Anarchism in the Wake of Marx: 
Subjectivity, Self-Activity, and Emancipation

Abstract:

This paper takes up several central ideas in Marx concerning human beings, self-activity, and alienation, drawing especially from the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. While Marx has been related in the academic literature to both classical anarchism and broader theories of resistance, I argue that his humanism has more in common with the “post-anarchism” of proponents such as Saul Newman and Todd May. Utilizing commentary from psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and contemporary philosopher Kenneth Stikkers, I link together Marx’s humanism and the post-anarchist critique of classical anarchism to outline what an effective form of resistance might look like. The result is an experimental, non-ideological praxis which allows for the generation of new subjectivities within given networks of power. This project, by closely examining the role of subjectivity in Marx, anarchism, and post-anarchism, sheds new light on resistance to capitalist alienation and the emancipation from capital.

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Man’s Creation of Himself

The alienation of labor is not an economic category, but rather it is a condition of subjectivity which manifests as a result of the historical and material forces of the capitalist mode of production. The problem of alienation can be and has been formulated in many different ways. Alienated labor is dehumanizing, it inhibits the development of personality, it prevents man from being what he ought to be. All of that is true, though the project at hand will add as a central concern that it also gives rise to forms of oppression wherein man is enslaved to the work of his own production. As such, resistance to such oppression must also be a resistance to alienation.

If we sympathize with Marx in saying that man creates the world through labor, that he constitutes his own self through the act of production, and that the nature of the production process determines the nature of man, then we must pay special attention to labor. Labor cannot simply be something man does. On the contrary, labor establishes part of what man is.

The worker creates a world with his hands. And here is the important part: He uses the tools he is given. He operates in a given context. He works in a given location, both physically but also socially and phenomenologically. While man creates his world, the world is simultaneously given to him. The limits of his being and all its possibilities take place upon a conditional background, a social milieu which shapes man as he shapes himself. The organization of labor and the structure of production, then, existing as part of this milieu, determines the kind of world which man can create.

This is the cornerstone of Marx’s historical materialism. In The German Ideology, Marx writes, “As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production.” Labor is the active expression of man as a creative being. This expression is not simply contained in the product—it is insofar as we say that the artist is in the painting or the musician is in the song—but it occurs in the process just as well. The doing of the work reveals the nature of man as does its tangible result.

The Human in History

The twentieth century German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, whose book Marx’s Concept of Man is perhaps the greatest explication of Marx’s humanism to have come to the Anglophone

world, followed this line of thought closely. “Labor is the expression of human life,” Fromm writes, “and through labor man’s relationship to nature changes, hence through labor man changes himself.” Man appropriates nature and forges tools from it for his production. The character of human work determines the place that humans have in, and the relation that they have to, nature. It is by this quality that “man changes himself.” By productively changing his relationship to nature, man changes the material conditions which, in turn, take part in constituting him as a subject.

This relationship between man and nature is also the relationship between man and history. Influenced by the writings of Hegel, particularly the unfolding of the dialectic in his philosophy of history, Marx saw man and history intertwined. Frustrated by the idealism of Hegel, however, Marx’s philosophy of history is bound up with a materialism that begins with real, living subjects and the conditions in which they exist.

There is a temptation to interpret Marx’s historical materialism as a sort of philosophy of predetermination. While Hegel envisioned a closed system with all of world history being a small part of a larger scheme, Marx identifies human nature in a specific instance of history, unfinished, open to change, constantly in motion. Marx does not see man as a passive subject carried along through time by the current of history. Fromm explains this point well: He writes, "Yet, man does change in the course of history; he develops himself; he transforms himself, he is the product of history; since he makes his history, he is his own product. History is the history of man's self-realization; it is nothing but the self-creation of man through the process of his work and his production." It is important to note that “self-realization” is not a recovery of some part of ourselves that is lost. Rather, it is a realization of something that has never been, a “not yet,” or, in Marx’s later language, the end of prehistory and the beginning of history.

Already we have seen that labor is the way in which man expresses himself creatively. Labor also reveals the relationship between man and nature, man and history—a dialectic which moves toward the self-realization of humanity. One more point must be made which will carry our analysis forward. An important feature of Marx’s historical materialism is that it illuminates both the dangers of the culture of capitalism in which we find ourselves today as well as the hope for one in which the common man is fulfilled. Fromm explains a tenet of historical materialism this way: “[Historical materialism] claims that the way man produces determines his thinking and his desires [...] Certain economic conditions, like those of capitalism, produce as a chief incentive the desire for money and property; other economic systems can produce exactly the opposite desires...” What this draws our attention to is the fact that material conditions

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3 Ibid., 26. Emphasis mine.

penetrate down to the level of subjectivity. We must bear this in mind in all discussions regarding how to overcome and move beyond capitalism and its oppressions.

Here we see that alienation, subjectivity, and self-activity come together in a sort of double-character. Alienation penetrates subjectivity, but it nonetheless emerges from subjectivity. Human activity is conditioned, but those conditions are the result of human activity. There is dialectic between the givenness of material conditions and the fact that they are created. The conditions we must escape are the work of our own hands.

**Capitalism’s Link to Alienation**

To move our analysis forward, we must look at how material conditions operate on the level of subjectivity. In short, capitalism alienates the worker from the products of his labor. For Marx, labor is intended to be an expressive activity. As Fromm points out, “Marx originally called man's function 'self-activity,' not labor, and spoke of the 'abolition of labor' as the aim of socialism. Later, when he differentiated between free and alienated labor, he used the term 'emancipation of labor.'” In fact, this line of thought is prevalent throughout Marx’s entire corpus, from the *1844 Manuscripts* to *Capital*. Marx envisioned a state of the world in which work functioned as a fulfilling act of productively grasping and participating in the world, even in its very constitution.

What exactly is it that labor needs emancipated from? In his article “Emancipation from Capital,” philosopher Kenneth Stikkers claims that “capitalism might be defined, too, as an economic system wherein capital hires labor, as opposed to those systems, such as worker cooperatives, wherein labor owns capital.” He also employs Robert Heilbroner’s definition of capitalism as a “regime of capital” where the social fabric of society is ruled by the power and temptation of capital accumulation. According to Stikkers, the defining feature of capital is that man as worker submits himself to the needs of capital. Labor within capitalism might be thought of as a form of servitude.

Stikkers illuminates the dangers of this relation between capital and labor by identifying what he calls, following Weber’s analysis of “spirit,” the *capital form*. He asserts that “the ‘capital form’ is a worldview that sees everything—living and non-living—as means for profit-making, that is, as capital.” Here is the crux of alienation. Upon the cultural background of the

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5 Fromm, 40.


7 Ibid., 91.
capital form, man sees himself as capital. Labor loses its expressive and creative facilities wherein man productively constitutes his own subjectivity and instead becomes consumed in the process of material production. When labor exists for the purposes of capital, man worships the things he himself has made. He no longer feels the creation of himself through his work and becomes a stranger to the work of his own hands.

Furthermore, the human view of the self as capital solidifies the creation of the worker as a commodity. He is objectified in his service to labor and loses part of himself in the process. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx writes that “the more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself [...] The greater his activity, therefore, the less he possesses. [...] The greater this product is, therefore, the more he is diminished.”

For Marx, alienated labor is separation from the activity of creative self-expression and thus estrangement from one’s own self. That is, alienation operates at a level beyond that of a mere economic or sociological category. Indeed, Marx affirms that “the culmination of this enslavement is that he [the worker] can only maintain himself as a physical subject so far as he is a worker, and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a worker.” Labor fails to be the activity of a spiritually free being and is instead the process of transforming it into a commodity.

To further demonstrate this momentous point, Marx writes that "Production does not only produce man as a commodity, the commodity-man, man in the form of a commodity; in conformity with this situation it produces him as a mentally and physically dehumanized being [...] Its product is the self-conscious and self-acting commodity . . . the human commodity." Capitalism furnishes the historical and material conditions in which man becomes an oppressor of himself. The history of capitalism is a history of man’s increasing alienation. This is why Fromm is correct in stating that Marx’s concept of socialism “is the emancipation from alienation, the return of man to himself, his self-realization.” Any resistance to capitalism must be formulated on the grounds of this self-realization. For human fulfillment to be attained, we have to consider the historical and material conditions of what will have been, the future.

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8 Fromm has a beautiful passage comparing alienation with the Old Testament idea of idolatry. Cf. Fromm, 44-45.

9 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, published in Fromm, 96.

10 Ibid., 97. Emphasis his.

11 Ibid., 111.

12 Fromm, 43.
as our starting point. Whether by Marx’s socialism or by another cultural system, the liberated man will be one which will create himself in his work rather than destroy himself in his servitude.

Moving Beyond Anarchism to Anarchism

What does any of this have to do with anarchism, and why does this analysis of alienation signal the need for post-anarchism? To understand the discontent and the innovations of the post-anarchists, it is necessary to draw out the core principles of classical anarchism, associated with figures such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, as a matter of contrast. Here I will argue that the failure of classical anarchism rests upon a faulty conception of power and that post-anarchism, specifically drawing from Saul Newman and Todd May, overcomes this problem by formulating a philosophy which focuses its attention on subjectivity rather than abstraction.

Classical anarchism, like the majority of radical political theories and practices of the past, exists as a program of Revolution. That is, the goal of classical anarchism is to liberate the individual from the oppressive power of a governing State. The same can be said of the state-socialist regimes of the twentieth century, which often paid lip service to the works of Marx, and of other examples throughout history. While certainly different than the Revolution of state-socialists, classical anarchism still seeks to replace the oppressive sovereign institution of the governing State with a non-oppressive ideal arrangement of society. There is a telos, a goal in mind. Revolution is the means to Anarchy. This idea of the Revolution poses several problems which I believe post-anarchism best addresses.

The first problem stems from the idea of the human as possessing an essential nature. Classical anarchism often inherits an Enlightenment idea of natural human benevolence. The oppressive arrangements of the State are simply inferior to those of reason and rationality—this is something many of us can agree upon—but many anarchists have thought that this is due largely to misplaced values. State institutions not only suppress the possibilities of human agency with their coercive power, but they also impede upon the very nature of the human person as a fundamentally good and social being. Kropotkin’s mutual aid was seen to be just as much of a part of our natural makeup as Darwin’s competitiveness. The Revolution for the classical anarchist is a struggle against institutions’ misuse of power. Anarchy, then, is the outcome of successful arrangements of human nature.

This description of classical anarchism may not sound different from the way in which I have described Marx above. Whether it be the State or something else, a specific ordering of society prevents an otherwise unobstructed, good human being from realizing himself. And just as Anarchy is the outcome of successful arrangements of human nature, many have interpreted Marx’s socialism as being analogous.
While I will not dismiss these interpretations and comparisons as existing without merit, I do believe that there are subtle (or, perhaps, well-hidden) differences which put the humanist Marx at odds with classical anarchism and which perhaps make the Marxist project more compatible with the philosophy of post-anarchism. I do not believe that Marx thinks of the human subject as naturally benevolent, corrupted only by a powerful institution standing in its way. In fact, his insistence on historical materialism over Hegel’s idealism leaves no doubt that, for Marx, man’s nature is an instance of history. Similarly, socialism for Marx is a condition for human fulfillment and not the outcome of such. We will examine this in more detail below, but we must arrive there by contrasting the anarchist and post-anarchists views of power.

**Power and Subjectivity**

An incomplete conception of power is largely to blame for the Revolution described above. Philosopher Todd May draws distinctions among three types of political philosophies: formal, strategic, and tactical. The first is theoretical, attempting to determine what the good society ought to be like. The second involves a political program which aims toward a single goal. The resulting reducibility envisages power as a series of concentric circles, as May illustrates, such that the problems of society originate from one major source or “base.” This is what makes the Revolution necessary to all revolutionary types. If that core of the problems can be dismantled or transformed, society would have rid itself of its leviathan.

The third type of political philosophy, tactical philosophy, is that which post-anarchism embodies. Tactical political philosophy views power as irreducible. That is, power is seen as a series of networks that happen, as Foucault said, both to the bottom and at the bottom. In fact, it is Foucault who teaches us that each person is a site of power and that power is more of a relationship than it is a directed force. “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere,” he writes in the *History of Sexuality*. Power is something that we take up and embody as an intensity rather than as a property. It is often creative and constituent rather than being inherently suppressive of some human essence.

Classical anarchists, through their abstractions, see classes of both people and power. They see universals where Marx’s humanism and the post-anarchists’ philosophy asks us to see individuals. We must not forget that the person, constituted through history, is also a site of power, connected through social and material networks. Just as we said that economic and

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material conditions penetrate subjectivity, we can say that power, in its productive and directive capacities also operates and is in fact embodied in subjectivity.

**Power and Resistance**

Taking into account the notion of power as a network of embodiments while simultaneously shifting the emphasis of resistance to the human person rather than on the prefigurative ideal arrangement of society, post-anarchism eschews the idea of a program lead by anarchy as a telos and rather begins with anarchist praxis, suspending any idea of a telos and favoring experimental processes instead.

In his book *Postanarchism*, Saul Newman writes, “Postanarchism is anarchism that starts, rather than necessarily ends, with anarchy.”12 Contrary to classical anarchism, it does not establish a projected end and the means to which we might be able to reach the ideal society. Instead, the means of postanarchism are its ends. The idea is that as power is channeled in various ways through everyday practices, man begins to regain the productive and creative qualities of his work and thus begins to liberate himself.

This experimental praxis, although non-ideological, nonetheless aims at Marx’s vision of the self-realization of humanity. Post-anarchism emphasizes the role of the person in history rather than an abstract concept of the ideal society. Its revolutionary character lies in the generation of new subjectivities. It centers a critique around the subject as a site of power and history without being completely individualistic, and it constructs a set of practices from the insights found there.

Newman proposes the idea of a “singularity,” a subject opaque to certain institutions of power. He writes, “Postanarchist subjects today, in their resistance to regimes of visibility and representation, carve out a terrain of life and a form of existence which is ungovernable to the extent that it is opaque to power.”16 The singularity is the subject which, in effect, has control over the types and instances of power that they encounter, embody, and reflect. It is a subject who is aware of their social-historical conditioning but which refuses to be determined and subjected by it. What it means to resist is to possess a certain control over one’s subjectivity while affirming the constituent nature and inescapability of power.

The opaqueness to power is rooted in the double-character of alienation outlined at the beginning of this paper. At any instant, the individual has a sort of radical freedom. But at any same instant, everything is already determined. The singularity finds neither of these conditions

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16 Ibid., 18.
to be satisfactory and becomes aware that at every second we are conditioned, but we are not completely caught. We know this because the conditions themselves were the result of human action. Opaque ness is the capacity to do—through experimental praxis—something not given by these conditions, and thus the singularity is a person who does not altogether resist the constituency of power but rather refuses to let it determine him.

The whole idea behind experimental praxis is that human nature is not a closed system. While human nature is conditioned by historical and material forces, it is not determined by them. This is the conclusion of everything we have been leading up to. The singularity is an autonomous, self-creating subject who, through experimental praxis, generates new subjectivities which are opaque to power.

The post-anarchists show us that resistance to the material conditions of alienated labor which capitalism creates must first consider subjectivity and the way power functions upon it. To overcome the problem of alienation and emancipate the act of production from capital, resistance must happen first in the relations of our normal, everyday lives. Marx’s socialism, following this, cannot be instituted upon the overthrow of an existing regime, even the regime of capital. Instead, our self-realization is a development through history, or prehistory — a history which we ourselves create.

Conclusion

Spatial considerations prevent me from fleshing out a conclusion in great detail, so I will offer only a few remarks.

By now, scholars of Marx have grown weary of hearing his oft-repeated adage concerning philosophers who have hitherto only interpreted the world and the task before us now of changing it. But the question remains: How can we go about accomplishing this task? And if we were to rid ourselves of capitalism, would our work as revolutionaries be complete?

If we could eavesdrop on a conversation between Marx and the post-anarchists, I think the consensus would be that, to change our world, we have to change history. And to change history, we have to change ourselves. History, after all, is the history of our successes, our failures, and the individual practices which continually constitute the fabric of our lives. As such, our work can never be done. Our self-realization will have only been the beginning of another kind of history.

Stikkers writes that the “emancipation from capital begins […] with those things of beauty, including gestures of kindness, friendship, and love, that remind us of our humanity and
reaffirm those values within that humanity that transcend those of capital and even life itself.”

I have a difficult time coming up with better words on which to conclude. Our resistance must take the form of everyday praxis and the generation of new subjectivities through our work. The world, in effect, creates us. We must not forget that it is also up to us to create our world.

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17 Stikkers, 96.
Bibliography


