

Unity and Separation in the Realisation of Labour

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Abstract:

This paper explores the complex dialectical developments taking place within the history of the labour process. Focusing in on the sections of the *Grundrisse* that deal with pre-capitalist economic formations I examine Marx's use of the concepts of separation and unity with regard to labour's realization in the process of production. Marx contends that there are two pre-requisites with regard to the labour process for the development of capitalism; 1., the existence of free labourers (i.e. capable of entering into acts of exchange for money); and 2., the separation of labour from the objective conditions of its realisation. These pre-requisite conditions are the product of a historical process of separation. Marx states that the "*original conditions of production cannot initially be themselves produced* – they are not the results of production", thus setting unity as prior to the historical process. History here becomes the history of separation as a basic condition for the realisation of labour. Capitalism for Marx designates the completion of this separation.

The use of the unity-separation dialectic gives rise to many formulations by Marx and especially frames his intriguing use of the terms organic and inorganic within the *Grundrisse*. The original state is unity between labour and the *inorganic* conditions of the metabolism of man and nature, while history exhibits the separation from these *inorganic* conditions and thus a change in the metabolism of man-nature. I explore why Marx chooses to reserve the use of the term 'organic' for developments internal to the human production process within the man-nature metabolism (or interaction) he describes.

Finally, I conclude by contending that the unity and separation dialectic does some striking work in chapter 13 of *Capital* where Marx examines co-operation within the labour process. Here Marx defines co-operation as the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production. This co-operation exists within a situation of alienation where "...the productive power developed by the worker socially is the productive power of capital."

Keywords:

Unity, Separation, Dialectics, Labour and Co-operation

Introduction

A striking aspect of Karl Marx's theorisation of the origins of capitalism is the repeated stress he places on the concept of separation. This paper explores the dialectical nature of the concept, what it reveals about its opposite term, unity, and how these relational terms are key in the process of labour's realisation. The term has been looked at before, but usually as an inter-changeable term for the concept of alienation.¹ I however contend that it is important to understand it as distinct from alienation. Further, by presenting separation in isolation from alienation, the basis for thinking the notion of alienation as specific to capitalism is bolstered.

My main focus on separation in action is in the passages of the *Grundrisse* commonly known as the "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations" (*Formen* for short).² Marx introduces the use of the term 'separation' here in order to replace his prior notion, in *The German Ideology*, that social forms progressed owing to the division of labour increasing and mutating through quantitative and qualitative change. In the *Formen* it is clear that the relationship of members of a society to the objective conditions of production (the land, all its fruits and the tools used to harness it), i.e. the means through which the activity of labour is realised, is the bedrock for defining a society and setting in train its laws of motion. This relationship, which is in essence the notion of property, is always defined in terms of separation and unity.

1. (Carver 2008: 48): Georg Lukacs's 1923 *History and Class Consciousness* is a famous anticipation of later concerns with topics around alienation as it only truly becomes a featured concept in Marxism in 1932 and then flourishes after the early manuscript publications with works from Ernest Mandel, George Novack, Henri Lefebvre and István Mészáros covering the 50's till 70's. Guy Debord's 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* stands out in highlighting the notion of separation, characterising contemporary capitalism as separation perfected.

2. The section on Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations was in fact published as a separate book in English translation in 1964. It featured an introduction by E.J. Hobsbawm and was translated by Jack Cohen. In 1974 Martin Nicolaus published his translation of the entire *Grundrisse* with Penguin. This translation is flawed with regards to the translation of the terms 'valorisation' and 'realisation,' however in some instances its language is more pointedly philosophical and even more helpful in illuminating how Marx thinks in the *Grundrisse*. I have relied in the main upon Jack Cohen's translation though where I have felt it added to the understanding of the *Formen* I have used Nicolaus's and noted the difference between both translations.

Alienation and Separation

I propose two brief reasons as to why we might think that separation should be seen as a concept apart from alienation.

Firstly, in German there is a linguistic distinction between 'Alienation' and 'Separation', as in English too they are different words, not simply different connotations of the same word in translation. 'Alienation' is used as the translation of three words '*Entfremdung*' (also 'estrangement'), '*Entäusserung*' or '*Veräusserung*,' while 'Separation' is '*Trennung*' and can also be translated, though it does not ever seem to have been by Marx scholars, as 'divorce' (Leopold 2007: 68; Carver 2008: 48).

Secondly, a view that places separation in equivalence with alienation leads to an ahistorical version of alienation, and a tendency towards returning to the *1844 Manuscripts*, and one could contend a less thoroughly materialist Marx.

Marx's most explicit definition of the concept, which comes well after the fact of its use in his manuscripts, is stated as follows:

The same process which counterposes the masses of free labourers to the *objective conditions of labour*, has also encountered these conditions to them as *capital*. The historic process was one of the *separation of hitherto combined elements; its result is therefore not the disappearance of one of these elements, but a situation in which each of them appears negatively related to the other* [italics added]: the (potentially) free labourer on the one hand, (potential) capital on the other. (Marx 1965: 106)

Here Marx offers us a definition of separation that we must apply back to all stages of the process of the formation of capitalism. All the elements remain the same elements as before a separation but now they appear negatively related to one another. I would say that in a separation the elements remain what they were, at the level of being existents, but the form of unity changes as do the potentials in light of the negativity embraced by the relation. Separation changes the frame in which the activity of the existents occurs. There is a marked difference for Marx between an affirmative relation, no relation and a relation of negativity.

Separation is a dialectical concept because, in Marx's use, it

qualitatively denotes a relation that is thoroughly historical, implying as it does a unity prior to the separation. Implicated in the concept already are the notions of process and negation. The notion of prior unity will be interrogated below.

In all the economic formations of society Marx defines the process of separation has also given rise to a new unity, both in appearance and in actuality.

Formulations for the Realisation of Labour 1 – The Grundrisse on Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations

After the presence of free labour (i.e. labour freed from the bondage of feudalism) the second condition that Marx isolates as necessary for the presence of wage labour and capital “is the separation of free labour from the objective conditions of its realisation – from the means and material of labour” (Marx 1965: 67). It is from here that Marx begins his inquiry into the historical process of separation within the *Formen*.

The *Formen* is itself divided into two parts: the first tracing the development of the fully separated labourer, the second dealing with the formation of capital (or, ‘value for itself’ which the free labourers find themselves faced against) (Marx 1973: 452). A key point to raise as we look into these formations is that historical and archaeological research after Marx gives a much more concrete version of the development of ancient societies than Marx could have known about. However, we must note that the level of abstraction in these passages is important as it tries to clarify a logic within social formations or varying modes of production. The reasoning I claim thus retains a value regardless of mistakes in concrete examples. And that value is specific to how separation and unity are formulated. Thus, we side-step aspects of the wider debate in the scholarship from Dobb (1967) to Brenner (1976) to Wood (2002) to Banaji (2010) on the true originary story of capitalism in favour of a textual analysis trying to isolate Marx’s dialectical thought. The terminology of separation consistently deployed by Marx in these passages is not merely linguistic but of conceptual and logical significance. Thus, one could say that this paper’s aim in the scholarship is to underline Marx’s dialectical thought towards making the point that research into the origins of capitalism requires consistent engagement with dialectics to understand that the qualitative differentiation of different economic formations relies upon isolating and understanding the relations holding between labour, its

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objective conditions of realisation and nature.

After primitive communalism, which I shall return to below, Marx outlines three formations that precede capitalism – the Asiatic, Ancient and Germanic. In all these formations the relationship of humans to the objective conditions of their labour differs or creates the distinction between these systems as well as the distinction between them and capitalism. These relations are framed by the motive of social reproduction which is in essence accomplished by the realisation of labour in the productive process.

The three formations defined with their key characteristics in terms of separation and unity are as follows:

Asiatic –

While claimed by some to be a Euro-Centric concept, it is more the designation of the name than its contents that are controversial as its conceptual core would in actuality cover many of the societies that preceded Ancient Greece and Rome, not just the societies of ancient Asia proper – Marx himself gives as examples of this mode of production ancient Mexico and Peru as well as the Celts (Marx 1965: 70).³

The Asiatic mode of production is marked by the non-existence of private property and the existence of an over-arching State capable of extraction in favour of the production of public works, most notably irrigation systems (in Asia) compelled by the climatic and geographic characteristics of the territory covered by the Asiatic mode of production (Mandel 2015: 116-139).⁴

The ruler, which may also take the symbolic form of a deity, is seen as realising the unity of the actual community and this in essence leads to the legal absence of property. However, Marx remarks that “in fact... its foundation is tribal or common property, in most cases created through a combination of manufacture and agriculture within the small community which thus becomes entirely self-sustaining and contains within itself all conditions of production and surplus production” (Marx 1965: 70). The image is of separate self-sustaining villages all joined together in order to achieve specific goals beneficial to all.

3. (Wood 2008: 80-81): As Wood states the economic formation Marx highlights may have been “more the rule than the exception in ancient civilisations.”

4. (Mandel 2015: 116-139): Mandel’s survey of the development of the economic thought of Karl Max offers a comprehensive understanding of its topic and in particular launches an important defence of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production. He notes that Marx’s conception clashes with any attempt to reduce dialectical materialism to formalism by offering a multiplicity of economic formations that do justice to the concrete reality of historical development.

The unity is the real owner. The material (or rather environmental) conditions of the terrain make it so.

Marx speaks of this form being capable of *realising* the common property through labour in either of two ways, either through a multiple of independent producers giving up its surplus, or by organising a common labour unit (presumably for public works) (Marx 1965: 70). The fact that labour power exists in a state set for its realisation as public labour is the significant mark of social labour in this mode of production.

Marx claims that this “form necessarily survives the longest and most stubbornly” (Marx 1965: 83). His reason for this is a balance of forces argument inbuilt into this form, namely the individual cannot exist outside the community and the consequences of an individual attempting to do so would undermine the basis of the community and its economic system or conversely lead to the pauperisation of the individual (Marx 1965: 83). In essence the social force capable of its overthrow is not allowed to grow.

Antiquity/Ancient –

The societies of classical antiquity are marked by the presence of an exploited slave class and the notion of citizenship (or membership of the commune) which guarantees individual ownership of property, with the land identified as ‘Roman’ etc. An *ager publicus*, the public property of that which is ‘Rome’ also exists, beside the publicly guaranteed private land.

The unity of the society is encompassed in the citizen’s identity as a Roman citizen. This identity is posited as existing *above* each and every member of the Roman citizenship – no Roman is the exemplary Roman, rather the identity is worth more than the individuals it is composed of. It is also a pre-requisite for one to own property in the territory occupied by the Roman Empire and thus appears *before* one’s presence in the community. However, in distinction to other societal formations, the Roman unity can also be found to exist concretely *among* the community in the form of the *ager publicus* i.e. property that is possessed by Rome as an entity itself.

Marx also especially notes with regard to this societal form that commerce and trade are viewed with suspicion i.e. not the career of a true Roman, while agricultural labour is celebrated (Marx 1965: 74). For Marx intercourse with the outside of the community, with foreigners in trade, or extraction of surplus from slaves to use in exchange, is necessitated by the social formation itself and ends up undermining

this form (Marx 1965: 94). Here Marx is prepared to think factors of external trade as in fact immanent problems faced by modes of production in maintaining themselves. This should make us attentive to the world-perspective which Marx employs and from which we can infer Marx's understanding of theoretical constructions in their concrete actuality. To say that an outside force undermines the internal structure is not to take the fact not as contingent to the formation but as an ever-present reality of that formation.

Germanic –

The most striking element in Marx's formulation of the Germanic mode of production is in his characterisation of the community as a coming-together as opposed to a being-together, or as an association as opposed to a union (Marx 1965: 78).⁵ In Antiquity and to a certain extent in Asiatic communities, community existed as a being-together – the community existed concretely in living among one another. The separate existence of the individual households within the Germanic mode meant that individual ownership was prior to the community. The community (the unity/union) only coming about in temporal moments of assembling together, for purposes such as organising war etc., and unity existing in itself only in an abstract manner, through culture (i.e. language, shared history etc.) (Marx 1965: 78-79). The Germanic mode thus does not exist as a State but as an association.

In the Germanic mode the *ager publicus* is not the presence of the State among or beside the private owners but the supplement to the individual property itself (it exists due to the defence of it by one tribe against another) (Marx 1965: 79).

This scenario allows the Germanic mode to set the pre-requisites for individuated property and subsequently the relation between lord and serf on the feudal estate.

Embedded in the material logic of these formations are breaks of separation compensated for by various forms of political, religious, or cultural unity. Each is not a necessary stage following on from the previous one but in world-historical reality they are simultaneous formations inter-acting and further stressing the contradictions of the so-

5. (Marx 1965: 78): The difference in translation between the 1973 Nicolaus edition and the Cohen edition here is worth noting. Nicolaus chooses the more philosophical language of “coming-together (*Vereinigung*)” as distinct from “being-together (*Verein*)” and “unification” while Cohen chooses instead the more everyday terms, “association”, “union” and “agreement”.

cial dynamics in each. The necessity in all these formations on the “road” to capitalism resides only in concretely defining the mediated relationship of labour to the objective conditions of production.

Excursus on Man-Nature Metabolism – Organic-Inorganic

A key separation that confronts all philosophies, not just Marxism, is that of the relationship between human society and nature. Marx illuminates this relation with the notions of inorganic and organic with regard to characterisations of nature to man and vice-versa. Through these terms he will be able to explain how perceived natural unity between man and the objective conditions of production as naturally occurring is the starting point for the process of becoming-separation which characterises human history (Marx 1965: 81).⁶

Marx also makes use of the term “body” to mediate how man relates to his environment. In the *Formen* there is an explicit equation between the “natural” objective conditions of production and the notion of man’s inorganic body (Marx 1965: 87).⁷ Marx states that “...just as the working subject is a natural individual, a natural being, so the first objective condition of his labour appears as nature, earth, as an inorganic body” (Marx 1965: 85).

I propose that the formula “Man is organic to nature but nature is not organic to man” underlies Marx’s thought in the *Formen* on the Man-Nature relation/separation. The original conditions of production are immanent to nature but not to man, this is the source of their inorganic nature. However, this classification relies on isolating the “moment of man” as essentially a moment of separation in natural history. The use of the terms organic and inorganic has a resonance with Hegelian terminology. According to Jean Hyppolite, in Hegel’s early philosophical writings there is a marked focus on conceptualising life itself (Hyppolite 1969: 10). Hegel begins to theorise life using the terms ‘organic’ and ‘inorganic’ with the vitalism of life encapsulated in the concept of organic. On the relation between the living creature and its inorganic environment Hegel states, “The organic is unmediated

6. (Marx 1965: 81): Marx states that in societies defined by the production of use-values or “the *reproduction of the individual* in definite relationships to his community [...] The chief objective condition of labour itself appears not as the *product* of labour, but occurs as nature.” (emphasis in original) The relation at the heart of labour’s realisation does not appear in its concretised form as technology within these economic formations.

7. (Marx 1965: 87): Also, Marx will employ the terms ‘laboratory’ and ‘workshop’ as analogies for how to characterise man’s early relation to nature.

power, the act which so to speak, grounds the inorganic in an organic flux” (Hyppolite 1969: 3; Hegel 1931: 118). Marx uses the terminology in a similar context, that of understanding man’s relation to the surrounding environment.

Marx attempts to investigate an originary relation between the generic terms ‘Man’ (species-being etc. not the individual bourgeois subject) and ‘Nature’. This originary condition is one of “natural unity,” with the caveat that Man relates to nature as his inorganic body i.e. there is a perceived relation of mastery within the original unity (Marx 1965: 86-87). Unity exists always already as a relation and this is why separation continues as a relation of negativity as opposed to being no relation at all.

I argue that what is “natural” for Marx is not a relationship to nature but the relationship of labour to its material pre-requisites, the objective conditions of its realisation. There is no “natural” relationship to nature - the relation is always doubled with nature being both objective conditions of production (the key to the realisation of labour) and nature in its material existence. The original relations are affirmative in character yet the seed of separation is already there (Marx 1965: 105).

As a concrete example of this relationship we can look at the conditions of primitive communalism. At an early stage we can observe, quoting Marx, “the original unity of a specific form of (tribal) community and the property in nature connected with it, or the relation to the objective conditions of production as naturally existing (*Naturda-seins*)” (Marx 1965: 94). Here the phrase “as naturally existing” gives us an example of the aforementioned doubling by isolating one of the guises under which the objective conditions of production may appear. Early nomadic people existed within a community as always united where what “is *appropriated and reproduced*... is only the herd and not the soil, which is always used in temporary commonality wherever the tribe breaks its wanderings” (Marx 1965: 89, emphasis in original). In one of Marx’s most poetic phrasings he states “the earth... appears in its elementary boundlessness” to them (Marx 1965: 88). The primary concern is the reproduction of the community as opposed to the soil.

Marx’s remarks upon tribalism and the origin of slavery are some of the most illuminating in how he thinks of the inorganic-organic relation. Slavery arises because one tribe come across the other as an organic part of the conditions of production thus, “Where man himself is captured as an organic accessory of the land and together with it, he is captured as one of the conditions of production, and this is the

origin of slavery and serfdom, which soon debase and modify the original forms of all communities, and themselves become their foundation. As a result the simple structure is thereby determined negatively” (Marx 1965: 89). The organic vitality of the captured in turn becomes a new inorganic condition of production to the new dominating social classes. The situation of the slave, or serf, is defined as one lacking in a relation to the conditions of production. Marx’s statement that such a condition can only be secondary, in development and not an original condition should be understood to resolutely imply that relation is a primary ontological condition of human existence (Marx 1965: 95).

Formulations for the Realisation of Labour 2 –On Co-Operation in the Labour Process

The separation dialectic is explicitly employed in the *Grundrisse*, however, in *Capital*, like alienation, its usage has receded. Nevertheless, I argue that Chapter 13 “Co-Operation” leaves us with the trace of its workings in the modern world. As Roman Rosdolsky has identified, the aim of co-operation in production is the extraction of relative surplus value, i.e. cheapening the cost of the individual labour unit (Rosdolsky 1977: 236). Beyond this it is important for other factors, namely the potential in complete separation present in capitalism.

Marx in the *Formen* sees separation as at the same time a potential liberation, “The process which in one way or another separated a mass of individuals from its previous affirmative relations to the *objective conditions of labour*... is also the same process which has liberated the *objective conditions of labour* potentially from *their previous ties* to the individuals which are now separated from them” (Marx 1965: 105, emphasis in original). This, I contend, essentially sets the ground for what Marx aims to show in the chapter on co-operation. Marx states the centrality of co-operation as a historical form peculiar to capitalist production as opposed to taking peculiar shape in capitalism going so far as to say that “Co-operation ever constitutes the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production...” (Marx 1990: 454). It may have pre-existed capitalism in terms of being a part of all large-scale industry but no mode of production concretely revolved around its consistent deployment prior to capitalism. By co-operation

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we mean the uniting of workers towards realisation of one plan of work. Marx had already identified the power of capital to unite the potential created by separation in the *Formen* when he stated: “*Capital unites the masses of hands and instruments which are already there. This and only this is what characterises it. It brings them together under its sway*” (Marx 1965: 111, emphasis in original). The chapter on co-operation concretely displays this unification process in capitalism and pronounces it as the “productive power inherent in capital” (Marx 1990: 451).

Matching the above quote concerning the liberation in separation to Marx’s analysis of co-operation it is possible to see the always-existing power of potential, present within labour in the capitalist mode of production. The realisation of labour has now been fully mediated by alien value, capital, but through this mediation its potential has exponentially increased. In essence labour power as potential becomes a greater power of potential the more it is separated from its realisation, the more it is immediate as labour-in-general as opposed to concrete labour. The realisation of labour takes place in mediated fashion in the capitalist mode of production and this mediation is the product of the separation of the objective conditions of production from the labourer.

Conclusion

In the *Formen* Marx makes a key reference to alienation in the following long passage unearthing what in actuality is meant by the notion of wealth:

...when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What, if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature – those of his own nature as well as those of so-called “nature”? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution – i.e. the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any *previously established* yardstick – an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of

becoming? In bourgeois political economy – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete elaboration of what lies within man, appears as the total alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purposes as the sacrifice of the end in itself to a wholly external compulsion. Hence in one way the childlike world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, in so far as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is *vulgar* and *mean*. (Marx 1965: 84-85, emphasis in original)

As a concluding thought I would suggest that alienation is specific to capitalism because only with capital can the presence of wealth reveal itself to be pure potential. Due to the complete separation of the labourer from the objective conditions of production this potential is a constantly unrealisable, shifting and becoming phenomenon constantly undermining all attempts at fixity or satisfaction. Capital unifies society but only as constant potential. That is how it alienates. Separation exists concretely as both potential and alienation united as opposites in capitalist society. It names a constant tendency in all affirmative relations while alienation is the specific phenomenal form of separation in capitalism. The separation-unity dialectic takes on a new form as and in alienation.

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