

Heidegger and Marx: Is a Dialogue Possible?

by
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As a panel member of Dr Geoffrey Klempner's 'Ask a Philosopher' internet service, I answered a question.[1] It asked if there was any similarity between Karl Marx's theory of Alienation and Heidegger's theory of 'deworlding'. This reanimated a line of enquiry I had long been wanting to pursue: is there any common philosophical ground between Marxism and Heidegger?

Superficially, there appear to be similarities. Heidegger writes copiously about the pernicious influence of technology and its corresponding world-view. Marx wrote about the influence of the capitalist mode of production and its detrimental consequences upon human beings and the world itself. Both critiques can lend themselves to political ecology and its concerns around environmental damage to the earth and its inhabitants. Both philosophers also locate the present state of affairs as the culmination of historical tendencies. Both emphasize the contemporary condition of humanity as a degeneration from a preferred, original condition and as such, both philosophers are critical of the existing state of affairs. Moreover, in his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger writes that a 'productive dialogue' with Marxism is possible. So on this basis, is there the possibility of a productive dialogue which could then furnish a common politics?

In what follows I will provide a basic overview of both thinkers' philosophies. With Marx, I have utilised his *Excerpts on James Mill, Elements of Political Economy* (1844)[2] and *Estranged Labour* (1844), the latter from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.[3] It is here that his writings on alienation or estrangement are largely found. For simplicities sake, I have not engaged in a larger enquiry on Marx's theory of alienation and whether it changes over the course of his writing or whether he dispensed with it altogether. With Heidegger I also provide an equally brief account of his philosophy. I have mainly used his *Letter On Humanism* as this is where he explicitly refers to Marx and why a 'productive dialogue' may be possible although, other works are cited.

Marx

The elements Heidegger credits Marx with recognizing are the phenomenon of estrangement and, the dimension of History. I will now provide an overview of Marx's theory of estrangement.

Species Being

For the Marx of 1844, there is a human essence, a human nature so to speak which is estranged from itself. This estrangement is objectified not in a God as it is for Feuerbach but in the practices and structures of capitalist society. The estrangement can be addressed only through the replacement of Capitalism by Communism. With this revolutionary act, human beings will be at one with their nature or species-being (*Gattungswesen*) again; consequently society will be the expression of this human, species-being.

Originally, argues Marx, the product produced by a person is their personality and power, actualised. The essential nature of the species is manifested in this act of creativity and the created product. Other people use and enjoy the product. The product becomes a necessary part of them; the creative human being and its product is thereby recognised and affirmed by them. Similarly, the producer has the knowledge and satisfaction of having met the needs of other human beings, of having thereby objectified and realised the essential nature of humanity. The converse of this relation also applies as the producer in this case can also be a consumer. This is social production where one enjoys the product of the other as it is 'the objectified meeting of their needs and personality'.^[4] This mutual recognition is the recognition of the actualisation of the species-being of humanity. Human practice is identical with the human essence.

Unfortunately, this harmonious situation of social production does not last. Various forms of class based property relations expressive of successive historical modes of production – Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism – follow. As Marx famously proclaims in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “The history of hitherto existing societies, is the history of class struggle”.^[5] It is under Capitalism that the estrangement of human beings from their essence or species-being becomes most acute.

With the Capitalist mode of production, the social relations hold where the class of Capitalists own the means of production in which the labour of the proletariat produces products to be exchanged on the Market. Although it produces the products, the proletariat does not legally have ownership of them. Ownership lies with the Capitalist. In return for their labour power which is now reduced to a sellable commodity, the proletariat receives just enough money to purchase his means of subsistence. The germane point here in respect of the species-being is that the proletariat does not have control or ownership of that which is the manifestation of its species-being. The original species-act of people creating and freely giving their creations to other human beings no longer holds.

Estrangement

No longer being a free act, Labour is determined by external, alien Capitalist social relations. These employ the labour power of the proletariat within specified times and for specific, prescribed work requirements. The product of labour has no personal relation to the needs or nature of its creator the proletariat, it is produced solely for ownership of the Capitalist. The product of labour thus becomes alien, becomes independent thus constituting the failure of the adequate manifestation the species-being of the proletariat.

The more the proletariat labours and produces, the less it owns; the more is produced for Capital – reinforcing Private property and the conditions for the greater loss of the proletariat's species-being. The world of products, of objects, society itself, is the creative results of the proletariat. Yet the proletariat is estranged from society, estranged from its own creation. Whether or not employment is available is dependent upon the Capitalist, dependent of the precarious actions of the Market with its booms and slumps. The species-being act of creation becomes reduced to a mere instrumental means to earn the means of subsistence to support life itself. The species-act is thus no longer life's prime expression but is something to be endured for the sake of payment. Consequently real life, the expression of life is viewed as occurring and of having value, only outside the working day and week. Under Capitalism, the proletariat does not have control of its own destiny.

So under Capitalism, the proletariat is estranged from its species-being: estranged from its labour, from its created product, from its creative species-act and estranged from the Capitalist mode of production itself which facilitates the estrangement. Whereas once, the human subject controlled its species-being, freely manifested in created objects for mutual use and exchange, under Capitalism, its created objects control it.

All these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the fewer objects the worker possesses. What the product of his labour is, he

is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The externalization [*Entausserung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.[6]

For Marx, the solution to this existential predicament of the proletariat is social revolution, the overthrow of Capitalism. With Capitalist social relations overthrown, the conditions underpinning estrangement also disappear. Estrangement is banished as the manifested species-being, no longer controlled and owned by Capitalists, returns to humanity as a whole. The species-being is regained and free creative labour, mutual free giving and use returns, in universal Communist society.

Heidegger

Heidegger's primary question is Ontological, the *Seinfrage*: What is Being? In *Being and Time* (1927) he pursues this question by means of a hermeneutics of Dasein's structures of being-in-the-world.[7] Later, after the so-called turning (*Kehre*) of the 1930's, he pursues the question by means of examining art, philosophy, poetry, language and technology. Western Thinking about Being began with the Greeks which shaped the subsequent direction of Thinking about Being.

From Philosophy to Technology

The contemporary hegemony of the Technologist perspective (more of which later) over humanity is a consequence of the destining of European Thinking which has its origins in the philosophical enquiries of the Greeks concerning the phenomena of the world. For the early Greeks *Poeisis* is a bringing-forth of phenomena into presenting from out of themselves. *Phusis* is the highest sense of *Poeisis* as it is a bringing-forth from out of itself, such as when the bloom flows out of the bud. This is distinct from the bringing-forth of the artist, poet, craftsman which requires another through which it is brought-forth. *Poeisis* propriates insofar something concealed comes into unconcealment (*Aletheia*).

However, at some stage, unconcealment became thematised to occur only in specific, limited ways. What presences is restricted beforehand by a pre-determined conception of what Being is, as the ground of beings which is

thereby closed off to any alternative 'letting-be' of Being.[8] Accordingly, Plato's Universals ground their particular instantiations. With Aristotle, following on from Plato, the unconcealment of Being in beings is understood as what is present and permanent in the sense of an enduring (*Ousia*) work in its workness (*Energeia*). Aristotelian-influenced Christian Theology grounds a creator god as the cause and end of his creations. For Descartes, the thinking mind substance (*mens*) grounds and discovers Divine Reason in the extended, natural world. The transcendental ego of Kant and Fichte grounds human knowledge of its world. The Hegelian subject of collective human consciousness (*Geist*) dialectically supersedes and incorporates its estranged otherness until the ground of Absolute Knowledge is reached.

The concern with the truth of beings becomes the locus of Western Philosophy in the guise of Metaphysics and, argues Heidegger, ultimately transforms into the categories of Natural Philosophy/ Science.[9] Science lends itself as the intellectual source from which the phenomena of the world – including human beings – are examined, categorised and thematised for utilisation. In our times, Technology has become the dominant mode to unconceal phenomena to serve the human 'Lords of the Earth'. [10]

Yet Technology is only one mode of unconcealing. It is a knowing that opens up with the intention, with the goal of grasping what is brought forth:

This revealing gather together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisaged and completed and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction.[11]

The essence of Technology is Enframing (*Ge-stell*); a setting-upon, “the setting in-order of everything that presences as standing reserve.”[12]

Enframing means the gathering together of the setting-upon that sets upon man i.e. challenges him forth to reveal the actual in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve.[13]

In his *Memorial Address* (1959) Heidegger differentiates between Calculative and Meditative Thinking with respect to Technology.[14] The Thoughtless *Zeitgeist* of Calculative Thinking is means-end thinking: it computes, it demands definite end results, it is planning and research. The Sciences are upheld to be the disciplines which can account for the human condition. Heidegger asks what is the ground that enabled the hegemony of modern technology to discover and set free the energies of nature:

This is due to a revolution in leading concepts which has been going on for the past several centuries and by which man is placed in a different world. This radical revolution in outlook has come about in modern philosophy. From this arises a completely new relation of man to the world and his place in it. The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able to any longer resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry. The relation of man to the world as such is, in principle, a technical one, developed in the Seventeenth century first and only in Europe. It long remained unknown in other continents and it was altogether alien, to former ages and histories.[15]

Technologist Calculative Thinking totalises how human beings view and value each other and the world: as resources to be exploited, used, as means to ends. The spirit of the age takes humanity away from its rootedness in its homeland to become Homeless; and as such Being is abandoned by human beings: “Homelessness is the symptom of the oblivion of Being. Because of it, the truth of Being remains unthought.”[16]

In sum, the thinking and being of Technology and the Metaphysical Philosophy which precedes it, smothers the real essence of the human being (Dasein) which is to be open to the disclosures of Being. This smothering moves human beings away from where they should be, leaving them homeless. In so doing, Being is forgotten with beings regarded as the prescribed subjective ground for ontology. Latterly, other ways of being and receiving Being are circumscribed by the sway of Technology, other ways which may open up alternative less egregious ways of living and being for human beings.

Marx and Heidegger: Is a Dialogue possible?

Instrumentality and Calculative Thinking

We can discern in Marx and Heidegger a convergence on the critique of what we can term, for the sake of argument, Instrumentality. The instrumentality of Technologist/ Calculative Thinking identified by Heidegger can be judged as similar with Marx's critique of Capitalism. As seen, for Marx the labour of the proletariat is employed for definite, instrumental reasons and purposes: to labour at a definite time and place, to labour within the remit of certain tasks thereby limiting the further creativity of the species-being creator. The product of labour is a thing, an instrumental means for exchange value on the Market

not appreciated as the manifestation of the species-being. The actions of the market which affect the lives of human beings, are governed by profit and therefore instrumental to the goal of capitalist profit. From the standpoint of the proletariat, its working-life – a source of estrangement – is valued instrumentally, as a mere means toward the end of wages and the living of what remains of life outside of working time. Instrumentalist thinking and acting is inherent to Capitalism and the estrangement experienced by the proletariat.

Further, such instrumentalist or Calculative Thinking has prioritised the development of Technology, as witnessed since the 18th Century with Industrialisation in Britain. It is totalising and global – points which Marx and Heidegger have noted. Although Marx would point out that this process is a development contingent to Capitalist Social Relations and the competition for the end goal of profit and is not derived from the destining of History as it is for Heidegger.

Despite such convergence on the phenomena of Instrumentality, Heidegger would probably contend that such thinking is not unique to Capitalism; such thinking underpins it as it is characteristic of the Western outlook since Plato. Where we are now has been 'destined' by our philosophical past. What is grounded by a ground is thereby determined beforehand for human knowledge and use. Marx's Historical Materialism and his grounding of the species-being, estranged though it is under Capitalism, is part of this Philosophical or Metaphysical tradition (more of which below). So whilst there is similarity between the two Philosophers on the issue of Instrumentality, there is dissimilarity between them with respect to the causes of it.

The Historical

Both Marx and Heidegger share an appreciation of the Historical. For Marx the origin of Primitive Communism in which the human species-being is fully expressed in free communal labour and exchange, gives way to societies based on differing relations defending Private Property in the interests of their respective Ruling class. The culmination of this historical tendency found in Capitalism which, hoped Marx, would be superseded by World Communism. With such an end-state, the 'riddle of History' is solved.[17]

The element of the historical also plays a major role in Heidegger. The history of European Thought is the manifestation of the forgetting of Being and its subsequent oblivion in the face of various modes of Metaphysical Philosophy. This forgetting began with the Greek Philosophers, was perpetuated and embellished in Metaphysics and has culminated in the hegemony of Technological Thinking and being. Yet such an historical, cumulated 'Danger'

simultaneously holds an opportunity for it to be challenged. Heidegger hopes that the consequences of hegemonic Technological Thinking and being will pronounce opportunities for it to be contested.[18]

Marx would perhaps dismiss Heidegger's contention that intellectual paradigms are alone primary in instigating social change as Idealist in the Hegelian sense. Yet, his contention that the inversion of the human essence under Capitalism is the cause of estrangement is itself arguably Hegelian in nature. As Hegel's Absolute Idealism is part of the Philosophical tradition of Metaphysics and Heidegger has, as Joan Stambaugh writes, 'leapt' out of this tradition, he is highly unlikely to endorse Marx's philosophy.[20] More of this below.

However, in his *Letter On Humanism*, Heidegger writes approvingly of Marx's concerns with estrangement and the Historical. Marx's recognition of the estrangement or alienation of humanity from itself is significant for Heidegger. It has its roots in the Homelessness of modern humanity which is evoked from the destining of Being.

So despite Marx's thinking being metaphysical, Heidegger writes that his account of History is superior to others precisely because Marx, in 'experiencing estrangement attains an essential dimension of history, the Marxist view is superior to that of other historical accounts'.[20] This essential element – Marx's recognition of the Historical – is the dimension in which a productive dialogue is made possible.[21] For such a dialogue to occur, preliminary issues about the nature of Materialism need to be settled. This is no insignificant matter as Marx's philosophy of History is called Historical 'Materialism'.

Materialism and Estrangement

Also in his *Letter On Humanism*, Heidegger stipulates that naïve notions of Materialism must be banished. For him, Materialism is not the position that ontology is simply matter; 'but rather is a metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material of labour'.[22] In Hegel – Marx's philosophical antecedent – the metaphysical essence of labour is anticipated although in an Idealist guise. As Heidegger writes:

The modern metaphysical essence of labour is anticipated in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the self-establishing process of unconditioned production, which is the objectification of the actual through man experienced as subjectivity. The essence of materialism is concealed in the

essence of technology, about which much has been written but little has been thought.[23]

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel elaborates – according to Heidegger – how the actual is objectified by Humanity and experienced as subjectivity.[24] Human consciousness (*Geist*) achieves Absolute Knowledge of itself by dialectically and cumulatively overcoming and incorporating what initially appears 'other' to itself or estranged from itself. Estrangement is progressively overcome in this dialectical movement of the Concept or 'self-establishing process of unconditioned production', leading ultimately to the Identity of Subject and Object in the Absolute. Heidegger makes the same point about the 'self-establishing process of unconditioned production' in his *Hegel and the Greeks*. Here, he notes:

Hegel also names 'speculative dialectics' simply 'the method'... 'The method' is the innermost movement of subjectivity, 'the soul of being', the production process through which the fabric of the whole of the Absolute's actualisation becomes actualised.[25]

Although heavily influenced by Feuerbach at this time, a similar dialectical movement to that displayed by Hegel – of 'unconditioned production', of a collective subject (*Geist*) overcoming and superseding estrangement – can easily be discerned in Marx's conception of the species-being or proletariat, its estrangement from itself in objectification and its reconciliation with itself in the overthrow of Capitalism and its supersession by Communism. Further, as the essence of the species-being itself is to produce, to be productive, to labour, to work, it too will be judged as manifesting 'unconditioned production'. Hence Michael Eldred concludes:

Marxism is however, according to Heidegger, caught within the metaphysics of subjectivity and even the unification and uniformisation of humanity in an internationalism and collectivism would only mean the 'unconditional self-assertion' of the subjectivity of humanity as a totality.[26]

The metaphysical essence of labour noted by Heidegger, expressed Idealistically by Hegel is now employed by Marx materialistically but, despite the famous inversion of Hegel's Dialectic by Marx,[27] the essence remains: every being is the material of labour, is produced, produces and is the subject of production: unconditioned production. Unconditioned production is inherent to the metaphysics of Marx, at least the early Marx.

What of estrangement then? As Marx's theory of estrangement is premised on the estrangement of an essence – species being – from itself, then this is employing concepts inherent to metaphysical philosophy. There must be the premise of a ground upon which, from which estrangement occurs. The banishment of estrangement entails a return to the ground: to reiterate, this is the metaphysics of subjectivity. This makes any fruitful convergence with the Heideggerian notion of the Homelessness of Humanity from Being, highly unlikely. Further, Heidegger's Homelessness is not an estrangement from a ground to be rectified; for Homelessness could and as Heidegger feared, become normalised. Humanity would forget, would close itself off to the alterity of Being and identify itself solely as a subject, subject to the sway of global technology and its modalities of being.

Conclusion: A Productive Dialogue?

Philosophically, Marx remains within the paradigm of Metaphysics. Heidegger has diagnosed Metaphysics as the philosophical underpinning of the Technologist world-view. He is critical of this world-view. As such he is highly unlikely to agree *in toto* with Marx's philosophy. As aspects of Hegel's Absolute Idealism are present in Marx's writings of the early to mid 1840's, specifically the conceptual structures observable in the overcoming of the estranged subject that is species-being; this too will continue the 'self-establishing process of unconditioned production' although in a materialist guise.

It might be said that Heidegger finds seeds or kernels of his own philosophy – such as homelessness and destining – wrapped in a Marxist shell. Yet the shell would have to be totally discarded to retrieve the kernel and turn it 'right side up'. Being so turned, they would cease to be Marxist in any sense. In conclusion, a productive dialogue with Marxism is possible only if Marxism ceases to be Marxism. Heidegger cites those elements in Marx – the Historical and Estrangement – only insofar as they remotely resonate and support themes in his own Philosophy.

If Hegelian metaphysics is the problem that prevents the possibility of a productive dialogue then, what of the possibility of such with with non-Hegelian Marxism such as that proffered by Louis Althusser?[28] As Althusser's Marxism does not recognise concepts such as 'species-being' or 'estrangement', relegating them to the influence of ideology on the young Marx, wouldn't a non-metaphysical dialogue be possible? Since the important concept of historical estrangement is absent from Althusser's Marxism, there is no common ground for any dialogue. I conclude that there can be no productive dialogue between Heideggerian Philosophy and Marxism, there can only be a

Heideggerian monologue. This however, does not prevent any contingent political alliance on the level of praxis such as for example, environmentalist campaigns based on Heideggerian influenced deep ecology and Marxist anti-capitalism.

Footnotes

1. <https://askaphilosopher.wordpress.com/2015/05/>
2. Karl Marx. *Excerpts from James Mill's On Political Economy*. P. 259. Contained in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*. Introduction by Lucio Colletti. Penguin. 1992.
3. Karl Marx. *Estranged Labour*. P332. Ibid.
4. P. 277. Karl Marx. *James Mill*. Op cite above.
5. P. 35. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The Classics of Marxism. Well Red Books. 2011.
6. P. 324. *Estranged Labour*. Op cite.
7. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Blackwell Publishers. 1992.
8. See Martin Heidegger *The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics*. Identity and Difference. Harper & Row. 1969.
9. See Martin Heidegger. *Metaphysics as History of Being*. The End of Philosophy. University of Chicago Press. 1973.
10. P. 323. Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology*. Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger. Ed: David Farrell-Krell. Routledge. 1993.
11. P. 319. *ibid*.
12. P. 37. Martin Heidegger. *The Turning*. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. Harper & Row. 1977.
13. P. 325. *The Question Concerning Technology*. Op cite above.

14. P. 46 et alibi Martin Heidegger. *Memorial Address*. Discourse on Thinking. Harper & Row. 1969.

15. P. 50. *ibid.*

16. P. 242. Martin Heidegger. *Letter On Humanism*. Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger. Ed: David Farrell-Krell. Routledge. 1993.

17. P. 348. *Karl Marx. Private Property and Communism*. Karl Marx: Early Writings. Op cite above.

18. See P. 338, 340 *The Question Concerning Technology*. Op cite above.

19. As Joan Stambaugh writes on page 13 of her Introduction to Heidegger's *Identity and Difference* (Op cite above):

‘To come closer to an understanding of the belonging together of man and Being, we must leave metaphysical thinking which thinks Being exclusively as the cause of beings and thinks beings primarily as what is caused. But we cannot leave metaphysics by a series of reasoned conclusions. We must simply leap out of it. Thus the principle (*Satz*) of identity becomes a leap (*Satz*) out of metaphysics’

20. P. 243 *Letter On Humanism*.

21. Op cite above.

22. *ibid.*

23. P. 243/4. *ibid.*

24. GWF Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford University Press. 1977.

25. Martin Heidegger. *Hegel and the Greeks*. Pathmarks. Cambridge University Press. 1998.

26. Chapter 2: Michael Eldred. *Capital and Technology: Marx and Heidegger*. <http://www.arte-fact.org/capiteen.html#2.0> e-book.

27. Karl Marx. Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital (1873)

28. Louis Althusser's general argument is that Marx's writings present an 'Epistemological Break' that separates his early 'Humanistic' writings from his later 'scientific' ones. Marx arguably rejected his early work – including the works cited in this paper – and their themes of a human essence, estrangement, teleology.

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