One does not often hear serious discussion of human emancipation these days, and yet the idea is at the core of critical thinking about the human condition, and remains the ultimate goal of truly transformative politics. Although a range of issues concerning political liberty emerged earlier in the modern age, and some can be traced back still earlier through the history of popular struggles and the history of political thought, it really was in the era of the French Revolution and its aftermath that the question of human emancipation as such came to the fore. While other thinkers contributed to understanding the issues, it remains particularly the theoretical achievements of the young Karl Marx that help illuminate what human emancipation entails, and how it is to be achieved.

The modern problem of emancipation

Marx grew up in Trier, an ancient and formerly free Rhineland city that embraced the French Revolution, but which, due to the defeat of Bonaparte shortly before his birth, was subjected to the reactionary rule of the Prussia. Marx’s father had been compelled to set aside his Enlightenment principles, and formally abandon his Jewish identity to become a Lutheran, in order to continue his career in law. Karl himself, a brilliant and philosophical youth, was from an early age deeply committed to a radical realization of freedom. Frustrating his father by turning towards philosophy and away from a career in law, then abandoning even the pretence of legal studies after his father died, Marx devoted himself as student, journalist, and activist to clarifying the meaning of human emancipation and how it was to be achieved. As was also the case for virtually every other thinker and activist of the time, the immediate and inescapable starting point

for Marx’s ideas required coming to terms with the politics, objectives, and limitations of the French Revolution.

In its opposition first to aristocratic privilege, and then to monarchy, the politics of the Revolution revolved about issues of liberty, equality, and sociality.² The radical Jacobins conceived the Revolution in terms of a fundamentally political emancipation, and the lawyers, office holders, and professionals who constituted their majority came to understand this almost entirely in terms of building a democratically representative republican “Nation.” They saw their mission as – and increasingly they became – functionaries of the state as a revolutionary instrument devoted to instilling democratic republican citizenship. This project of realizing a republic in accord with Rousseau’s conception, embodying the “General Will” of the people, went far beyond the relatively mild forms of previous liberal politics, from the most tentative of original revolutionaries through the moderate Girondins.³

Yet from the perspective of the still more radical popular movement in the Revolution, which embraced not only direct democracy, but increasingly also ideas of social equality – political tendencies that culminated in Gracchus Babeuf’s “Conspiracy of Equals” – even the most radical Jacobins fell far short of advocating true emancipation. Babeuf’s ideas in turn constituted a key contribution of the French Revolution to the development of “socialism” in the first half of the 19th century. Indeed, it was in reference to raising “the social question” that a distinctive radical politics emerged within the broad “left” – comprising democratic, republican, and even merely liberal-constitutionalist ideologies – defined by a shared opposition to absolute monarchy following the Revolution.

It was in this context that, by early 1844, it had become clear to Marx that both the social question and the political notion of power⁴

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4. This is the term Jean Bruhat used (in “La Révolution française et la formation de la pensée de Marx,” Annales historique de la Révolution française, XXXVIII (2) 1966, p. 141) to describe the focus of Marx’s interest during the first half of 1844, a period of “preoccupation” with the radically Jacobin Convention of 1792–94. At
urgently had to be addressed, and he simultaneously undertook the critique of political economy and a close study of the radical politics of the French Revolution. It was also in this period, after completing his articles for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* he had edited with Arnold Ruge, that Marx definitively abandoned the idea that human emancipation was either a project of philosophy or a collaboration between philosophy and the proletariat. From the spring of 1844 onwards, Marx was clear that the emancipation of humanity belonged to a historical process grounded in the development of social relations (the material history of social humanity), and that the processes of class struggle that drove and informed the realization of real emancipation emerged from the interests of the working class in their immediate character as “common humanity,” and not from philosophy.

Indeed, in examining Marx’s manuscripts and texts from 1843 through mid-1844, we can discern – in language that is sometimes daunting in its dense philosophical analysis, if also at times poignant, scathing, or breathtaking in its vision – the process through which his immanent critique of both Hegel and the philosophy of the Young Hegelians culminated in his transcending the idea that philosophy was action. This new stance was most famously articulated in Marx’s eleventh “Thesis on Feuerbach” the following year: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”5 What, then, we are led to ask, is the form of change that is necessary – what is the nature of the emancipation that must be achieved?

That even the most conservative forms of liberalism still embodied genuine elements of emancipation was due to the legacy of feudalism. At the core of the “feudal revolution” that swept the territories of Charlemagne’s empire (*circa* 1000 CE) and spread from there, was a reduction of virtually all previously free persons to a status of time, Marx wrote to Arnold Ruge of his plan to write a history of the Convention, and he urged the publication in *Vorwärts* of excerpts from the memoirs of the Jacobin René Levasseur, which he had studied. While it is important to take note of this interest in the radical politics of revolution, his most significant work in this period was undoubtedly the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which he first developed the critique of political economy. The brief notes on Levasseur, however, were his only writings on the French Revolution proper, aside from passages in such other political works as the *Communist Manifesto* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In moving ever more decisively beyond the politics of the French Revolution, he also moved beyond studying it as such.

unfreedom. This followed from the sudden appropriation of all sovereign powers of state authority by great landlords, who constituted themselves in a directly political sense as lords not only over tenants of their own properties, but also over all who lived nearby.6 This transformation wiped out the surviving traces of a public sphere, first established in the ancient world, in which free men (if only men) enjoyed political rights, and were protected in their freedom. In the early modern period, after the demise of feudalism in the mid 15th century, re-establishment of a meaningful public sphere – accompanied by much debate over constitutional forms, legal rights, and the proper limits of sovereign power – emerged as the most fundamental and enduring issue of politics within the dominant classes. The circumscribed limits of this project of minimal political emancipation were, however, blown open by the experience of the Revolution.

In light of this historical contextualization, emancipation in its broadest sense can be seen to be a particular political project of the modern age. The politics of the ancient world had been characterized in fundamental ways by the possession of liberty (though of course many were excluded from it). With the introduction of feudalism proper, however, citizenship and liberty were extinguished for the great majority of even the formerly free male population relative to lordly bearers of sovereign power.

The republics and republicanism of late medieval Italy were neither ancient survivals nor prematurely modern political forms, but historically specific developments of the Middle Ages integrally connected to the feudal societies to the north.7 It is telling that in the wake of the Renaissance, Italian cities generally lost their ascendancy even within the peninsula, and slipped into a long political somnolence. Early in the modern era, few other than the Swiss had won back the essentially republican form of liberty characteristic of the ancient world,8 liberty that was thereafter jealously preserved in

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8. Even in the period of the Empire, both in theory and generally in practice, Roman citizens enjoyed protection of their liberty under law, and the state in principle remained “the public thing” – the literal meaning of res publica.
their cantons. It is because of the general imposition of unfreedom during the Middle Ages, and the limited extent to which emancipation had since been realized, that the Genevan Rousseau was prompted to confront the conundrum that men were born free, yet everywhere were in chains.

Simultaneously, at the level of culture, there emerged in “the Enlightenment” a growing rejection of superstition and revealed faith as the basis for public discourse and the regulation of public activity. The feudalism of the Middle Ages devolved upon the Church virtually complete control over culture – regulation of morality, legitimate ideas, the forms of social intercourse, artistic expression, acceptable knowledge – while the lords enjoyed almost untrammeled political power as bearers of the sword. As issues of public rights and freedom re-emerged, so also did challenges to the power of the Church. Contrary to much recent opinion, this cannot be reduced to a single dimension of modern discourse, such as liberalism – neither Voltaire nor de Sade can in any way be said to have been liberals, nor is it easy even to reconcile Rousseau with specifically liberal ideas. The emancipation of thought and cultural production during the modern era took many and varied forms, framed within a broad rejection of received knowledge, leading to the profound displacement of religion as guardian of ideas, values, and legitimacy.

Nor can the modern era be associated with a single form of social and economic development. As Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood have demonstrated, capitalism did not develop across Europe, but uniquely in England; and not in the context of town life, but in agriculture.9 In France, by contrast, the social property relations of modern era increasingly took the form of politically constituted property within the monarchy, centered upon increasingly formal property rights in personally owned, heritable, and saleable “public” offices, supplanting the immediately political property form of territorial sovereignty characteristic of the feudal era. This led to a society characterized by intense bureaucratism and statism – unlike both feudal society and

modern England – with intense and frequent struggles over interests that were simultaneously “political” and “economic.”

States and property after the French Revolution

It is in this light that we must interpret the “nation building” that the Jacobins undertook as professional administrators of the Republic. With every major political development between the calling of the Estates General in 1788 and the consolidation of Bonaparte’s Empire, the number of state officials grew. Much like the absolutist monarchy of the old régime, this burgeoning apparatus of power both played a vital role in the social and economic life of France, and provided income and career to the already rich and powerful, the talented and ambitious, and the merely comfortable bourgeoisie.\(^\text{10}\) This is evident in Marx’s commentary on the state at the founding of the Second Empire by Louis Bonaparte:

> the executive power commands an army of officials numbering more than half a million individuals and therefore constantly maintains an immense mass of interests and livelihoods in the most absolute dependence; where the state enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends, and tutors civil society from its most comprehensive manifestations of life down to its most insignificant stirrings, from its most general modes of being to the private existence of individuals; where through the most extraordinary centralization this parasitic body acquires a ubiquity, an omniscience, a capacity for accelerated mobility, and an elasticity which finds a counterpart only in the helpless dependence, the loose shapelessness of the actual body politic... But it is precisely with the maintenance of that extensive state machine in its numerous ramifications that the material interests of the French bourgeoisie are interwoven in the closest fashion. Here it finds posts for its surplus population and makes up in the form of state salaries for what it cannot pocket in the form of profit, interest, rents, and honorariums.\(^\text{11}\)

It is striking to what extent, not only in this passage but throughout the work, Marx identifies the material interests of the French dominant classes in terms of finance, state incomes, and rents, and the slight extent to which any industrial bourgeoisie is even noted, let alone credited with a significant role. Moreover, Marx clearly identified the peasantry as bearing the burden of supporting the dominant classes through their astounding level of mortgage indebtedness, together with the heavy taxes that were the “life source” of the apparatuses of

\(^{10}\) See Comninel, \textit{Rethinking the French Revolution}.

\(^{11}\) Karl Marx, \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon} (online), Ch. 4.
state.\textsuperscript{12} The French state, through its successive absolutist, Republican, and Bonapartist forms, erected an ever more stupendous edifice of administration, rule, and war – nominally for the good of the people, or the glory and General Will of the Nation, but always on the backs of impoverished peasant masses, and to the great benefit of its architects and overseers.

There were, then, different paths of social and political development in the modern era, emerging from the Middle Ages in accord with the historical specificities of each country. In Italy, robust industry and commercial dominance, together with strong republican institutions, subsided into undistinguished centuries of aristocratic dominance over sharecropping peasant tenants, aside from a few surviving enclaves of commerce. France and England increasingly diverged as a result of fundamentally different feudal forms.\textsuperscript{13} In France, the central state developed as a means for politically constituted property to appropriate peasant surplus. England, however, became the unique locus for the development of agrarian capitalism, from which its generalized industrial form subsequently developed, with considerable direct assistance from the state.\textsuperscript{14} Not only, then, were the forms of state different in different European societies, but the differences directly reflected structures of social property relations through which class exploitation was realized.

In 1843, Engels first distinguished England as having priority in the sphere of the economic; France, with priority in the political; and Germany, in the philosophical. He drew out this idea specifically in relation to how the doctrine of communism emerged in each country.\textsuperscript{15} This focus on ideas is telling: socialists in England were driven to communist ideas “practically, by the rapid increase of misery, demoralisation, and pauperism in their own country,” with little awareness of the ideas and movements on the Continent. French socialists instead came to the same conclusion “politically, by first asking for political liberty and equality; and, finding this insufficient, joining social liberty, and social equality to their political claims.” Since, however, “the Germans became Communists philosophically, by reasoning upon first principles,” it is not hard to appreciate

\begin{thebibliography}{15}
\bibitem{12} Ibid., Ch. 7.
\bibitem{13} Cominelli, “English Feudalism.”
\bibitem{14} See Michael Zmolek, \textit{Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: An Inquiry into the Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in Britain}, Ph.D. Diss., York University, Toronto, 2008.
\end{thebibliography}
that this development was not grounded in the economic or political experiences of working people. This German priority in philosophy was associated by both Engels and Marx with its priority in the development of modern theology.\textsuperscript{16} Not only did Germany produce the Reformation, but almost immediately the ideas of religious reform were appropriated by German peasants, with the radical preacher Thomas Münzer as leader, to justify demands for social equality, elimination of private property, and an end to the right of political power over others.\textsuperscript{17} Luther exploded in vituperation against this presumption that a return to original Christian values might thus be applied to social life outside the ecclesiastical structure, and exhorted those in power to “Kill them like dogs!”

The role of religion alongside property and political power as a specific form of oppression was particularly clear in Germany. The Holy Alliance of 1815 brought together the Christian states of Orthodox Russia, Catholic Austria, and Lutheran Prussia – with tacit support from Anglican-dominated Britain – to suppress the liberal, democratic, and socialist ideas that emerged during the French Revolution. Then, in pursuit of a more complete Christian union, Frederick William III forced a merger of Lutheran and Calvinist faiths in Prussia, generating not only resistance from “Old Lutherans” who rejected the apparent incorporation of Calvinist doctrine, but a profound awareness of the politicization of religious belief. Whereas the French state, both during the Revolution, and after the overthrow of the restored Legitimist Bourbon monarchy in July 1830, stood opposed to the claims of the Church, while in Britain the established Church was becoming ever less significant to the state, the absolutism of the Prussian state was manifestly grounded in a re-confirmation of faith.

It is this confluence of religious oppression, political oppression, and the suppression of all “socialist” ideas challenging inequality and immiseration that provided the context for the development of Marx’s ideas with respect to the meaning of human emancipation. Since his youth, he had become increasingly critical of oppression in each of these forms. Forced by state censorship in 1843 from his position as editor of the \textit{Rheinische Zeitung}, he returned to a critical reading of Hegel’s \textit{Philosophy of Right} to clarify his thought.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 400; Karl Marx, \textit{Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844}, MECW, vol. 3, pp. 182, 290.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Engels, “Progress of Social Reform,” p. 400.
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Marx’s critique of Hegelian philosophy in 1843

Marx had initially rejected the philosophy of Hegel – the comfortable academic who provided an apologia for the Prussian monarchy – but subsequently found himself drawn to the “Young Hegelians,” who pursued an atheist and materialist re-grounding of Hegel’s original historical conception of social totality. Recognizing humanity in its collectivity as the real embodiment of consciousness in the universe, Hegel brought together philosophy, religion, and history to conceive the development of humanity as the realization of the divine in the world over historical time. Without reprising the complex developmental unity of his thought, its key contribution was the way he incorporated into philosophy the already pervasive liberal conception of history as progress. Where the philosophy of Aristotle conceived the world in fundamentally fixed terms, and the telos of a thing was simply the end towards which it developed within this given frame, Hegel conceived the social whole – indeed, the whole of humanity – in terms of its development as a totality through history, through discernible stages of growing realization and increasing complexity, towards a final form of fully realized human potential.

Where political economy in England conceived progress largely in terms of economic development, and political ideology in France saw it in terms of historical class struggles, progress found its expression in Germany primarily in philosophical terms, culminating in reconciliation with the Prussian theocratic monarchy. In opposition to Hegel’s accommodation with the monarchy,19 the Young Hegelians sought to turn his ideas against the reactionary state. It was this combination of theoretical sophistication with a left political agenda that attracted Marx, despite his initial distaste for Hegel.

Hegel’s work elaborated upon the longstanding philosophical (and theological) concept of alienation, particularly pursuing the integration of its sense of the sale of property with a more profound sense that involved personal identity, informed by the idea of being a “stranger” to God.20 The Young Hegelians turned this conception back against Hegel’s concessions to Prussian official religion, articulating the view that religious belief constituted alienation from our own humanity. In this critical conception of alienation, putting faith in an imaginary divinity was a denial of our own responsibility for the forms of life

19. This is not to say that there were not, implicit in Hegel’s work, significant points that looked beyond the existing absolutist state. What he did not do, however, was elaborate such points in explicit criticism of the existing state.
and achievements that we realize in and through the social whole. In
the course of worship, “religion alienates our own nature from us,” 21
we project the potency of our own collective existence as something
apart, a divine “other” to which we are subject – a subjection made
palpable in subordination to religious authorities, and particularly to
the “holy” form of the monarchy. Rejecting the conservative view
that human freedom and rationality, as conceived by Hegel, had
already been realized in the Prussian state (however explicit his texts
seemed on that point), the Young Hegelians sought to make reason
and emancipation real.

For the most part, as is especially evident in Bruno Bauer’s book
_The Jewish Question_ (1873), they conceived the emancipation of human-
ity in terms of its release from religious alienation. The authority of the
Prussian state was said to be grounded in religion, and it directed
much of its attention towards religious issues. The philosophical
freedom of humanity from the alienation of religion, embodied in the
freedom of the state from religion, would result in realization of
freedom in the republic, or _Freistaat_. It was this reduction of human
emancipation to nothing more than achieving the merely political
objective of the French Revolution – the “free state” rather than free
humanity – that elicited Marx’s caustic criticism of Bauer in the first
part of “On _The Jewish Question._” 22 He concluded this critique by
demanding a great deal more:

All emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to man
himself.
Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of
civil society, to an egoistic, independent individual, and, on the other hand, to a
citizen, a juridical person.
Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen,
and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday
life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man
has recognized and organized his “forces propres” as social powers, and, conse-
quently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political
power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished. 23

In his first published work of theory, then, Marx declared the need to
go beyond the “merely political” politics of the French Revolution:
human emancipation required the transformation of our “own
powers” into a truly social form.

Publications, 2008), Ch. 25.
Among the Young Hegelians, however, Moses Hess had begun to take the idea of alienation an important step further, in ideas best known from *The Essence of Money* (1845). Hess had first advanced this approach in a Swiss publication of 1843 that contained pieces by several Young Hegelians, as well as Frederick Engels, and Marx’s critique of Bauer was directed towards a piece in this collection as well as toward *The Jewish Question*. As Hess articulated his ideas in 1845, he conceived “the human essence” to be “the collaboration of individuals of the human species” in the social whole of life activity, and he saw in money the alienation (estrangement) of humans from that essence, in terms drawn from the critique of religion:

in the old mutual estrangement of men, an external symbol had to be invented to represent the spiritual and material exchange of products. Through this abstraction from real, spiritual and living intercourse the capacity, the creative force of men was increased during their estrangement; in other words, they found in this abstract means of intercourse a mediating essence for their own estrangement; they had to seek the unifying essence outside of themselves, i.e., an inhuman, super-human essence, since they were not men, i.e., were not united. Without this inhuman means of intercourse they would never have entered into intercourse. But as soon as men unite, as soon as a direct intercourse between them can take place the inhuman, external, dead means of intercourse must necessarily be abolished.

In the second part of “On *The Jewish Question*,” referring specifically to Bauer’s piece in the Swiss collection, Marx developed a critique of money as alienation in conjunction with his critique of merely political emancipation. In passages that are too often misread because their subject is not the question of Jews as such, but rather the preoccupation with money that Christianity created and imposed as the day-to-day meaning of being “Jewish,” Marx’s point is that this preoccupation with money has finally reached its highest development in bourgeois society “under the dominance of Christianity.” In this sense, he argues, Christians have themselves become “Jews” (as, he notes ironically, it was Jews who first became Christians). The real object of emancipation, therefore, is not the merely political freedom of the secular state – which is insufficient even to end the religious form of alienation – but achievement of social life without the alienation from ourselves embodied in the pursuit of money.

In this first of his published “early works,” therefore, Marx advanced a philosophical position that went beyond the Jacobinism of the French Revolution and explicitly incorporated “the social question.” He had, however, already developed an even more far-reaching contribution to the idea of emancipation than that contained in “On The Jewish Question,” marking, indeed, a remarkably original and profound contribution to political theory. Through his return to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right earlier in 1843, Marx had come to appreciate that the state as such was inherently a form of human alienation.

This point emerges through his critique of Hegel’s ideas in relation to their fawning embrace of the Prussian monarchy. At one level, Hegel’s claims do go beyond merely legitimizing or apologizing for that monarchy, but in their toadying they are immediately open to the most cutting criticism, which Marx did his best to provide. In taking these ideas seriously, however, Marx moves from Hegel’s assertion that “the general interest” is the purpose of the state, to its implications for the nature of the constitution. Here, where Hegel abases himself to assert that without a monarchy the state “is no longer a state,” Marx focuses upon the meaning of the constitution in relation to the people, and observes that the constitution is always grounded in the people:

Democracy is the genus Constitution. Monarchy is one species, and a poor one at that. . . . Democracy is the solved riddle of all constitutions. Here, not merely implicitly and in essence but existing in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the actual human being, the actual people, and established as the people’s own work.27

From this point on, as he increasingly loses patience with Hegel’s dodges, Marx has in mind that the real social collectivity of the people – which is not comprised even within the democratic form of the political state28 – stands in opposition to the state as such. The political form of the state, in other words, is itself inherently a form of alienation. It is for this reason that Marx’s conception of emancipation – in all of the work that follows in 1843, and still more in the life-work that he truly takes up from 1844 – always requires transcending the state as such. “It is not the radical revolution, not the general human

28. In his critique of Hegel’s conception of the development of the state from the family and civil society, Marx distinguished between the state as political apparatus and the substantive social reality of the people in their totality, even going so far as to oppose the “the political state” to “the non-political state.”
emancipation which is a utopian dream for Germany, but rather the partial, the merely political revolution,” he asserted in his published critique of Hegel, identifying the agents for this emancipation as the proletariat, whose lack of particular interest compelled them to realize the interests of humanity as a whole.29 He still, however, conceived this in relation to philosophy as such, “which finds its material weapons in the proletariat.”

In these writings of 1843, Marx advanced the concept of emancipation beyond that of any other political theorist.30 Alienation was the projection of forms of material human sociality – the social relations through which we realize our collective existence, the necessary condition for human existence – into artificial institutions and ideas treated as real; not merely alien to us as individual human beings, but having power over us. Emancipation was overcoming alienation, in all of its forms, to return the human world to real human beings themselves. Alienation existed in the form of religion, as the Young Hegelians first claimed. It also existed in the form of money (and hence property), by which the social intercourse of humanity became a means to exercise power over others, reducing them to mere things. Then, in identifying the very form of the state as a form of alienation, Marx found the solution to the “riddle of all constitutions,” as well as to Rousseau’s conundrum. So long as the state existed in its political form, as alienated social power that acted back upon us as individual humans, we could never be free. For humanity to live without chains, the General Will had to be realized freely, without alienation.

The alienation of labour and true human emancipation

Yet, Marx’s achievement in his Paris manuscripts of 1844 dwarfs even these profound contributions of 1843. Having been alerted to the real import of the ideas of the political economists by Engels’ Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” Marx read each of the authors cited in it, and undertook a detailed critique of his own.31 He began by dividing his pages into columns under the headings of the three basic classes and corresponding forms of income identified by the political economists: Wages of Labour, Profit of Capital, and Rent of Land.

29. Ibid., p. 186.
30. Both Thomas Münzer and the English “Digger” Gerrard Winstanley argued that human freedom required abolition of both the state and private property, but their works are not accepted as part of the “canon” of political thought.
Writing down the columns of “Wages of Labour,” he drew out what the political economist asserts, and what it actually means for workers:

He tells us that originally and in theory the whole product of labour belongs to the worker. But at the same time he tells us that in actual fact what the worker gets is the smallest and utterly indispensable part of the product – as much, only, as is necessary for his existence, not as a human being, but as a worker, and for the propagation, not of humanity, but of the slave class of workers.32

From this, Marx rises above the point of view of political economy, and in subsequent passages (known on the basis of their content as “Estranged Labour”) he conceives of the alienation of labour. The alienation of labour is not a product of property or monetary wealth – rather, property is itself the form of the alienation of labour. 33

This realization had the most profound impact upon Marx’s thought, posing the problem of human emancipation in entirely new terms, as is evident in the two questions he posed at the end of his original analysis under “Wages of Labour”:

(1) What in the evolution of mankind is the meaning of this reduction of the greater part of mankind to abstract labour?
(2) What are the mistakes committed by the piecemeal reformers, who either want to raise wages … or regard equality of wages … as the goal of social revolution?34

The first question takes Hegel’s conception of human society developing through the course of history, and reconceives it in relation to the development of the alienation of labour. It is this reconception that leads Marx to assert in the Communist Manifesto that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” This follows from the fact that the differences of wealth between classes arise from the alienation of labour. As he noted in the opening words of “Wages of Labour,” this basic social relationship between worker and capitalist involves antagonistic struggle.

Where other forms of alienation may have predominantly negative effects upon those who labour, they are not constituted antagonistically in the way that the alienation of labour is. The worker can use the form of money to meet his or her own needs, and even the capitalist may fall victim to money. The alienation of labour is profoundly different in making the life-activity of some humans alien to themselves in the

32. Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, p. 239.
33. Ibid., pp. 271–3.
34. Ibid., p. 241.
immediate form of benefit to others. It is for this reason that in conceiving a general relationship of antagonism between classes at the start of the Manifesto, Marx summarized it as “in a word, oppressor and oppressed.”

This historical conception of human society developing through particular forms of the alienation of labour is not developed to any great extent in the 1844 manuscripts, but it is already present. Marx asserts here that labour and capital in their opposition “constitute private property as its developed state of contradiction,” and he refers to earlier social forms (“ancient Rome, Turkey, etc.”) as having an “antithesis between lack of property and property” that is as yet undeveloped. He conceives “the entire movement of history” in relation to “Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man... the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being.”

And communism, in this conception, is a movement of real, historical struggle against the alienation of labour. It is not the weapon of philosophy, but the movement of humanity recovering itself, by itself. This movement is a material historical process grounded in the development of social production:

The entire movement of history, just as its [communism’s] actual act of genesis – the birth act of its empirical existence – is, therefore, also for its thinking consciousness the comprehended and known process of its becoming.

That is, rather than following the dictates of philosophy, or seeking historical verification in “disconnected historical phenomena opposed to private property,” communism as a mature movement “finds both its empirical and its theoretical basis in the movement of private property – more precisely in that of the economy.”

This material, immediately perceptible private property is the material perceptible expression of estranged human life. Its movement – production and consumption – is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realisation or the reality of man.

It is for these reasons that the revolution of proletarian workers is the basis for the general emancipation of humanity. To transcend the “reduction of the greater part of mankind to abstract labour” is to

35. Ibid., pp. 293–4.
36. Ibid., p. 296.
37. Ibid., p. 297.
38. Ibid.
redeem humanity as a whole by and for humans. The long, historical,
one-sided development of human social capacities through forms of
the alienation of labour culminates in those who have nothing to lose
but their chains transforming social existence for all humanity into a
form that will have no chains on anyone. This, then, is a complete
resolution of Rousseau’s conundrum.

It is for this reason that the paltry aspirations of “piecemeal refor-
mers” always remain inadequate. What is at issue is not “better wages
for the slave,” but full emancipation of all humankind. This requires
above all an end to the alienation of labour, but the general emancipa-
tion of humanity requires an end to alienation in all of its forms. Alien-
ation in the form of the state exists primarily to ensure that alienation in
the form of private property – the alienation of labour – is main-
tained.39 Thus the political form of the state must itself be transcended.

There is, however, necessarily a dialectical character to this. Unless
the state’s defence of property is overcome, there can be no overcoming
the alienation of labour. At the same time, without overcoming the
alienation of labour there can be no transcendence of the political
form of the state. Anarchists understand that both the state and
private property must be superseded, but offer no solution beyond
ending both at the same time. There are substantial reasons for recog-
nizing that human emancipation cannot, however, be so simply rea-
lized. One significant issue, of course, is that the forces defeated in
any revolutionary transformation will not simply disappear, even if
there is simultaneous revolution across the globe. This is, however,
far less profound a problem than the fact that social production in all
its forms, the institutions and patterns of daily social life, and the
built-form of the infrastructure of our social existence, have taken
form over long generations of social inequality and political power.
Who will live where, how people will travel to work, what jobs will
continue to exist, how needs will continue to be met where current pro-
duction relations are inherently abusive, how environmentally
destructive production upon which entire communities depend
should be dealt with: these are not questions that can be resolved
through simple consensus on the morrow of the revolution. Alienation
in all of its forms will bequeath to any social process of human eman-
cipation an enormous range of challenges, problems that are not
without solution, but which will vex persons of reason and good will
for a considerable period of time.

39. This point is apparent in much of anthropology and sociology, and figures centrally
in the history of political thought.
Emancipation and revolution

In his later political writing, especially his “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” Marx briefly sketched an approach to these problems. Asserting both the need for revolution to make possible an end to capitalist social relations of production, and the need not only to change the immediate form of the state, but to eliminate the state as such as a condition of full emancipation, Marx nonetheless accepted the need for a political form of the state to continue for some time (and one might well expect not a short time). Here – using the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” in one of a very few places in the whole of his writing – he explicitly (if briefly) explored the implications of it not being possible to transform social life completely all at once. He recognized that a transformation in social life was required to make possible a move from the principles of what he described as “bourgeois right.” In capitalist society, “bourgeois right” does not apply to workers, in that their returns from production are not proportional to the labour that they contributed. The first stage of revolutionary transformation must necessarily end the alienation of labour by which workers inherently produce wealth for their capitalist employers, but it cannot immediately go very far beyond that. Only

after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly

is it possible to move to a form of society in which it is not necessary to maintain the principles of “bourgeois right” in distributing the proceeds of collective social labour. And only then, therefore, would no state be required.

Thus, the state must be defeated in revolution to end the most immediate manifestations of alienation, as well as the most oppressive and undemocratic characteristics of the state itself. Yet only after a far more profound transcendence of alienation and a reconfiguration of the real social landscape – to allow free human interaction on the basis of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” – can the state truly wither away.

On the one hand, human emancipation requires that the state itself must truly be transcended, in time. On the other hand, the political form of the state cannot simply be dispensed with on the morrow of

40. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (many editions), Section I.
the revolution. It is, therefore, essential to recognize the ways in which the alienation inherent in the state has been partially constrained through the construction of human rights during the modern era. States long ago generally ceased to be embodiments of relatively simple communities of like-minded persons, among whom a General Will might be said to exist at the political level.

Notwithstanding the revolutionary conception of liberty, equality, and sociality that informed the Jacobin project of building a Rousseauan republic, such a state cannot achieve true human emancipation. Relative to the alienation inherent in state power, however, the establishment of individual and collective rights has been a profound political achievement. The state’s alien potency has not been replaced by benign, freely determined self-governance, but it is potentially held in check in its power over individuals. There is no certainty that rights will be respected, of course, and they can never simply be taken for granted, but must be preserved and extended through struggle. It is, indeed, precisely because rights are limited and uncertain that the state as such must, in the end, be transcended. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the potential for what Bakunin – in diatribes that otherwise offered little that could survive Marx’s scathing criticism – had called the “dictatorship over the proletariat,” a form of alienation that is not to be trivially dismissed. The post-revolutionary state should not, must not, be allowed yet again to render the people the impotent subjects of their own collective power. Rights and democratic practice must be zealously guarded, not taken for granted.

Conclusion

The struggles for human emancipation must have, at their core, class struggle to end the alienation of labour. This is not, however, the only form of alienation through which humanity has been, and continues to be, oppressed. Ultimately, the realization of full human freedom requires the elimination of our collective subordination to any form of sovereign power – we must not be subjected to some “other” that is constituted as more than “us.” Since this transcendence cannot be realized all at once, however, we must recognize and preserve that partial recovery of liberty relative to the state that has been one of the signal achievements of the modern age. As part of an ongoing struggle for the realization of emancipation – necessarily dialectical in pursuing real ends through real contradictions – we must hold on to the rights that we have constructed, without holding them to be either above criticism, or the essence of freedom.
In this regard, it is equally important to recognize that even if the structures of power – not only the state, but other forms of oppression – have roots in the systemic reproduction of fundamental inequality through the alienation of labour, it is not only class from which humanity must be emancipated. Religion is potentially a relatively benign form of alienation. Other forms of alienation – the objectification of some humans for the benefit of others – are far less benign; these include the reduction of women to subjects of men’s will, as well as the reduction of persons of colour to subordinate means of satisfying needs (or worse still, to threats to security) – in short, all forms of objectifying the autonomy of persons that reduce one human to mere means to an end (or mere obstacle) for another.

As Marx first put it in “On The Jewish Question,” the emancipation of humanity requires the “reduction of the human world and relationships to [humanity] itself.” This “reduction” is not a form of alienation, but of realization – humans in their relations with each other must recognize themselves in others, and so realize their species-being. Through his lifework, Marx focused upon the fundamental challenge of the alienation of labour, through which the historical development of society consistently has been bent towards the interests of the wealthy and powerful. Yet, from his earliest exploration of the forms of alienation, to his mature observations on the need and the capacity to achieve a society founded on the principle of “from each according to ability to each according to need,” nothing less than the complete emancipation of humanity ever would suffice for Marx.