

Question: Within Marx's texts, there exists a deep contradiction: labor is presented as both our essential human activity ("species-being") and the very mechanism by which capitalism dehumanizes us. How is Marx addressing the paradox inherent in labor itself? Can revolutionary transformation fully resolve this contradiction, or does labor inherently risk some degree of alienation?

Marx's Solution to Labor's Paradox and the Limits of Revolutionary Emancipation

In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argues that, unlike animals that produce only to satisfy immediate needs, humans engage in "free, conscious activity" as an end in itself, which Marx calls our "species-character" (75). Through labor, we objectify our inner purpose and essence: "The object of labor is... the objectification of our species-life: for we see ourselves in the world we create" (76). In other words, genuine, freely undertaken labor fulfills our humanity, asserting our will and imagination, and shaping the world according to rational and artistic standards (76). This "species-essence" is also inherently social; individuals labor with shared capacities and knowledge, connecting consciously to each other and to nature (86). In a non-alienated form, labor connects individuals to each other and to nature in a conscious way. Marx later reiterates that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (491), indicating liberated labor as collective emancipation. Thus, Marx conceptually elevates labor as a fundamental human activity uniting personal fulfillment and communal well-being.

However, this ideal of labor stands in stark contrast to the reality of labor under capitalism. Instead of free creative activity, a worker is alienated from the product, the process, his own nature, and his fellows. "Labor is external to the worker... it does not belong to his essential being," Marx writes; "the worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself" (74). Labor being alienated is experienced as torment or exhaustion, something people "shun like the plague" (74). As a result, labor no longer affirms man's species-being; on the contrary, "estranged labour estranges [man] from his species-life" (77). Our advantage over animals, that free creative labor, is turned into a disadvantage, such that a human now "feels himself freely active only in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating" (74), and in his human functions, he is reduced to an animal. What's more, if the

worker is estranged from his own activity and product, he is also “estranged from other men” (77). The worker labors for this other, not for himself or for humanity. In Marx’s biting words, “the worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces” (71) – the enrichment of the capitalist world inversely impoverishes the worker’s humanity.

In Marx’s time, factory labor had deskilled artisans into repetitive machine-minders. This not only dulls the worker’s creative potential but also makes him replaceable, just another “appendage” of the factory (479). All family and gender are “instruments of labor” to capital (479). Marx emphasizes how capitalist production treats the worker as a means, not an end, essentially as a living tool. The accumulated “dead labor” of capital feeds on workers’ living labour, and the longer and harder they work, the more the “vampire” thrives (363). This image underscores that under commodity relations, labor power is something the capitalist buys and uses up for profit, literally draining the worker’s life-hours. Legally, the worker is free, but in reality, he is forced by necessity to submit to the boss’s demands or starve.

We have thus seen the tension: labor in principle is key to human freedom, yet labor in practice under capitalism enslaves and alienates. At the heart of human labor, it is "the *objectification* of the species-life of man," the free, conscious activity through which we fulfill our nature as a species-being, yet under capitalism, it becomes an alienating, dehumanizing force because it is fundamentally "commodified" by capital. Therefore, a revolutionary transformation that abolishes its commodity form would bring labor emancipation. As Marx states, "from the moment when labour can no longer be converted into capital... from that moment labour loses its estranged, oppressive character" (486). Here, Marx sees emancipation through labor by transforming its conditions, rather than without labor. The proletariat, by fighting for shorter hours, better conditions, and ultimately for revolution, is attempting to reclaim control over labor, which is historically necessary and possible. Through bitter experience, workers gain the insight and organization to revolutionize the capitalist system. In capitalist society, “living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour,” whereas in communist society, “accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer” (485).

The end goal being presented is a society in which people collectively regulate their labor to meet human needs rationally and democratically, rather than being ruled by market forces or masters. At that stage, the contradiction we started with would be resolved: the species-being aspect of labor, the creativity and purposeful activity, would then be preserved, while the alienating aspects, the coercion and exploitation, would vanish.

That said, the transformation Marx foresees is so radical that labor in a communist society would hardly resemble what we call “labor” today. The commodity character of labor would disappear. In that sense, labor is “wholly transformed” and even “*transcended*.” He describes communism as “the positive *transcendence* of private property, or human *self-estrangement*, and therefore the *real appropriation* of the human essence by and for man” Importantly, Marx calls this the resolution of the conflict “between existence and essence, between *objectification* and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity” (84). Each of these pairs speaks to the labor problem. Under alienation, existence (mere living) is separate from essence (our human potential); our objectification in labor contradicts our self-confirmation; our necessary labor to survive conflicts with our freedom. Under communism, labor will still involve necessity, but it will no longer feel like a fetter on freedom.

Of course, one can critically ask whether Marx might be overly optimistic about how completely alienation can be overcome. Is there a risk that any necessary labor, such as unpleasant tasks, will always carry some alienation? While Marx doesn’t tackle in detail the day-to-day of labor in communism, he implies that shared ownership and rotation of tasks would mitigate this. The fundamental premise is that if labor is truly freely associated, it ceases to feel alien even when difficult, because one understands its purpose and performs it by conscious choice as part of a community. Whether this is fully achievable or an asymptotic ideal is debatable, and indeed, this very need for a revolutionary transformation suggests how deep the contradiction runs. Marx would assert that alienation is not an eternal condition but specific to certain social relations, abolished once those relations are transformed. However, this optimistic resolution raises questions that Marx did not fully answer, and which I found myself pondering: even in a post-capitalist society, will all necessary labor, such as producing food, building infrastructure, and caring

for the sick, be inherently fulfilling and free of alienation? While Marx might suggest that, democratically, no one working for another's profit removes alienation, the material reality of labor would still exist. This presents a tension in Marx's vision: he stresses the contradiction is historical, implying it can be overcome, yet his view of productive activity as almost synonymous with human essence might romanticize labor. Ultimately, this vision embodies Marx's enduring promise: a harmonious bringing together of the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, achieved by transforming how and for whom we labor. Modern capitalist society still vividly presents this dual face of labor, celebrating work as noble and self-discovered even as countless jobs are tedious or exploitative. The contradiction Marx highlighted is therefore very much alive, but so too is the hope he placed in collective action and change, urging us to envision a world where producing, creating, and working are not antonyms of freedom and fulfillment but their very vehicles.