

Alienation, Private Property, and Democracy: Why Worrell and Krier Raise Questions in the Clouds

Critical Sociology
2018, Vol. 44(2) 267–274
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920516664963
journals.sagepub.com/home/crs



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Abstract

In this article, I argue that Marx's philosophy does not commit us to Worrell and Krier's claim that a post-capitalist society will be a social formation in which all social relations appear unmediated to their agents. Quite the opposite is true: given his Hegelian background, which Marx never gives up, social relations are in principle to be mediated by the results of human productive acts, and although a socialist society no longer is mediated by capital, it still cannot be thought without a legal, ethical, and political form of these relations. Those meditations (which Worrell and Krier do not separate clearly from social-economic aspects) will be universal. Accordingly, the authors' claim that Marx is opposed to the concept of the universal is baseless. In addition, I demonstrate that Worrell and Krier's interpretation of Marx's concept of alienation as a romantic concept is misguided and, instead, that we would do well to focus on the concept of private property. Finally, I show that they do not properly grasp Marx's concepts of democracy and communism.

Keywords

alienation, class conflict, communism, democracy, Hegel, Marx, universal

The thing to be done at any definite given moment of the future, the thing immediately to be done, depends of course entirely on the given historical situation [Umstände] in which one must act. This question, however, is in the clouds [Nebelland] and therefore is really a statement of a phantom problem to which the only answer can be the criticism of the question itself. No equation can be solved unless the elements of its solution are involved in its terms.

Marx to Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881 (MEW 35: 160)¹

Universality

The following remarks are intended to show that Worrell and Krier raise questions in the clouds, and that, following Marx's recommendation, we should criticize their questions as *non-starters*. In particular, my remarks are directed against the assumption that for Marx a post-capitalist society will

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be a society without “mediating substance” (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 1). In contradistinction to Worrell and Krier, I submit that Marx’s philosophy does not commit us to the claim that a post-capitalist society will no longer be a “society” (if we understand by “society” a total system of abstract mediations) and, instead, will be a social formation in which all social relations appear unmediated to their agents. Quite the opposite is true: given his Hegelian background, which Marx never gives up, social relations are in principle to be mediated by the results of human productive acts, and although a socialist society no longer is mediated by capital, it still cannot be thought without a legal, ethical, and political *form* of these relations. Those mediations (which Worrell and Krier do not separate clearly from social-economic aspects) will be *universal* and, hence, will mediate “abstractly” all social relations. Accordingly, Worrell’s and Krier’s claim that Marx “is hysterically adverse to universal mediation” (2016: 5) makes no sense and remains stuck in an abstract and dual conception of the relation between individuals and the universal “big” other(s); the latter concept of which not only remains empty, but also, without further explanation, functions as a placeholder for everything that the authors mention, from Hobbes’ Leviathan to the Soviet system. Against this claim, I submit that immediacy is not the “cornerstone” (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 5) of Marx’s post-capitalist vision (if there is one). As Althusser argued decades ago, even a communist society would be based on a *specific* (and not “human”) mode of production, and, hence, on a specific mode of reproduction. The argument that a communist society is a society without *any* universal does not make sense, particularly since, even if we assume that we would no longer have “the” society that is constituted above and against its social members, we would still need to assume some form of political, ethical, and legal organization, especially given the development of the means of production and the social and ideal relations that are contained in them. Accordingly, the authors’ point (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 16) that we need a better mediation between the individual and the universal, a “new social utopia where some Big Other ‘reigns’ not as a terrifying Hobbesian ‘Leviathan’ but as an immanent universal object” (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 16), is not really a problem insofar as institutional relations in the form of legal, political, and ethical relations fulfill this criterion without making speculative predictions about the economic form of a future society.

Unfortunately, Worrell and Krier present Marx as an “alienation romantic” and thereby distort the philosophical base of Marx’s thought. There is no immediate relationality for Marx. Indeed, he remains a sole Hegelian on this point. For every human activity is mediated by its reality, i.e., the results of human productivity, including all kinds of media and communication systems, institutions, etc. We should also not forget to think of the earth as the *universal* condition of human productivity, given that every human act also contains a metabolic relation to nature as well as the entire structure of social-ecological relations. Worrell and Krier’s age-old conception of Marx(ism) can also be characterized by focusing on their underlying “use value fetishism.” Use value fetishism is based on the idea that a post-capitalist society throws off capital as its alien shell and returns to a “purely” human and non-alienated form of labor. According to this vision, which is based on a non-dialectical mis-reading of chapter one of *Capital*, insofar as labor and value are abstractly juxtaposed to each other, a communist society is a society that is exclusively directed towards the satisfaction of needs. I do not think that such a romantic position, i.e., the vision of a social organization without a specific social form of its reproduction, is very useful.

Moreover, Marx warns in the 1881 letter that I quoted above that we should not discuss possible transitions towards a possible future social organization without taking the *contemporary* historical moment into account. In regards to “socialist conferences” (about which he was asked in the letter cited above), Marx advances the following:

It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Workingmen’s Association has not yet arrived and for this reason I regard all workers’ congresses, particularly socialist congresses, in so far as

they are not related to the immediate given conditions in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but harmful. They will always fade away in innumerable stale generalized banalities. (Marx to Nieuwenhuis, Feb 22, 1881)

Accordingly, what Marx underlines here is that a *sober realism* is needed when we politically speculate about a socialist society in the present moment. The warning is very clear: to discuss socialist society in a non-socialist society might end up in empty abstractions. Instead, what is needed is to think the possibility of a socialist society *always* as a transition that can be identified with the *current real movement* towards such a new social organization. Communism, as famously pointed out in the *German Ideology*, is the “actual [wirklich] movement that overcomes [aufhebt] the current conditions [Zustände]” (MEW 3: 35) and not some kind of utopia. Communism can only be properly conceived of if we conceive it as *always* already arriving. However, if it is *the* real historical movement, then it can appear in many forms and many instantiations that dismantle the current situation. As a consequence, no one can know when the new society is finally “there” before its arrival comes to an end.

In this vein, it is also important to point out that Marx warns in the same letter that we should not misunderstand the Paris Commune as the actualization of a post-capitalist future (as Worrell and Krier seem to believe). He says:

Perhaps you will point to the Paris Commune; but apart from the fact that this was merely the rising of a town under exceptional conditions, the majority of *the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be*. (Marx to Nieuwenhuis, Feb 22, 1881; emphasis added)

Accordingly, the analysis of the Paris Commune as a pre-historical actualization of what is supposed to come is in truth an imaginary projection of an idea into the non-existing realm of (future) history. It is impossible to make predictions about a new society at a time when this new society is constantly arriving and hence not yet real. However, what *is* possible is using historical events as signs of the future and as signs of hope. Marx remains a Kantian at this point:

But had any eighteenth-century Frenchman the faintest idea *a priori* beforehand of the way in which the demands of the French bourgeoisie would be accomplished? The doctrinaire and necessarily fantastic anticipations of the programme of action for a revolution of the future only divert us from the struggle of the present. The dream that the end of the world was at hand inspired the early Christians in their struggle with the Roman Empire and gave them confidence in victory. (Marx to Nieuwenhuis, Feb 22, 1881)

Worrell’s and Krier’s claim that Marx never “really gave much thought to the political coherence and presuppositions underpinning the idea of a future communism” (2016: 10) can therefore be rejected. However, his comments on democracy in his Hegel critique as well as his comments on the Paris Commune give us some guiding clues about his conception of communism as the real movement of overcoming what exists (if we take those comments as *historically* proper comments). Given the main point about raising questions in the clouds, we cannot make predictions about a future society as long as we do not *understand its possibility from within the current conditions*. The idea of communism and its *present* (i.e., not eternal) content can only be wrested from the theoretical analysis of our *contemporary* contradictions of capitalism, such as the rising global inequalities, the transformation of the earth into a huge gas station, and the ever-renewed forms of wars, walls, and exclusions, as well as the ambivalence of technological progress and educational advances.

In sum, we can see from this that the claim that “Marx presents us with an everything or nothing choice” (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 45) should be rejected, insofar as Marx does not think of the

alternative between capitalist society and post-capitalist society as an either/or choice; instead, he pushes us to think harder about the current openings, the *real* movement, when we think about possible futures. Instead of turning to the present with its contradictory signs, such as the looming ecological catastrophe, the emergence of a global “we,” the unfolding of new class conflicts, and the conflict between commons and capital, at the end of their polemic piece Worrell and Krier recommend a dissatisfactory retreat to singing and chanting. After these general remarks, I would like to offer three additional short extensions to what I have presented so far, namely, remarks on the concepts of alienation, private property, and democracy.

Alienation

First, Worrell and Krier reduce Marx’s concept of alienation to the problem of alienated *labor*. However, we would do well to extend this textbook version of alienation and, at least, by taking note that we find a broader conception of alienation in the early Marx. This broader conception of alienation is not related to labor alone, but is also related to political, legal, and cultural relations, such as (1) the rupture between family and civil society (MEGA I/2: 149);² (2) the relation between civil society and the state in the context of Marx’s concept of democracy, which is articulated in his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (MEGA I/2: 33); (3) religious alienation, i.e., religion as the cry of the oppressed; (4) money as the perversion of character and agency (MEGA I/2: 318); (5) poverty (MEGA I/2: 290); and, above all, (6) private property (MEGA I/2: 108), which is also at the center of the concept of alienation in *one* portion of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, namely, the section entitled “alienated labor.” The focus on private property is important, insofar as the problem of alienated labor is not, as the authors claim, a problem of autonomy; instead, it is connected to *law* [Recht] in general, and, more particularly, to the problem of abstract law and civil society, as introduced in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of law.

According to Marx’s critique of the modern liberal tradition most exemplified by Locke, private property is not an anthropological concept to be found in all societies, i.e., it is not the result of a “natural” appropriation of the earth and things around us through labor; rather, private property is a specific historical and social *form* of this appropriation (for this, see, e.g., the introduction to the *Grundrisse*; MEGA II/1: 23). According to the *Manuscripts*, private property is the dialectical expression of wage labor, since it is through the wage form that the results of our productive activities appear to us as things to be appropriated through monetary consumption. Private property *seems* to be the expression of the individual’s freedom to buy and possess commodities, but in truth it is the “hinge” between the individual and her productive capacities as something owned by someone else for the sake of profit. The wage is therefore the expression of the true alienation for Marx because the private appropriation of the products of labor through the act of buying them (back) presupposes (a) the exclusion of others from the enjoyment of these products and (b) the insertion of the labor-relation into the production of privately produced wealth. Put differently, private property, especially in its real actualization and movement as privatization, is the way in which wealth exists in capitalist societies. This privately produced wealth is ultimately based on *class* distinction, insofar as with the introduction of wealth through wage, surplus value goes towards the upper class(es). Accordingly, private property and, hence, alienated labor, is ultimately the result of the class distinction in capitalism. Worrell and Krier, at least in my view, underestimate that the problem of alienated labor is less a problem of labor itself; but is, instead, a problem of *class oppositions*. Worrell and Krier’s attempt to understand the concept of alienation as a result of a critique of *immediate* social relations misses the main point of Marx’s theory, as it does not read Marx’s analysis in the context of a theory of a specific form of social relations. Again, Marx nowhere claims that a communist society will be a society in which no universal mediator of social

relations can be found; it is *precisely* the other way around, insofar as we find, due to the class division, *no universal* mediation in capitalist social organization. Only a classless society could be “mediated” by a universal, though we should note here that Marx has not yet introduced capital as a universal in his early writings. As a consequence, the authors’ charge that Marx did not think about the political aspects of his projections of the future is baseless, since the class struggle *is* a primarily political concept in Marx. I will come back to this point in the next subsection.

As a consequence, although Marx thinks of communism as a specific social form of this appropriation, which is no longer based on class distinction, this does not mean that we can live in a society without any historically specific form of appropriation (of the results of our productive capacities and the earth). To define communism the way Worrell and Krier define it, is to eradicate the central core of what communism means, namely, the idea of a classless society. This does not exclude the unequal distribution of goods, the inequality of individuals, or the unequal structure of possessions. “Classless” here only refers to the idea that the wealth that is produced by collective labor is no longer appropriated and controlled by one class. One condition of this is that we re-appropriate *the commons* in the form of the earth and our productive activities. The commons, however, *is* a universal. Accordingly, the authors’ claim that Marx rejects universal mediation is wrong.

Second, we should also reject Worrell’s and Krier’s claim that alienation is centered around the problem of autonomy (2016: 2), particularly since the concept of alienated labor is rooted in Hegel’s concept of recognition, which, in turn, is posed as a critical concept that is opposed to autonomy, if we mean by autonomy some kind of *independence* and control of oneself (and others). At least in the *Manuscripts* Marx remains a sober Hegelian, inasmuch as freedom is spelled out, as indicated above, as a problem of the relation between the political and the social-economic form of society. Recognition in the Hegelian context means that I cannot be an *agent* without relations of intersubjective recognition, which, according to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, are built into abstract law and, hence, make up even the most abstract relations of the existence of freedom. Given how much attention Marx pays to this concept in the Mill excerpts that appeared around the same time as the *Manuscripts*, it is very difficult to make the claim that these deal with the dualism of autonomy and heteronomy. In contradistinction, Marx wants to point out that I cannot *be* who I am (or who I could be) without my activity being recognized as something that goes beyond my own desire and agency, i.e., the acknowledgment of social reality as ultimately a historical and collective reality. As Marx outlines in the 1844 Mill excerpts (MEW 40: 459–63), a “true” realization of human productivity would include intersubjective recognition *in* the medium, whereby the others would be recognized in their suffering and enjoyment in the process of reproducing and appropriating the product of their productive activities. However, this mediated immediacy does *not* mean that Marx is thinking about a social configuration without a mode of production (and, hence, a specific mode of reproduction), or without ethical, legal, and political relations, including the institutions that such a *universal* network of relations [*Verhältnisse*] would found and reproduce. As he already states in the *Economic Manuscripts*, a socialist society implies a “new mode of production” and a “new object of production” (MEGA I/2: 279). Accordingly, Marx does not think of a post-capitalist society as Worrell and Krier claim, as a form of social organization, in which we all are “immediately” related to each other as “pure” humans. Moreover, Marx also remains a Hegelian in the following respect: he is not opposed to the development of the individual as a development that is *independent* from the universal mediation of the political or legal system. Only romantic or totalitarian approaches to this relation try to argue for some “immediate” identity of individual and universal. A properly developed concept of dialectics and recognition, which includes *legal and political institutions*, however, does not allow for what the authors call the “utopic demystification and banishment of the Big Other” (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 19).

Third, the concept of alienation interpreted as a principle of *labor* contradicts the idea that true freedom and the overcoming of necessity can only be reached *beyond* labor. The problem is not to reach a state of unalienated labor; instead, we need to overcome the centrality of labor for our contemporary capitalist society. Again: Worrell's and Krier's assumption that the center of Marx's thought should be seen in the critique of alienated labor presupposes that we return to non-alienated labor in a communist society. However, as Postone (1996) and others have argued, what we find in Marx is a *critique of labor as labor*, namely labor as the center of wealth and its reproduction. For example, overcoming labor division is no longer central in the machine fragment in the *Grundrisse*. So, the claim that we are supposed to return to a non-alienated form of labor still assumes that labor will be the central element in a communist society. According to Marx (seen through Postone's lens), however, a communist society would no longer be centered around labor. As a consequence, proclaiming a return to non-alienated labor does not make much sense (though Marx himself *seems* to make this claim in the *Economic Manuscripts*).

Democracy

Finally, I would like to offer a few remarks on the concept of democracy, which the authors mock in their comments on Marx's comments on the Paris Commune. First, as mentioned previously, Marx warns against interpreting the Paris Commune as the realization of a socialist society; and instead, he recommends reading the Paris Commune as a historical sign of hope, i.e., his interpretation of the Commune is not meant to be an ahistorical statement, but depends upon the historical *situation* that Marx encountered when writing the *Civil War in France*. This situation, however, had changed when he corrected his views in the letter quoted at the beginning of this article. Moreover, Worrell and Krier again reduce everything to the labor perspective and to what they identify as precarious work for everyone (2016: 13), without acknowledging that an alternative reading of Marx's comments on the Paris Commune could easily show that they are centered on political questions, i.e., on the political form that a different integration of the working population into the political process would take. As Marx himself states, the Commune is constituted by the "political form of their social emancipation" (MEGA I/32: 56). Finally, we should understand Marx's comments on the Paris Commune as a demonstration that it contained a political counter-project to the political framework that existed at that point in France. Accordingly, it is less about labor, even though Marx admittedly assumes that a true political revolution can only be carried forward by the working classes. Again, Worrell's and Krier's claim that Marx never "really gave much thought to the political coherence and presuppositions underpinning the idea of a future communism" (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 10) can safely be rejected.

Be that as it may, following Marx's own warning, we should, not simply reactualize the comments on the Paris Commune and take them out of their historical setting. Instead, we should re-read them as the historical projection of a counter-project, namely, as a democratic projection in a world that not only was largely bourgeois, but also still feudalistic. We should now ask: what are the democratic elements that Marx underlines (in the drafts) of his pamphlet, and what are the elements that he criticizes? Just to mention a few, Marx describes the *opposing* political structure with the following characteristics: the separation of state bureaucracy from civil society (MEGA I/32: 53), the control of the state machinery by the upper classes (MEGA I/32: 54), a central standing army that stands against the popular masses (MEGA I/32: 54), "parliamentary showwork" (MEGA I/32: 54), police-based law and order, "self-paid senates" (MEGA I/32: 54), "financial swindler" (MEGA I/32: 54), political dispossession (MEGA I/32: 56). Against this, Marx welcomes, among other changes, the following modifications: short-term representation (MEGA I/32: 105), the administrators should not make more money than the average working population (MEGA I/32:

105), judges should be elected (MEGA I/32: 105), churches should be “disestablished” (MEGA I/32: 106), religion should be removed from public education (MEGA I/32: 106), and universal access to scientific knowledge should be erected, making knowledge *public* knowledge (MEGA I/32: 106). To be sure, one could argue that Marx underestimated that much of the foregoing can be achieved within modern representative “democracies,” but to claim, as Worrell and Krier (2016: 16) do, that these comments already contain a Soviet model of suppression is plainly absurd. In addition, these comments also demonstrate clearly that Marx’s political vision is democratic, even if the details remain, given that the Paris Commune was not successful and remained a local experiment, necessarily *in the clouds*.

Even more, it sounds to me as if some of these descriptions have not lost their force, particularly if we think of our own times in which depolitization and de-democratization are at their height. Is it not the case in our own times that the process of privatization is waging wars around the globe, that the upper classes determine all important policy decisions, that our standing armies are not only getting larger, but slowly intrude into every aspect of everyday life, that capital destroys the well-being of billions of human and non-human animals by turning everything on earth into profitable income for finance capital, and that imperialist economic policies dispossess the majority of the global population? Though Worrell and Krier cite Marx’s excitement about the “heroic self-sacrifice” (MEGA I/32: 65) of the working population, as if any revolution could do without this moment, they never mention that Marx says this in the context of the positive establishment of themselves through the *constitution* of the Commune (MEGA I/32: 66), which is no longer intended to be the constitution of a class, but is instead intended to be a truly *universal* – legal and political – constitution of the people. The subtle claim (Worrell and Krier, 2016: 14) that Marx’s proletariat is based on a perverted protestant ethic, is, in my view, Worrell’s and Krier’s personal vendetta, which cannot be supported by Marx’s philosophical claims.

It is clear, then, that Marx follows Kant with his claim that the abolishment of standing armies is not only a condition for peace (as in Kant), but also the condition “for all social improvements” (MEGA I/32: 57). Similarly, the police must be “de-classed,” too. However, according to Marx, a communist society will be based on the disappearance of the *political* character of the state apparatuses. For example, the class-based structure of police violence, as we can observe it currently in the US, should wither away. However, this does not mean that a socialist democracy can do without *any* executive functions or without police entirely. Marx always dismissed such socialist dreams and utopias. When he says in the *German Ideology* that in bourgeois society right and law are separated, he means that law in a capitalist society takes on a class-based and, hence, an oppressive character. Put differently, it remains abstract law, and punishment is carried out as a tool of political oppression and not, as it should be, as the expression of a free society. The Commune as the attempt to do away with the class conflict no longer needs to have a police that operates on the ground of the upper (or white) classes; instead, it becomes truly “neutral” and realizes what bourgeois ideology can only promise, i.e., an independent executive body.

Finally, Marx does not assume that the state will simply wither away; rather, the *form* of it will change. Lenin’s “withering away” stems from Engels, but not from Marx (for this, see MEGA I/25: 21). For example, in his comments on Bakunin (MEW 18: 634), Marx states that the future society will not be based on a state organization in its *current form*; and there are remarks about the disappearance of the state *as such*. It is clear, though, that Marx thinks of a post-capitalist society that deserves its name as a society based on decentralization and autonomous self-regulation; but it is not clear whether this would imply the abolishment of all centralized and universal state functions. For example, in the comments on the Commune, Marx seems to assume that there will be *public* education, i.e., an educational system for all. At least in my mind, a public education system is, in fact, a universal.

Conclusion

Given what I have outlined in my foregoing remarks, the main issue that Worrell and Krier address in their interesting piece should be pushed into other directions: instead of abstractly criticizing Marx for not taking absolute others or similar abstractions into account, and instead of making empty distinctions between capitalism and communism, it would be more proper to the spirit of Marx's philosophy to think through the possible openings in relation to all basic ontological relations within which we find ourselves entangled. This would include ethical relations, social-economic relations, and legal and political institutions; and it would require a sober analysis of our present times and its contradictions, including the analysis of critical work done by those who lived within those states that failed in their attempt to develop socialist societies, such as Rudolf Bahro's *Die Alternative* (1977). As Marx states in the *German Ideology*, communism is not a society to be reached in the future; instead, and more properly conceived, it is the *reality* of the movement that entangles the present and pushes it forward (MEGA I/2: 275). Communists are all around us. Always. Even if we (and they) do not know who they are. One thing, however, is certain: we cannot and should not give up the category of the universal, and, as my foregoing remarks should have shown, I do not think that Marx ever gave this notion up. In sum, Worrell and Krier raise questions in the clouds, and we would do well to critically engage with the starting point of their considerations.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Marx and Engels (1956) *Werke*, cited as MEW and volume number parenthetically throughout the text. Emphasis in original.
2. Marx and Engels (1970) *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, cited as MEGA and volume number parenthetically throughout the text.

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