¹⁷ These observations echo the *Adamic Myth*, in that Adam and Eve's eating of the apple (an act on nature), evokes the soon to be exiled couple's consciousness, and subsequent feeling of alienation. Despite "an immense interval of time" transpiring between when means of subsistence was created by "by earth itself," with human labour in its "instinctive form," and man "brings his labour-power to market for sale as a commodity," alienation is clearly born of human action.¹⁸

¹⁵ Wolfe, Ross. "Man and Nature, Part II: The Marxist Theory of Man's Alienation from Nature." *The Charnel-House. From Bauhaus to Beinhaus*. Online. (Accessed: March 11, 2015).

¹⁶ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1*. Translated by: Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1982. 283.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 284.

¹⁸ Marx 1982, 283; Marx, 1964; Marx 1982, 283.

In *German Ideology*, Marx shifts from a “purely contemplative” form of materialism, transposing his observations about human nature to the “empirical premises of history.”¹⁹ Needless to say, the first of these premises is the existence of human individuals, with the first historic fact determined by their organization and subsequent relation to the rest of nature. As mentioned above, man distinguishes himself from animals by producing his means of subsistence. The way in which individuals produce their means of subsistence defines their “mode of life.”²⁰ This brings us, or more precisely, *returns* us to an examination of the division of labour and its resultant alienation, only this time in the context of history.

Marx links the division of labor to property ownership, in that, divisions in labour determine individuals’ relationships to one another, not only in regard to the product of labor, as mentioned above, but also the material and tools necessary for production. This dynamic, in turn, shapes societal and economic structures, which correspond to stages in the development of the divisions of labor and types of ownership. Marx provides concrete examples of what ultimately constitutes the progression of alienated labor, beginning with tribal property. This form of ownership coincides with the undeveloped stage of production mentioned above. Think hunter-

¹⁹ Foster, John Bellamy. *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. 114; Santilli, Paul. “Marx on Species-Being and Social Essence.” *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 13, No 1/2 . June, 1983. 80.

²⁰ Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. “The German Ideology. Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets.” *Collected Works, Volume 5. Marx and Engels 1845-1847*. Translated by Clemens Dutt, W. Lough and C. P. Magill. New York: International Publishers, 1976. 31.

gatherers, perhaps the raising of domesticated animals, or at the most subsistence farming.²¹ At this stage, any division of labor is an extension of family structure. Nonetheless, regardless of how minute, a division of labour exists. Marx deems this scenario “latent slavery,” with the wife and children functioning as slaves in service to the husband.²² Though acknowledging this form of *slavery* (emphasis mine) is “still very crude,” Marx notes an inclination toward the interests of a particular individual above others’.²³

The next stage in the division of labor’s evolution is the ancient communal and state property. This form originates from the union of several tribes in the establishment of a city (by either agreement or conquest). In addition to a pre-existing tradition of slavery, additional types of private property also develop. All private forms of property, however, remain subordinate to communal property. Out of this private/communal dialectic, the concept of the State is born, whereby common interests are dissociated from both individual and collective interests, to “[assume] an independent form.”²⁴ Nevertheless, Marx deems the State an “illusory community,” maintaining that the hierarchy implied by the division of labor has evolved into classes,

²¹ Ibid, 33.

²² Ibid, 46.

²³ Ibid, 32-33; Ibid, 46.

²⁴ Ibid, 46.

who vie for dominance, with the dominant class representing its interests as common interests.²⁵

As antiquity originates from the town, the third form of ownership, the feudal or estate property, emanates from the country. Like tribal and communal property, it too is based on community. The subjected producing class of feudal society, however, is not slaves as in the ancient community, but enserfed small peasantry.²⁶ As with slaves in previous societies, serfs function as an element of the means of production. Despite serfdom being a condition of bondage, unlike the institution of slavery the feudal system contains a degree of reciprocity. Serfs pay taxes and work a parcel of the lord's land in return for protection, as well as the right to work a portion of the vassal's holdings for themselves. In most serfdoms, if the land is sold the serfs remain with it—they are legally part of the land.²⁷ That is, until increased use of currency and the rise of manufacturing leads to what Marx terms "primitive accumulation."²⁸

Marx's primitive accumulation is an adaptation of economist Adam Smith's "previous accumulation," which states that Capitalism results from an ever increasing division of labor, with more specialized producers rising to own the means of

²⁵ Ibid, 47; Ibid 33, 46-47.

²⁶ Ibid 34.

²⁷ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1*. Translated by: Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1982. 874; "Serfdom." *New World Encyclopedia*. Online. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Serfdom>. (Accessed April 4, 2015).

²⁸ Marx 1982, 873; ; "Serfdom." *New World Encyclopedia*. Online; "Primitive Accumulation of Capital." *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 3rd Edition, 1970-1979. The Gale Group, Inc. <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Primitive+Accumulation+of+Capital> (Accessed April 4, 2015).

production.²⁹ According to Smith, this feat is accomplished strictly through hard work and frugality, with the lazy spendthrift “[eating] his bread in the sweat of his brow.”³⁰ Marx brands this understanding of primitive accumulation “insipid childishness,” and I would be remiss if I failed to address the fact that he equates it to theology’s “legend” of original sin.³¹ This remark is consistent with his iconic assertion, “religion is the opium of the people.”³² He views a Smithian understanding of primitive accumulation as an anecdote about an original past intended to explain, not only why things are the way they are, but why they will remain so.³³ Marx’s disdain for both texts stems from his view that they are consistently employed to lull those with “nothing to sell except their own skins” into submission.³⁴

The parallel Marx finds between Smith’s rendition of primitive accumulation and the lore of original sin is based on an understanding of scripture that stems from consequentialism, a first-order reading intended to justify circumstances that benefit those espousing such an interpretation. As mentioned above, seeing Marx’s thoughts regarding nature as Edenic, emanates from a reading of the text in question that goes beyond simple narrative, one derived from reading the *Adamic Myth* as myth.

Consequently, neither Marx’s views regarding religion in general, nor those

²⁹ Marx 1982, 873; Gehl, Robert. “Primitive Accumulation.” *Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of Terms*. <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/p/r.htm> (Accessed: March 23, 2015).

³⁰ Marx 1982, 873.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Marx, and Engels 1975. 175.

³³ Marx 1982, 873.

³⁴ Ibid.

surrounding the “legend of theological original sin” specifically, impact the validity of this analysis’ foundational argument, despite an ironic juxtaposition.³⁵ Unlike Marx’s “so-called” primitive accumulation, which he fully intends as a direct contradiction to Smith’s previous accumulation.³⁶

Marx describes primitive accumulation as the “historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.” By virtue of practices such as the enclosure of peasant plots and common lands (with an eye toward a new type of large-scale Capitalism based farming), a significant number of European serfs are indeed expropriated from their customary means of support. Dispossessed serfs’ flight into towns continues through the fifteenth century. These workers typically enter separately and are consequently never able to realize any degree of power, given that they find themselves in conflict with an organized community of merchants and trade guilds.³⁷ This turn of events ushers in the historic tendency of capitalist appropriation, which depends on the exploitation of formally free, yet alienated labor. This phenomenon is not limited to the Middle Ages and Europe’s Feudal system, becoming a world-wide occurrence in large part due to colonialism, and Marx considers the following “Idyllic proceedings [to be] the chief moments of primitive accumulation:”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marx 1982, 874.

³⁷ *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition*; Marx and Engels 1976. 65.

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production.³⁸

In addition to paving the way for Capitalism to gain traction, this development also produces the separation Marx sees as the most important division of material and mental labour, the antagonism between town and country.³⁹ Marx contends that large-scale industry “has a more revolutionary effect” on the domain of agriculture than anywhere else.⁴⁰ Not only does it “annihilate the bulwark of the old society, the peasant,” large landed property reduces the rural population, thereby creating enormous cities, effectively making the country dependent on the towns, in that means of production are increasingly concentrated in “a few hands.”⁴¹ The effects of this economic paradigm shift are not one-sided, however. Throughout his intellectual career, Marx maintains that under this scenario both sides of the town / country divide experience a diminished existence. He holds that the proletarian city dweller is deprived of clean air and sanitary living conditions, which impacts his physical well-being, while the rural worker endures an existence bankrupt of social intercourse with the larger world, depriving him of intellectual sustenance. The result, Marx asserts, is a

³⁸ Marx 1982, 915.

³⁹ Foster 137; Marx 1982, 874; Marx 1976, 64.

⁴⁰ Marx 1982, 637.

⁴¹ Ibid; Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. *The Communist Manifesto*. Project Gutenberg, 2005. EBook #61. (Accessed April 5, 2015).

society increasingly divided into “two hostile camps,” as noted by David Urquhart, one of “emasculated dwarfs” and the other “clownish boors.”⁴²

Marx contends that diminished condition resulting from large-scale farming is not limited to human beings. Labour, he observes, is fundamentally “a process between man and nature,” one in which “man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.”⁴³ Based on the fact that during this period depletion of natural fertility is of great concern, and influenced by the central figure in this crisis, German chemist Justin von Liebig, Marx observes that capitalist agriculture not only “[robs] the worker,” it also disrupts the “metabolic interaction between man and the earth.”⁴⁴ He attributes exhausted soil to the “blind desire for profit.”⁴⁵ This is a prime example of nature becoming nothing more than a means of subsistence, as mentioned above.

In his economic manuscript *The Grundrisse*, Marx states that the need to import guano for use as fertilizer indicates agriculture under capitalism “no longer finds the natural conditions of its own production within itself,” and is therefore no longer “self-

⁴² Foster, 137; Marx 1982, 637.

⁴³ Marx 1982, 283.

⁴⁴ Foster, John Bellamy and Magdoff, Fred. “Liebig, Marx, and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today’s Agriculture.” *Hungry for Profit: the Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*. Ed. by Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. 43; Marx 1982, 638, 290; Marx 1975, 567.

⁴⁵ Marx 1982, 348.

sustaining.”⁴⁶ A practical manifestation of man’s alienated relationship with nature (resulting in the need for a fertilizer industry) is reflected in the conditions that culminate in what sociologist John Bellamy Foster terms “metabolic rift.”⁴⁷ Not only does the reduction in rural population brought about by capitalist agriculture create enormous cities, it also prevents constituent elements of food and clothing consumed by the inhabitants of those cities from being returned to the soil, thereby exhausting its fertility. Making matters worse, urban environments produce an overabundance of the aforementioned “excretions of consumption.”⁴⁸ Exacerbating the imbalance even further and underscoring the alienated nature of the situation, as Marx laments “they find no better use for the excretion of four and a half million human beings than to contaminate the Thames with it at heavy expense.”⁴⁹

Although the newly established fertilizer industry may temporarily improve the soil, Marx asserts that “the more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction.”⁵⁰ One moral Marx has gleaned from history is that “the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture, or that a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system.” Bearing this in mind, it appears that the only

⁴⁶ Marx, Karl. *The Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. New York: Penguin, 1973. 462; Foster, 156.

⁴⁷ Foster, ix.

⁴⁸ Marx 2010, 70.

⁴⁹ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 3*. Translated by mark Harris. New York: International Publishers, 2010. 70.

⁵⁰ Marx 1982, 638.

way to curtail the destructive chain of events associated with large-scale industry is to return to the proverbial garden. Marx recognizes the impossibility of returning to “that original fullness,” and juxtaposes the notion of doing so to the equally impossible prospect of economic history evolving no further than Capitalism.⁵¹ Further, he acknowledges a need to “work out [our] relationships in their fullness,” insinuating a dialectical relation of opposition as a means by which to do so.⁵² For Marx, communism constitutes the synthesis between a return to original fullness and an arrested economic history.

Although stating that “the abolition of the contradiction between town and country is one of the first conditions of communal life,” Marx considers communism more “an *ideal* than “a *state of affairs* to be established.”⁵³ His vision does however involve a “reconversion of capital into the property of producers, although no longer as the private property of the individual producers,” but that of “associated producers,” in other words, “outright social property.”⁵⁴ While preserving the economic benefits of large landed property, abolishing the monopoly of private property in land restores man’s intimate connection to the land. Under this scenario, the earth is no longer an object to be bartered, re-establishing it as a genuine, personal property for man.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Marx 1973, 100.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Marx and Engels 1976, 64; Ibid 48.

⁵⁴ Marx 2010, 304.

⁵⁵ Foster,79.

Marx describes communism as:

the *positive* transcendence of *private property, human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i. e., human) being — a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.⁵⁶

Clearly, Marx sees his vision of communism as reconciling the alienation inherent in human beings functioning under capitalism, at every level including and especially man's relationship to nature. Ultimately characterizing communism as "the riddle of history solved," it appears Marx also considers it the way *to get ourselves back to the garden*.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Marx and Engels 1975, 297.

⁵⁷ Ibid; Mitchell.

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