From the "Unhappy Consciousness" to "Parasitic Language".
The Concept of Alienation in Hegel, Marx, and Wittgenstein

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Understandably, the title of my paper promises much more than I will be able to deliver. My objective, actually, is not so much to outline historical developments in the concept of alienation since I believe that the notion as espoused in Hegel’s and Marx’s philosophy is widely known. I aim rather at examining an issue which is far less obvious, namely the concept of „alienation“ in Wittgenstein’s thought.

The relationship between Wittgenstein’s philosophy on the one hand and Hegel’s and Marx’s philosophy on the other is part of a broader project that I have been working on recently, namely the Walzerian question concerning the viability of „social criticism without a critical theory“. My project is propelled by the following question: Is it possible to retain the emancipatory dimension of Marx’s philosophy if we relinquish both the idea of the universal liberation of humanity the ambition of devising an objective theory of capitalism? One component of my project is to attempt to critically deploy the concept of alienation.

Hegel’s approach to alienation as formulated in Phenomenology of Spirit constitutes a starting point for my argument. The approach is anchored in Hegel’s conviction that alienation is not a normative category but a descriptive one. It serves solely to describe the past stages in the development of human consciousness. Thus in his view the concept of alienation is not critical in character. Marx, on the other hand, uses the concept of alienation critically, making the transcendence of alienation part of the project of liberation of humanity, which is yet to be achieved. Marx’s weakness, however, lies in his having replaced Hegelian spirit (Geist) with the notion of „species-being“ (Gattungswesen), which does not allow him to fully disentangle himself from Hegelian metaphysics. In this paper, I will draw on Wittgenstein’s concept of therapy to argue that it is possible to think about alienation in a way that preserves its critical character while at the same time avoiding what Seyla Benhabib critically refers to as Marx’s „philosophy of the subject“. This, however, requires us to explore alienation as a problem pertaining to the ways in which language functions.

For both Hegel and Marx, the source of alienation is human action. For Hegel it is first of all the activity of the spirit, for, principally, whole reality is for him a form of Geist. In contrast to the Enlightenment thinkers, Hegel does not perceive consciousness as an a priori and immutable faculty, but sees it as a historical and social process rooted in human agency. The essence of this process lies in alienation, the doubling of consciousness and its overcoming through self-recognition or reconciliation. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel uses two words to describe alienation as a division in spirit, and they in fact portray alienation as a two-step process: „externalization“ (Entäußerung) – the immediate positing of the object – and „estrangement“ (Entfremdung) – the experience of this object as an alien reality. Spirit can fully actualize itself only if it becomes alienated from itself and then overcomes this alienation. Practically this means that in order for a human being to become reconciled with himself he must first subdue nature. As Hegel states in the Aesthetics, „finite“ human spirit, in contrast to infinite spirit (God), is bounded and restricted by its opposite, namely nature. This restriction [...] the human spirit in its existence [...] overcomes, and thereby raises itself to infinity, by grasping nature in thought through theoretical activity,
and through practical activity bringing about a harmony between nature and the spiritual Idea, reason, and the good.¹

However, the actualization of man’s individual freedom, which is at stake in the development of spirit and its process through successive stages, depends on social relations and institutions which are necessary for man to be able to fully realize himself. According to Hegel, man can be fully free only in the social world. The metaphor of lord and bondsman from *Phenomenology of Spirit* implies that unambiguously as their freedom depends on mutual recognition. This is another significant departure from Enlightenment thought, which held social institutions to be a necessary evil that hinders the human pursuit and attainment of freedom.

According to Hegel, individual consciousness, from which spirit commences its development, progresses through a series of historical stages, beginning with a state of complete unity in the Greek *polis*. Following the fall of the *polis*, humanity undergoes a stage of fragmentation and alienation. Hegel calls this early period of double consciousness „unhappy consciousness.“ „Unhappy consciousness“ refers to the condition in which finite individual consciousness experiences a severance from its own essence, which it locates in the perfect and unchangeable world of divinity that exists beyond its own world. This stage begins with the advent of Christianity, in the period of the Roman Empire. Hegel observes that this process has positive outcomes that propel development of individual freedom and subjectivity. According to Hegel, self-consciousness comes to complete development in the wake of Luther’s reformation and the French Revolution, when it re-unites with the natural and social world in the modern, liberal state.

Basically speaking, Marx retains Hegelian logic of alienation. For Marx, alienation is also a result of man’s work on nature and he also believes that it can be overcome. Nevertheless, his approach differs significantly from Hegel’s project in many points. First of all, the concept of alienation in Marx’s philosophy acquires a *critical* character. In Hegel’s system, alienation can be said to serve a purely descriptive function and to have become obsolete in the present represented by Hegel’s own times. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel straightforwardly writes that his work is not supposed to provide an *evaluation* of the current social relationships:

This treatise [...] shall be nothing other than an attempt to comprehend and portray the state as an *inherently rational entity*. As a philosophical composition, it must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a state as it ought to be.²

Marx, on the other hand, is convinced that the transcendence of alienation, which Hegel saw as already having taken place in contemporary society, is actually still a goal to be attained in the future provided that contemporary social relations are adequately scrutinized. In this sense, the concept of alienation is part of the „reform of consciousness“, as Marx puts it in his letter to Ruge, a reform which is to stimulate man to change his own social situation.³

Marx also differs from Hegel in the very definition of the process of alienation. For Hegel, alienation is a division in spirit, which first institutes objects beyond itself and then experiences them as alien, independent beings. Transcendence of alienation takes place together with the historical development of self-consciousness and consists in understanding that the world is its own externalization. Marx calls the Hegelian model of transcendence of alienation „actualization of illusion“:

The whole history of the alienation process and the whole process of the retraction of the alienation is therefore nothing but the *history of the production* of abstract (i.e., absolute) thought – of logical, speculative thought. The


estrangement, which therefore forms the real interest of the transcendence of this alienation, is the opposition of in itself and for itself, of consciousness and self-consciousness, of object and subject - that is to say, it is the opposition between abstract thinking and sensuous reality or real sensuousness within thought itself.4

In contrast to Hegel, Marx sees alienation as an experience of a real, living human being of flesh and blood, a worker. If labour offers the opportunity for self-realisation and is a determinant of humanity, both the products of labour and labour itself should be sources of satisfaction and fulfilment for us, an expression of our humanity. However, if we are deprived of the product of labour, „the object which labour produces – labour’s product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.“5 Both the objects we have produced and capital as a whole, which depends on our labour, rule us by becoming the condition of our physical existence. The „power“ of our products keeps growing – the more we produce and the more we become engaged in our labour. This, however, induces the growth of an environment which is not only hostile to us but also seeks to reduce us to the role of mechanical reproducers of the system. Marx’s essential question is: Who is this alien being that opposes man and divests him of what he himself produces, his labour and also his own humanity? Is it nature, is it the gods? The answer to his rhetorical question is, of course, no. „The alien being, to whom labour and the product of labour belongs, in whose service labour is done and for whose benefit the product of labour is provided, can only be man himself.“6 Thus the game of alienation does not play out in some otherworldly realm nor in the abstract world of absolute spirit. It is a game played by and among people, some of whom are more powerful than others, and those others, who humbly participate in the veiled manipulation initiated by the process of production, alienate their own activity from themselves and transfer it to something that is alien and does not belong to them.

The difficulty with Marx’s early phase of philosophical reflection was the nearly inadvertent inclusion of metaphysics in his concepts, which was actually the object of his critique of Hegel. The foundation of Marx’s critique of alienation and capitalism in his early philosophy was the notion of „species-being“, which was intended to emphasize the inter-subjective nature of subjectivity and the universal character of social transformation. The notion of „the proletariat“ serves a similar function in Marx’s thought. Hence in his later phase, in the period of Capital, Marx strives to supplement his philosophical analysis with historical and economic examples exposing the contradictions and incoherencies that are internal to capitalism and will inevitably lead it to destroy itself and change into a more pro-social system as the result of an ultimate rationalisation of capitalism’s inherent irrationality.

In view of this, is it then possible at all to speak of alienation without referring to the idea of a universal subject? I believe that it is, and that a basis for such reflection is to be found in Wittgenstein’s critique of language. Of course, no references to Hegel or Marx are to be found in Wittgenstein’s writings. However, a number of biographical accounts (by Malcolm, von Wright, Rees, and Monk)7 indicate that, through the mediation of Piero Sraffa, Wittgenstein did come into contact with Marx’s thought. References to Sraffa himself can be found in Wittgenstein’s texts.

5 Ibid., 71.
6 Ibid., 79.
7 There are several biographical descriptions of Sraffa’s influence on Wittgenstein. One of the most influential is by Norman Malcolm who tells the story of Sraffa’s and Wittgenstein’s train journey. During the trip, Wittgenstein insisted that a proposition and what it describes must have the same „logical form“. In response, Sraffa made a „gesture, familiar to Neapolitans“ (Norman Malcolm, Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir, Oxford 2001, 58–59), and asked Wittgenstein what its logical form is. This experience, according to Malcolm, convinced Wittgenstein that it was absurd to insist that „a proposition must literally be a „picture“ of the reality it describes“ (Ibid., 59). Another interesting recollection comes from G. H. von Wright, who refers to Wittgenstein’s statement that conversations with Sraffa made him feel „like a tree from which all branches had been cut“ (G. H. von Wright, „A Biographical Sketch“, in: Malcolm, Ludwig Wittgenstein, 15). But in the next sentence the author adds that „later Wittgenstein did not receive any inspi-
For instance, in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations* we encounter a famous formulation: „I am indebted to this stimulus for the most consequential ideas of this book.“ Nevertheless, it is indeed difficult to discern in Wittgenstein any direct inspirations by the Hegelian-Marxian project with the exception of a few superficial similarities between Wittgenstein’s observations in *Investigations* and Marx’s analysis of language in *German Ideology* or some analogies between Wittgenstein’s so-called „use-theory of meaning“ and Sraffa’s theory of value in economy.

Nonetheless I think it worthwhile to trace some analogies between Wittgenstein and Marx, and indirectly – through Marx – between Wittgenstein and Hegel. The analogies can be discerned in their understanding of philosophy and its role. I would argue that both Marx and Wittgenstein are engaged in a specific, practice-oriented variety of critical philosophy. Marx’s critical thinking would, in my view, consist not so much in enforcing a grand theory of capitalism’s political economy, but in revealing the illusion of capitalist labour relations in keeping with young-Marxian idea of critique as a „reform of consciousness.“ In the case of Wittgenstein, I would characterize critical thinking as a therapy consisting in the systematic exposure of the philosophical illusions bound up with the metaphysical use of language.

In his *Between Signs and Non-Signs*, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi straightforwardly resorts to the notion of „linguistic alienation“ in his attempts to explain Wittgenstein’s concept of language. He starts from the Hegelian distinction between „consciousness“ and „thinking“, that is, roughly, from Hegel’s assertion that thought is consciousness grasped in language. Consciousness would then be a kind of non-verbal thinking, which does not yet employ language. Rossi-Landi remarks:

> False thought is linguistic alienation, and that Wittgenstein dealt with false thought is obvious. But certainly he also dealt with false consciousness, and this in several ways. He distinguished false consciousness negatively from false thought and he examined mental conditions which are not verbally expressed but which can be perceived by studying nonverbal behaviour.9

When „something goes wrong“ on the level of consciousness, as Rossi-Landi puts it, we are dealing with „false consciousness“. False consciousness, in turn, the false thought bound up with it, and the praxis in which they are entangled, constitute a broader phenomenon of alienation.

One should notice that when Marx speaks of false consciousness, this has nothing to do with the concepts of truth and falsity as understood in formal logic. Falsity is instead a kind of „disease“10 that Marx endeavours to combat, and in this he somewhat resembles Freud and Nietzsche. Indeed, one could say that *Manuscripts* display the classical structure of therapy. They begin by diagnosing an ailment (alienation), proceed to establishing its aetiology (private property), and end by proposing a treatment (the abolition of private property by action).

It would not be out of place, therefore, to conclude that Wittgenstein’s philosophical project is a unique Marxian therapy to copes with man’s alienation, only that it takes place at the level of language. And the other way round, one could say that Marx’s project is a unique Wittgensteinian therapy targeted at consciousness. In this sense Wittgenstein’s philosophy is a logical consequence of the Marxian critique of consciousness, an advance Wittgenstein makes in proceeding from the critique of consciousness to the critique of thought, that is, language. Wittgenstein does not criticize language as such; his critique primarily concerns a specific kind of language we might follow Rupert Read in calling „parasitic language“.11 Such language occurs when a human being

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10 Ibid., 100.
using language is not able to achieve what he would like to achieve. If language becomes alien to us, we are not able to express with it what we would like to express and, first of all, we are not able to express ourselves.

When is it that language becomes a „parasite“? Wittgenstein seems to offer a precise answer to this question: „The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.“12 Language fails to do any work when it is used in ways that violate its principles. Language is functional and its purposes include communicating, informing, describing – then the „engine“ works. Problems emerge when we want to talk about something that is incapable of becoming an element in any language game or form of life, that is, something that cannot „be grounded“ in practice. Then, we could say, „theory“ becomes parasitical on „practice“. Theory (metaphysics) does have a life of its own; it is a certain illusion which must derive its reality from our everyday language – similarly to the „capitalist“ who is parasitical upon the „worker“ without himself being real. Wittgenstein calls this situation „a metaphysical use of language“ and clearly defines his role as a philosopher: „What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.“13 Bringing language „back“ to itself means overcoming alienation, just as in Marx the reconciliation with oneself means perceiving the illusory alienness of one’s own products.

It seems to me that we can apply this Wittgensteinian perspective in order to interpret Marx’s critical project in a novel and rewarding way. Its merit lies, in my opinion, in revealing an internal relationship between critique and emancipation that is at once both its goal and its reason. Marx realized this in the early texts in which he defined critique as a reform of consciousness. In this sense, Marx’s transcendence of alienation is not a journey to the promised world of an ideal human being, but a return to practice, the return from a consciousness that has been perverted by ideology back to men of flesh and blood. Marx’s point, then, would not be to construct the truth of man independently of context and history, but to bring man back to himself. But in fact the point is not „return“, either. We have always been this man, only our consciousness has gone astray producing „an illusion of man“. So it is not actually a return but the realization that the alienness of people and objects is an illusion arising from our consciousness. So if to read Marx through Wittgenstein entails interpreting him as proposing a kind of therapy whose aim is to abandon the illusions of alienation, then to read Wittgenstein through Marx is to interpret Wittgensteinian therapy in emancipatory terms. In this sense, the return to the everyday use of language would include a moment of liberation. Wittgensteinian emancipation would consist in language ceasing to be an alien being that hinders our self-expression. It is clear, therefore, that Hegel and Marx can also help us understand Wittgenstein here.

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13 Ibid., § 116.