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V. I. Lenin on Alienation

Critical Sociology

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Abstract

According to an old legend, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of Soviet Marxism, overlooked Karl Marx's theory of alienation. For Marxist humanists, this theory underlies the emancipatory thrust of Marx's thought, and since, in their view, Lenin's acolytes ignored alienation, communist regimes failed to empower the workers. Considering these claims, this article challenges the legend that Lenin himself neglected Marx's theory of alienation. It argues that this theory was central to Lenin's Marxism. In fact, Lenin was among the first to discover the concept in Marx's work, although he also analysed the concept independently. Like Marx, Lenin criticised capitalist alienation and defined communism as a non-alienated society. After the October Revolution, however, Lenin struggled to realise this goal. Responding to a failed European socialist revolution, a brutal civil war, a deadly famine and widespread cultural backwardness, Lenin made concessions to alienation. Nevertheless, Lenin's legacy provides an important insight into alienation today.

Keywords

Lenin, alienation, estrangement, Marx, communism, humanism, Praxis school, sociology

Introduction

According to an old legend, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of Soviet Marxism, overlooked Karl Marx's theory of alienation (Bell, 1959: 946; Fromm, 1966: 71; Mitin, 1967: 3, 6; Service, 1977: 95; Lane, 1981: 17, 68; Harding, 1996: 7). For Marx, alienation 'is a situation in which the combined powers and attributes of human beings are literally objectified: into capital, technology, markets, laws of history, God, and so on, so that living (subjective) human beings are ruled by their own objectified powers' (Ross, 2020: 527). Many believe that 'Lenin had no awareness of this concept and that it played no part in the elaboration of his own theories' (Mészáros, 1972: 93). The main argument for this view is that Lenin was unaware of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, which contain his most detailed discussion of alienation (Mitin, 1967: 3; Fromm, 1966: 71; Levine, 2015: 177). The Bolshevik David Ryazanov published these for the first time in 1927, in Russian no less, 3 years after Lenin's death in 1924 (Musto, 2015: 234). Before 1927, Musto claims that a few people did examine the meaning and significance of alienation in Marx's

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work, but he does not include Lenin among them. Musto (2010: 80) instead argues that ‘the rediscovery of the theory of alienation occurred thanks to György Lukács, who in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) referred to certain passages in Marx’s *Capital*— especially the section on “commodity fetishism”. . . and introduced the term “reification”’. Actually, commodity fetishism and reification are not forms of alienation, despite being closely related (Ross, 2020).¹ Nevertheless, most would agree with Musto’s (2010: 81) contention that it was only after the publication of the German edition of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* in 1932 that alienation became a popular subject of socialist discussion. Since then, many studies have analysed the concept, but they seldom acknowledge Lenin’s engagement with it.

For those who place the concept of alienation at the heart of Marxism, Lenin’s ignorance of the 1844 *Manuscripts* is significant. It shows that he ‘missed out the core of Marx’s theory: the *basic* idea of the Marxian system’ (Mészáros, 1972: 93). This claim forms part of a socialist tradition called Marxist humanism, which emerged after the 1932 publication of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts*. For Marxist humanists, Marx’s theory of alienation underlies the emancipatory thrust of his thought; and since, in their view, Lenin’s acolytes ignored alienation, Marxist-Leninist regimes failed to empower the workers (Dunayevskaya, 1965; Rockmore, 2018: 3; Musto, 2021: 16).

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School voiced similar arguments. Marcuse (1958: 234–235, 238) utilised Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* to criticise alienation in both capitalist and socialist societies, claiming that Marxism-Leninism ignored Marx’s theory of alienation. It therefore makes sense that the Marxist strand of critical theory is historically connected to Marxist humanism. Erich Fromm (1966), a founding member of the Frankfurt School, also promoted Marxist humanism, editing the book *Socialist Humanism* in 1965.

Several scholars present Lenin as the founder of Marxism-Leninism (Rockmore, 2018: 2, 8; Musto, 2021: 19). This view, if accepted, means that his doctrine must reckon with the Marxist humanist critique. Some have made this link, claiming that Lenin violated Marx’s humanism, and that his ideas are responsible for alienation in Marxist-Leninist societies (Meyer, 1957: 271, 273; Kurtz, 1973: 174; Brie, 2019: 59–60; Musto, 2021: 19).

Others have rejected this narrative. In Tito’s Yugoslavia, a socialist state critical of Soviet Marxism-Leninism, a Marxist Humanist group called the Praxis school defended Lenin’s emancipatory aspirations, and shifted the blame for alienation in the Soviet Union onto Stalin (Sher, 1977: 137–138). When Yugoslavia introduced its system of workers’ self-management, which sought to increase the workers’ control over their economic enterprises, both the ruling League of Communists and Praxis school justified the system with reference to not only Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts*, but also Lenin’s writings (Gruenwald, 1983: 158, 191).

Prior to Stalin’s death in 1953, ideologists within the orthodox Marxist-Leninist regimes rarely discussed alienation. The official line maintained that the concept was inessential to Marxism. Consequently, Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* went unpublished in some of these countries (Musto, 2021: 19). With the onset of de-Stalinisation in 1956, however, humanism came into vogue, especially in the criticism of Stalinism itself (Dunayevskaya, 1965: 71). Soviet scholars began tackling the concept of alienation more seriously (Yanowitch, 1967). In doing so, they rejected the charge of establishing an alienated society and denied that Lenin laid the groundwork for such a society. While acknowledging that Lenin was unaware of Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* (Yanowitch, 1967: 37–38), Soviet scholars argued that the concept of alienation was central to his thought. According to M. B. Mitin, a prominent representative of this position, ‘the notion that Lenin “missed” the problem of alienation . . . is untenable’. In fact, ‘Lenin always emphasised that the teachings of Marxism on . . . the building of communism comprise a . . . genuinely revolutionary humanism that sees as its highest goal the destruction of all oppression and exploitation of man by man’ (Mitin, 1967: 13, 3). To further promote this view, the Soviets included ‘alienation’ and ‘humanism’ in the

subject index of Lenin's Collected Works (CW 47: 29, 251).² Mészáros also supports this position. It is clear, in his view, that 'in Lenin's development as a Marxist his grasp of the concept of alienation in its true significance played a vital role' (Mészáros, 1972: 93).

Evidently, the status of alienation in Lenin's thought is important not only for understanding his intellectual development and relation to Marx. It is also essential to understanding the history of the discovery of alienation in Marx's work, Lenin's connection to Marxism-Leninism and Marxist humanism, the relationship between Marxism-Leninism and alienation and the concept of alienation itself. 'Considering the centrality and importance of the concept [of alienation] in critical sociology' (Worrell, 2014: 1183), these issues are especially pertinent for researchers in this field.

That said, this article examines and rejects the legend that Lenin overlooked Marx's theory of alienation. It argues that this theory was central to Lenin's Marxism. In fact, Lenin was among the first to discover the concept of alienation in Marx's work, although he also examined it independently. This indicates that Lenin adhered more faithfully to Marx's humanism than is often alleged.

This article also argues that Lenin, like Marx, criticised capitalist alienation and defined communism as a non-alienated society. After the October Revolution, however, Lenin struggled to realise this goal. Responding to a failed European socialist revolution, a brutal civil war, a deadly famine and widespread cultural backwardness, Lenin made some pragmatic concessions to alienation. Nevertheless, the recognition of Lenin's engagement with alienation is important in appreciating the emancipatory potential of his Marxism. Lenin's legacy also offers an important insight into alienation today.

Before outlining these arguments, it is worth clarifying that this article discusses Lenin's thoughts on two types of alienation in Marx's writings: alienated labour – which the 'common reading' conflates with alienation itself (Ross, 2020: 530) – and political alienation. These are not usually connected and should be held analytically distinct. That said, Marx and Lenin thought that it is difficult to eradicate the former without eradicating the latter, and their conceptions of socialism intertwined the economic and political spheres. For that reason, this article refers to both simply as 'alienation' in the context of socialism. In any case, it should usually be obvious which type the analysis is describing.

To proceed, this article begins by briefly outlining Marx's theory of alienation. It then examines Lenin's engagement with this concept, including his critique of capitalist alienation. Moving on, the analysis examines Lenin's theoretical programme for overcoming alienation under socialism, before exploring his attempt to implement this programme in practice after the 1917 October Revolution. Finally, the conclusion identifies the importance of recognising Lenin's engagement with alienation, as well as the significance of his legacy for comprehending and overcoming alienation today.

Marx on Alienation

Alienation, for Marx, is the transformation of human labour into a power that rules society, as if by a kind of supra-human or natural law. It means, in other words, 'that living human beings are controlled by a force that exists outside of them but that is in reality their own combined force' (Ross, 2020: 535). The key thing to remember is that 'this force remains *us* and becomes embedded in a new nature via a metamorphosis that is an objectification/materialisation tied to our activity' (Ross, 2020: 535). In essence, then, alienation occurs when people create firmly established forces (objectified human activities) that control human activity. Because humans produce and maintain these controlling forces, alienation entails the domination of people by themselves, by the social structures, relations, products, and institutions that they create and perpetuate. Marx

argued that people became alienated during the rise of class-divided societies, when a property-owning class was able to subjugate and exploit the propertyless class. He paid special attention to alienation under capitalism.³

A core characteristic of capitalist alienation is capital's domination over humanity. In this situation, the workers externalise themselves in the production process by creating value. Utilising its private ownership of the means of production, the bourgeoisie exploits the workers to appropriate their surplus value, make a profit and accumulate capital. Through the maintenance and repetition of this exploitative process, humanity acts as the servant of capital, its own creation; since capitalism can survive only through the constant accumulation of capital. Instead of creating value in accordance with their human needs, people produce in accordance with the needs of capital.

For Marx, then, 'the problem with capitalism is that human beings are enthralled to human products- this is *alienation* proper, in its most basic formulation'. However, 'an element of this is *estrangement*, the concept that human existence (the 'subjective' essence of any given person in a given milieu) is out of step with essence (what a human could be, given the state of 'objective' knowledge-power)' (Ross, 2020: 538). Estrangement, in short, means the separation of people from aspects of themselves, which they need to live a human existence. To be more precise, the concept describes an inverse relation between the subjective humanity of people, on one hand, and the humanity of their objectified attributes, on the other. Under estrangement, people lose their own humanity in proportion as their objectified activities gain it (Ross, 2020: 537).

In his analysis of capitalism in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx argued that the bourgeoisie's appropriation of the workers' product results in the workers' permanent loss of self. Consequently, the more workers produce, the more estranged they become. Their world, their productive activities, their products and the people they encounter are strange, external and opposed to them. As for the workers themselves, 'from whom everything else stands apart as hostile and alien', they are self-estranged, since 'their humanity, power, activity, and sociability are all now elements of an alien world that becomes all the more able to oppress them the more it takes from them and absorbs what it takes into itself' (Ross, 2020: 530).

A critical difference between estrangement and alienation is that the former focuses primarily upon the externality and strangeness of objectified human activity, the separation of human beings from their own capacities. Estrangement occurs when people objectify their own attributes, which then confront them as strange and external forces. Alienation, by contrast, entails both the strangeness that results from objectification, *and* domination. Not only do people objectify aspects of themselves that appear as strange, but their self-externalisations also dominate people in turn, by governing them. Accordingly, while alienation has a mostly negative connotation in Marx's thought, estrangement is a more neutral concept. Marx thought that estrangement 'is only truly negative' when (1) laws keep the workers' estranged attributes out of reach, leaving them with just 'their skin and bones' and when (2) estrangement appears alongside alienation (Ross, 2020: 530).

In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx extended his critique of capitalist alienation to politics. Liberal democracy claims to manifest popular sovereignty in public affairs, but it cannot provide this, since the state is divorced from civil society, where capitalist exploitation and competition reign. The popular majority are unable to fully exercise their capacity to politically determine all the spheres affecting them. Since, moreover, the state is a manifestation of class antagonisms, its claim to provide a united political community is illusory, since in civil society people are divided according to class interests. The sham solidarity and equality promoted by the democratic state masks the real class antagonisms and inequality pervading society. In fact, the state exists to stabilise and perpetuate these concrete phenomena. It achieves this by excluding the masses and standing above them, as their own alienated social power (Marx, 1967: 157, 155, 176, 186, 199–202).

In his essay *On the Jewish Question*, Marx argued that alienation will end only once political democracy extends into civil society and abolishes the private ownership of the means of production, for this will enable the workers to collectively administer their political–economic activities in a conscious, planned, and democratic manner. Such an unalienated state will dissolve, since the entire population will participate in public governance, rather than an official body separated from civil society (Marx, 1967: 241). In his 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx (1974: 90) described this stateless situation as communism, a classless society in which every individual can realise their full potential. ‘For Marx the very purpose of communism is to overcome alienation’ (Ross, 2020: 536).

Marx did not expect estrangement to vanish with the end of alienation. After 1847, he tended to present factory labour and machine technology – which are manifestations of estrangement – as necessary components of communism. Marx realised that human emancipation ‘requires mammoth objectifications of human activity, created by legions, which will of course dwarf any individual’ (Ross, 2020: 540). Under communism, Marx thought that the producers will still objectify themselves, in the form of phenomena such as advanced technologies, consumer products, workplace discipline, and political authority. The important thing is that this objectification will not be alienated. The producers will collectively control their technologies and distribute their products in the service of human needs, and they will determine their forms of workplace discipline and political authority via democratic methods. For the post-1847 Marx, therefore, the goal was not to overcome estrangement but to instead overcome alienation: the unplanned, undemocratic character of production and public affairs. Marx thought that estrangement will diminish in an unalienated society, but he did not expect it to disappear (Ross, 2020: 539–541). This is important to note, for this article recognises that Lenin also associated communism with factory labour, consumer products, machine technology, workplace discipline and political authority. Lenin’s conception of communism did not entail the eradication of estrangement.

To end this discussion, it is worth mentioning that Marx changed his approach to alienation over time. In his early (pre-1845) writings, including the three mentioned earlier, Marx’s major unit of analysis was the human being, which he sometimes described as a ‘species being’. In his later writings, including *Capital*, Marx couched alienation in a class analysis. He spoke not of alienated human beings, but of alienated classes. Highlighting this fact, Althusser and his followers erroneously concluded that Marx discarded the concept of alienation, when in truth he evolved a more scientific approach to it (Ross, 2020: 536). As the following analysis shall show, Lenin also described alienation in terms of both human beings and classes.

Lenin on Alienation

According to Mitin (1967: 4), ‘the fact that Lenin was unfamiliar with Marx’s early writings [on alienation] is beyond question’. The validity of this claim depends upon the definition of Marx’s early writings. Most scholars define these as everything Marx wrote before his *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*, both of which he completed in the spring of 1845. Lenin was familiar with two of Marx’s pre-1845 writings on alienation: his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and his essay *On the Jewish Question*. In the bibliography of his article ‘Karl Marx’, Lenin (CW 21: 80) claimed that these were the two ‘most noteworthy’ of Marx’s writings published in 1844. There is no published material containing Lenin’s examination of these two works. He did read them, however, since he quotes the former in several places, including the ‘Karl Marx’ article (CW 21: 47). The fact that Lenin described them as ‘most noteworthy’ indicates that he recognised and valued their ideas on alienation.

More significantly, in 1895 Lenin wrote a ‘Conspectus of Marx and Engels’ *The Holy Family*. They began writing this book in 1844, and they published it in February 1845, before the *Theses*

on *Feuerbach* and *German Ideology*. *The Holy Family* therefore qualifies as one of Marx's early writings. The Soviet committee in charge of publishing the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin highlighted the significance of this. According to the committee, 'Lenin could not read . . . Marx's *Manuscripts of 1844*, but in his *Conspectus of The Holy Family* he quoted a number of important passages . . . which originated in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and which deal with the problematics of alienation' (cited in Mészáros, 1972: 95). In fact, the *Holy Family* also contained descriptions of alienated labour and political alienation that likely originated, due to their similarities, in Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and his essay *On the Jewish Question*. Contra Mitin, therefore, the evidence shows that Lenin studied three of Marx's early writings on alienation directly (Marx's *Critique of Hegel*, *Jewish Question*, and *Holy Family*) and a fourth indirectly (Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*). As such, there is little basis for the view that Lenin was unfamiliar with Marx's writings on the concept. He was actually fairly familiar with some of them.

Mészáros traces Lenin's engagement with alienation back to his 1895 *Conspectus*. Mészáros (1972: 93) argues that this date is significant, since 'all of Lenin's important theoretical works . . . postdate' 1895. Indeed, it even predates the 1927 publication of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, which suggests that Lenin was one of the first people to highlight Marx's theory of alienation.

Lenin's *Conspectus of The Holy Family* quoted extensively from Marx and Engels' critique of Pierre Proudhon, a self-declared anarchist. Proudhon endorsed a mutualist economy in which every worker owned their own home and means of production and traded with other workers. Marx and Engels argued that mutualism would not overcome alienation, because it maintained petty private property. The workers would still produce on an individual basis to achieve their private economic ends, instead of producing collectively for the community's needs. Since individual workers would privately control and divide production, the collective planning of society's economic development would be impossible. The workers would remain estranged from themselves and each other. Lenin (CW 38: 30) quoted the passage expounding this argument and commented that it 'is highly characteristic, for it shows how Marx approached the basic idea of his entire "system," . . . namely the concept of the social relations of production'. The value of this observation, Mészáros (1972: 94) explains, 'is the fact that "the basic idea of Marx's entire system" – "the concept of the social relations of production" is precisely his concept of alienation, . . . as Lenin correctly recognised it'.

Further on, Lenin quoted Marx and Engels' critique of Hegel's views on alienation. Whereas Hegel, a philosophical idealist, thought that people could overcome alienation via mental enlightenment, Marx and Engels, who were philosophical materialists, identified its material core. Alienation could disappear only by transforming the social relations of production. Lenin (CW 38: 40) drew a thick line down the margins of this argument, indicating its significance to him.

Lenin also quoted Marx and Engels' view that the bourgeoisie and proletariat experience alienation differently. While the bourgeoisie retains a '*semblance* of human existence' in its alienation, given its dominant economic position, the exploited proletariat 'feels annihilated in its self-alienation; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence' (cited in CW 38: 27). Lenin recognised the Marxist thesis that alienation is an objective condition, rooted in class relations. Under capitalism, all people are alienated, regardless of whether they think it or not. They may, however, display different symptoms of this condition, depending upon their place in the class structure.

Finally, Lenin discussed Marx and Engels' critique of political alienation. The liberal democratic state claims to provide collective rule in public affairs, but it actually stands apart from the people as their own alienated social power. Since the state is separated from the capitalist economy, a sphere of power affecting everyone, the principle of collective rule is only partially realised.

Lenin echoed Marx's denunciation of the 'spirituistically-democratic representative state, based on modern bourgeois society'. Democracy under capitalism is spiritual and alienated, as opposed to material and non-alienated, because the economic realm is beyond political control, because the sense of collective solidarity offered by democracy is illusory and because the state is separated from the people (CW 38: 40).

Although Lenin said little in his *Conspectus of the Holy Family*, his choice of quotations and his responses to them reveal the importance of alienation in his thought. Significantly, Lenin did not only promote this theme of the *Holy Family* in 1895. He continued to do so afterwards (Mészáros, 1972: 95). In his article 'Frederick Engels', published in 1896, Lenin celebrated the *Holy Family* precisely for developing the theory of alienation. In the 1840s, he explained, the philosophers Bruno and Edgar Bauer described Marxism as anti-humanist, because the theory based its emancipatory vision not upon humanity but upon the working class. Marx and Engels responded to this accusation by portraying the proletariat as the truest representative of the struggle for human freedom (Mitin, 1967: 4). Since the workers were the most dehumanised of all the social groups, they were in the best position to understand and destroy alienation, in the interests of humanity:

These gentlemen, the Bauers, looked down on the proletariat as an uncritical mass. Marx and Engels vigorously opposed this absurd and harmful tendency. In the name of a real, human person – the worker, trampled down by the ruling classes and the state – they demanded, not contemplation, but a struggle for a better order of society. They, of course, regarded the proletariat as the force that is capable of waging this struggle and that is interested in it. (CW 2: 23)

Lenin praised the *Holy Family* not only for containing 'the foundations of revolutionary materialist socialism', but also for being written 'in the name of a real, human person', the worker. This was an explicit affirmation of alienation and its centrality to Marxism. Mészáros argues that the same argument characterises Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*. They expressed the 'critically adopted standpoint of "the worker, trampled down by the ruling classes and the state"; . . . the standpoint of the proletariat in its opposition to the "propertied class" which feels happy and confirmed in this self-alienation . . . This is what Lenin, and Marx, had in mind when they spoke of the "real, human person"' (Mészáros, 1972: 95–96). Lenin would add that Engels thought this as well. By defending this aspect of the *Holy Family* in his article 'Frederick Engels', he is one of the few Marxists to recognise Engels' engagement with alienation.

Mészáros (1972: 94) argues that 'the central ideas expressed in [Lenin's] *Conspectus* . . . remained in the centre of his ideas in his subsequent writings'. Mészáros does not explore these, but he is right. Lenin continued to describe alienation in everything but name, paying special attention to the phenomenon in his native Russia, a quasi-feudalistic autocracy. In some of Lenin's remarks, Marx's influence is noticeable, but in others, it is evident that Lenin examined alienation independently.

In the autumn of 1895, Lenin (CW 2: 52) asserted that the 'workers must show that they consider themselves human beings just as much as the factory owners do, and that they have no intention of allowing themselves to be treated as dumb cattle'. Marx (1974: 65) made a similar remark in his 1844 *Manuscripts*, when he said that alienated labour turns workers into 'animals' while fostering 'stupidity' and 'cretinism' among them. Writing from prison later in 1895, Lenin remarked that 'once the factory management has engaged a worker, it disposes of his services just as it likes, paying no attention to the worker's habits, to his customary way of life, to his family position, to his intellectual requirements'. The factory 'demands that the worker surrender his will altogether'. As a result, 'the worker becomes part of a huge aggregate of machinery. He must be just as obedient, enslaved, and without a will of his own, as the machine itself' (CW 2: 105–106). Marx (1974:

65) made a comparable statement in his *1844 Manuscripts*, when he remarked that alienated factory labour turns a section of the proletariat 'into a machine'. Lenin (CW 12: 277) expressed the same point in 1907, when he observed that 'the peasants are struggling to free themselves from bondage, from labour service, from feudal exploitation. The peasants are struggling for an opportunity to live just a little bit like human being'. Lenin repeatedly criticised capitalism for dehumanising the workers, and this of course was a key element of Marx's theory of alienation.

At this point, it is worth confronting an assumption of this analysis that can help in clarifying alienation more precisely. This article interprets Lenin's treatment of workers and peasants as human beings as a discussion of alienation. In itself, this logic is challengeable. It is possible to think about society in terms of human beings without discussing alienation. For instance, when people define dehumanisation as a subjective feeling or individual emotion, they are not describing alienation in Marx's sense. Lenin did not do this. In describing workers and peasants as human beings, he portrayed their dehumanisation as an objective condition rooted in social relations, as Marx himself did in his 1844 *Manuscripts*.

Alienation and Socialism

Marx regarded the elimination of private ownership of the means of production and the construction of socialism as a necessary condition for overcoming alienation. Lenin upheld this proposition. As early as 1895, he argued that Marxism aimed at establishing 'socialist production in common, directed by the workers themselves'. Under this system, production will 'benefit the working people themselves, while the surplus they produce over and above their keep will serve to satisfy the needs of the workers themselves, to secure the full development of all their capabilities and equal rights to enjoy all the achievements of science and art' (CW 2: 108). Like Marx, Lenin argued that the abolition of capitalism will not spontaneously end alienation. The workers themselves must direct the production process collectively. Only then can they develop their creative human capacities. Lenin made this clear in his comments on the 1902 Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Mitin, 1967: 7). G. V. Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, proposed the 'planned organisation of the social process to satisfy the needs both of society as a whole and of its individual members'. Lenin argued that this was insufficient:

Organisation of that kind will, perhaps, be provided even by the trusts. It would be more definite to say 'by society as a whole' (for this covers planning and indicates who is responsible for that planning), and not merely to satisfy the needs of its members, but with the object of ensuring *full* well-being and free, *all-round* development for *all* the members of society. (CW 6: 52)

Unlike Plekhanov, Lenin emphasised the importance of the workers themselves democratically planning their common affairs.

Prior to 1914, however, Lenin's philosophical outlook contradicted his political programme for overcoming alienation. In his treatise *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (CW 14), which was published in 1909, Lenin maintained the philosophical position that matter determined consciousness and that the economic base shaped and constrained the political and ideological superstructure. According to this view, human ideas, forces, and actions were the passive reflections of underlying economic forces. Conscious thoughts were a mere epiphenomenon of the objective material conditions in society, which evolved independently of the human will. This crude materialism gave limited scope for human subjectivity (Anderson, 1995: 21–22). Socialism, Lenin assumed, would arise from structural economic factors, and as a process of 'natural history', unaffected by conscious human action (CW 1: 137).

From 1914 to 1915, Lenin revised this approach. He reformulated the philosophical underpinnings of the relationship between alienation and socialism while studying Hegel's writings, especially his *Science of Logic*. In his comments on Hegel, which the Soviet Union published posthumously under the title *Philosophical Notebooks*, Anderson (1995) argues that Lenin replaced his crude materialism with a more truly dialectical materialism. By engaging more seriously with the insights of Hegelian idealism, he affirmed the role of the subjective factor in history. Lenin insisted that human 'consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it' (CW 38: 212). While, in his view, economic forces still provided limitations to human action, the masses could influence these forces and determine the course of history, if they developed a revolutionary consciousness. For the first time in his intellectual development, Lenin established the philosophical foundation for the view that the masses were the decisive force in history. Rather than accepting their fate as the slaves of objective material conditions, they had the capacity to alter these conditions (Anderson 1995). And this, of course, is a core tenet of Marxist humanism.

Although few have mentioned it, these philosophical revelations were fundamental to Lenin's thoughts on socialism and alienation. In arguing that humans could shape the world and determine their own destinies, Lenin affirmed the possibility of the working masses rising up to overthrow capitalism, build socialism, and abolish alienation; for the mastery of one's own destiny is precisely the overcoming of alienation.

The Marxist humanism permeating Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* infused his major work of socialist theory, the *State and Revolution*, which he wrote between August and September 1917 (Anderson, 1995: 148). In this text, Lenin emphasised the unalienated character of socialism. In a passage reminiscent of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, he described the capitalist state as 'a power standing above society and "alienating itself more and more from it"'. In order to overcome this alienation, it was imperative to destroy 'the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this "alienation"'. It was essential, in short, for the workers to govern themselves directly in their Soviets, their councils, a transition that would gradually dismantle the state, by causing it to wither away (CW 25: 393). The Praxis group philosopher Rudi Supek captures the humanism of this vision: 'Lenin understood that the revolutionary proletariat, as the force of mankind's new emancipation, must build equality among the people in the management of the state by starting from their direct will – from the workers councils – thus naturally destroying alienated social power in the form of the state' (Supek, 1978: 99).

Under socialism, Lenin argued, the workers' councils would organise production in accordance with a collectively decided plan. He 'considered that the alienation of decision-making and controlling functions within the entire economic substructure of society could now be overcome by a thoroughgoing democratisation of the administrative mechanisms' (Harding, 1983: 128). For with the rise of imperialism, technological advances in large scale capitalist production had simplified economic administration, to the extent that the workers themselves could direct the process, from the local to the national level, without the need for capitalists. While many have identified a humanist vision at the heart of *The State and Revolution*, Neil Harding most clearly portrays this vision as the overcoming of alienation:

Here is . . . the promethean conception of man as an actor forging his own destiny and asserting his control over his environment. It is, of course, exactly the vision of man which Marx espoused in the 1844 Manuscripts – a vision of man which is logically required by the overcoming of alienation in which the transcendence of the state played so large a part. (Harding, 1983: 123–124)

Lenin's theory of socialist revolution in *The State and Revolution* is a theory of overcoming alienation, for it envisioned the end of capital's domination over society and the bourgeoisie's

domination over the workers. Lenin aimed at establishing conscious workers' economic and political control during the construction of socialism. This, he argued, would help satisfy the needs of every person and provide the conditions for developing their individual capacities. Lenin viewed these indicators as the most important factors in understanding the essence of socialism and communism. He maintained, of course, that socialism could not arise without conflict, without suppressing the capitalists, exploiters and the other enemies of working-class power. Nevertheless, Lenin argued that the socialist revolution represented humanity's leap from alienated to free labour, to a form of labour in which the workers could derive 'creative inspiration and satisfaction' (Mitin, 1967: 8). The same solution to alienation therefore ran from Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts* to Lenin's *State and Revolution*, which proposed a 'concrete programme' for humankind's liberation from alienation during the building of communism (Mitin, 1967: 9–10).

Political commitments prevented Lenin from finishing the *State and Revolution*, and as such, his thoughts on the Soviets in this work were underdeveloped. However, Lenin elaborated his views on these organisations in subsequent works, including his pamphlet 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', written on the eve of the 1917 October Revolution. Here, Lenin listed six features of the Soviets that would help overcome alienation. First, they replaced the standing army – an alien force standing over the people – with a workers' militia composed of the proletarian and peasant masses. Second, since the masses themselves created and organised the Soviets, they provided a close bond with the majority of the people. Third, since Soviet representatives were popularly elected and subject to recall them at any time, the Soviet system was profoundly democratic. Fourth, by mobilising people from diverse professional backgrounds, the Soviets facilitated varied and creative policies without bureaucratic hindrances (CW 26: 103). Fifth, the Soviets were an organisational form for the revolutionary vanguard: the class-conscious workers and peasants, and this vanguard could 'train, educate and lead' the rest of the oppressed. Sixth, by vesting its representatives with both legislative and executive powers, the Soviets could 'combine the advantages of the parliamentary system with those of immediate and direct democracy' (CW 26: 104). Each of these features increased the working masses' collective control over their public affairs, thereby reducing alienation.

In the same text, Lenin addressed the objection that the Soviets would be unable to govern Russia because the uneducated workers and peasants lacked the necessary training and experience. Lenin refuted this argument. On one hand, he argued that the Bolsheviks were 'not utopians'. They recognised that the unskilled workers would not immediately be able to perform public administrative functions. How could they, when for most of their lives under capitalism the workers had been debarred from politics? Having said that, Lenin rejected the 'prejudiced view that only the rich . . . are capable of *administering* the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of administration'. The class-conscious proletarians and soldiers would train the inexperienced in the essentials, and by doing so, enable the poorest, most downtrodden, and ignorant workers to participate in public administration (CW 26: 113). That said, Lenin conceded that even the class-conscious workers would be unable to perform specialist administrative and economic roles overnight. Economists, engineers, agronomists and other experts with professional qualifications would remain necessary. However, the workers would place these experts under their control, and order them to fulfil the workers' demands, in accordance with the principles of socialist democracy (CW 26: 116).

It was inevitable, Lenin argued, that the Soviet power would 'make mistakes in taking its first steps', since for the workers would wield genuine political and economic power on a nationwide scale for the first time in history. Nevertheless, there was no better way for the workers to govern themselves than to learn from their own mistakes on the job (CW 26: 114). It was imperative to imbue the masses with the 'confidence in their own strength' and convince them that they

themselves could collectively administer the political and economic life of society. Unless this objective was achieved, Russia's socialist revolution would fail (CW 26: 115).

Lenin emphasised that '[f]ull power' for the workers meant control over both economic and political processes. Anyone who knew 'the connection between politics and economics could not have "forgotten" this "trifling" circumstance' (CW 26: 116). In making this point, he recognised that the overcoming of alienation required the abolition of both political alienation and alienated labour.

Responding to those who argued that the workers' revolution could not overcome capitalist resistance, Lenin argued that such people had not yet witnessed the workers at their full strength, at the helm of Soviet power. When the working masses who had been 'crushed by . . . capitalist slavery' achieved power, only then would they display their full potential. Millions of 'fighters who had been politically dormant . . . having ceased to believe that they were human, that they had a right to live', would seize the opportunity to decide their own fates, and they would overcome every obstacle in their path (CW 26: 126).

Alienation and the October Socialist Revolution

Unlike Marx, Lenin did not only imagine the overcoming of alienation. In October 1917, he got the opportunity to put his vision into practice, when the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia and began the construction of socialism. Some think that the Bolshevik insurrection doomed any chance of emancipating the workers; for by establishing a one-party state, the Bolsheviks hampered their self-governance (Brie, 2020: 28–29; Lane, 2020). Lenin and his comrades did not see things this way. They claimed to have won the sympathy of the majority of workers and peasants, in addition to having established the objective conditions for human flourishing on a scale unprecedented in history.

During the early months of Bolshevik rule these claims were not farfetched. In the build-up to October 1917 the Party won a broad base of support within the Soviets, the main organs of workers' and peasants' power. Lenin supported the workers' initiatives in establishing control over their enterprises, via their factory committees (CW 26: 264–265), as well as the peasants' expropriations of the landowners (CW 26: 258). Lenin recognised the difficulties involved in organising the economic foundations of socialism and developing a new attitude to work. Nevertheless, he showed faith in the workers' capacities, a faith in the idea that socialism created the conditions for their development.

Lenin exemplified this perspective in his article *How to Organise Competition*, written in December 1917. 'Bourgeois authors', he observed, were embellishing capitalism, presenting it as the only system suitable for human flourishing. Since the Bolsheviks stood for socialism, these 'bourgeois authors' accused them 'of ignoring "human nature"' (CW 26: 404). Lenin was having none of it. Imperialism, he argued, prevented the masses from controlling production, thereby stunting this essential human drive. Russian capitalism meant 'the incredibly brutal suppression of the enterprise, energy and bold initiative of the *mass* of the population, of its overwhelming majority, of ninety-nine out of every hundred toilers' (CW 26: 404). As such, the Soviet regime would offer no mercy for the supporters of capitalism. These people advocated a system 'in which poverty and want forced thousands and thousands on to the path of rowdyism, corruption and roguery, and caused them to lose all human semblance' (CW 26: 411).

Rather than suppressing human nature, Lenin argued that the Soviet people were creating the objective conditions for fully realising it. By taking over the factories, the workers created the opportunity for 'the truly mass display of enterprise, competition and bold initiative' (CW 26: 404). In every factory where the workers had deposed the capitalists or subjected them to workers'

control, and in every village where the peasants had overthrown the landowners, ‘the working man can reveal his talents, unbend his back a little, rise to his full height, and feel that he is a human being’ (CW 26: 407; Mitin, 1967: 9). The Soviet people were abolishing capitalist competition, which intensified exploitation with the aim of enriching the bourgeoisie. In its place, they were establishing socialist competition, based upon workers’ control and planning. Socialist competition incentivised workers to fulfil the economic plans set by themselves. It would draw ‘the majority of working people into a field of labour in which they can display their abilities, develop the capacities, and reveal those talents, so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled in thousands and millions’ (CW 26: 404).

As the weeks and months wore on, however, Lenin’s struggle against alienation became progressively difficult. The Praxis group philosopher Mihailo Marković argues that the objective conditions were chiefly responsible. Like Marx before him, Lenin had counted on a European-wide socialist revolution as a prerequisite for successful socialist construction in a single country (Marković, 1970: 99). It soon became evident that this revolution would not materialise. At the end of World War I, Soviet Russia was a lone workers’ state in a capitalist sea, and it had few allies. Many opposed the Bolsheviks and turned to counter-revolution, embroiling the country in a brutal civil war. A deadly famine accompanied it. In addition, Lenin thought that the workers suffered from cultural backwardness. Due to living most of their lives under capitalist oppression, they lacked the knowledge to run the factories. These circumstances made deviations from workers’ rule unavoidable. Lenin was compelled, writes Supek (1978: 99), to ‘retreat from [his] humane and ethical idea and rely upon the instrument of human oppression, the state- to be sure, under the control of the revolutionary proletariat, but the state, just the same’. To be clear, Lenin did not abandon his conception of communism as a non-alienated society. He did, however, make several pragmatic concessions to alienation as a necessary means of achieving communism. Lenin never denied that concessions would be required, and he did not shy away from them. After reading Hegel in 1914, he embraced the dialectical notion that all development proceeded through contradictions (CW 14: 359).

Thus, although Lenin endorsed workers’ control during the early days of Soviet rule, he began giving the increasingly fused, increasingly bureaucratic Party-state apparatus more power over the economy, including the right to appoint enterprise managers and impose discipline. Since the workers often lacked the ability to run the factories, the Bolsheviks hired bourgeois technicians at high salaries to run them instead. Lenin also envisioned eroding trade-union autonomy. He wanted to gradually incorporate them into the Party-state so that they could help manage the economy, educate the workers, and serve as ‘schools of communism’ (CW 32: 19–42). In practice, this would prevent the unions from opposing the Party’s directives.

To add to this, Lenin advocated Taylorism, a scientific method of capitalist economic management designed to squeeze the maximum amount of labour out of the workers, in the interests of obtaining optimal economic efficiency. Taylorism advocated a strict hierarchy of management and control, one that gave workers little power. Lenin had not always endorsed Taylorism. Before the October Revolution, he argued that it represented ‘man’s enslavement by the machine’ (CW 20: 152–154). When the Soviet regime began to flounder, however, Lenin defended Taylorist methods as necessary for avoiding Russia’s economic collapse. ‘The urgency of the problems to be solved, and the acuteness of the social and economic crisis that was gripping Russia offered no encouragement for experimenting with roads that were diametrically opposite to those laid down by industrial capitalism’ (Liebman, 1975: 338). Lenin’s policies were compatible with a bureaucratic, top-down, state-capitalist economy, one that gave workers limited collective control over production.

Some socialists warned that this system was emerging, and they opposed it. In 1920, a Party faction called the ‘Workers’ Opposition’ arose in response to rising bureaucratisation. Among other

things, they advocated the transfer of national economic management to the trade unions, which they presented as the true representatives of workers' economic power. Lenin dismissed their demands. Within the context of the civil war and famine, he argued that a move that disruptive would be suicidal. Furthermore, Lenin accused the Workers' Opposition of taking insufficient account of the fact that Russia was overwhelmingly peasant. Turning power over to the trade unions, which represented the working class, would have narrowed the regime's social base. For these reasons, Lenin (CW 32: 249) denounced the Workers' Opposition as an 'anarcho-syndicalist deviation', and his supporters defeated it during the Party's Tenth Congress in March 1921.

During the same Congress, Lenin (CW 32: 433) announced the New Economic Policy (NEP), which gave the green light to private enterprise and free markets. Although, most crucially, the state retained control of the commanding heights of the economy – the banks, large industries, and foreign trade – NEP allowed smaller businesses and farmers to trade freely. Lenin presented NEP as a temporary concession, not a permanent principle. The civil war and famine had pushed the Soviet economy to the brink of collapse. The promotion of limited free enterprise was necessary to save the country from ruin (Mészáros, 1972: 271–273). Although NEP achieved this objective, it did little to erode alienation.

At the time of Lenin's death in 1924, the struggle against alienation in Soviet Russia was still in its infancy. Lenin himself was under no illusion on that score. As his health weakened, he expressed concern about the dangers of bureaucracy (Mitin, 1967: 10), the curtailing of workers' power, excessive Party interference in the Soviets, and administrative corruption. Lenin denounced these phenomena, recognising them as distortions from socialism. At the same time, he sought to strengthen the state and its coercive organs, to crush dissidents and rule-breakers. According to the Praxis group philosopher Svetozar Stojanović, 'Lenin was obviously torn between the ideas on self-management he expressed in *State and Revolution* (for the sake of which he so fiercely attacked growing bureaucratism and had demanded workers' control), and the unquestionable need for the state to introduce order by means of force and organise life out of the chaos born out of counter-revolution, poverty, and famine' (Stojanović, 1978: 50).

Following Lenin's death, Marxist-Leninist countries utilised his ideas on the Communist Party's leading role, NEP, state coercion, political centralisation, and Taylorism, to justify their own socialist systems, which Marxist humanists described as alienated. Whatever one makes of this judgement, it is misleading to conflate Lenin's thought solely with Marxism-Leninism, or at least the Soviet interpretation. In Tito's Yugoslavia, communists used Lenin's ideas to criticise alienation in the Soviet Union and defend Yugoslavia's unique system of workers' self-management (Tito, 1950: 23, 26–27, 30, 33, 36–37). As the Praxis group recognised, Yugoslavia's experiment with workers' self-management did not eradicate alienation. The top-down nature of the workers' councils led to corruption, inefficiencies and cynicism that hampered workers' control (Sher, 1977). That said, any assessment of alienation in Yugoslavia, or in the more orthodox Marxist-Leninist regimes, must not be situated in a vacuum; but must instead be compared to the situation in the capitalist countries, where alienation remains rampant (Archibald, 2009; Comor, 2010).

Conclusion

After reading all this, the reader may justifiably ask: is it actually important to show that Lenin discussed alienation and viewed communism as a nonalienated society? Is it not enough that he viewed communism as a classless society in which the masses participate in managing their common affairs? This is an important question to answer, especially when one considers that Lenin himself rarely used the term alienation. The position of this article is that it is important to show that Lenin discussed alienation. It is important, because alienation, more than any other Marxist

concept, is associated with a profound concern for human flourishing. An opponent of alienation wants every individual to realise their full potential, master their own destiny, and live a truly human existence. By themselves, the concepts of class struggle, exploitation, democracy, and even communism, address these concerns indirectly and insufficiently. Only the concept of alienation enables a comprehensive insight into the conditions necessary for human self-actualisation. A Marxist theory that therefore ignores, vulgarises, or belittles alienation, is open to the charge of neglecting the meaning and conditions for human freedom. Historically, this has been an issue for orthodox (Soviet style) Marxism-Leninism. While Marxist humanists claim that the doctrine ignored alienation, others, such as Ross, allege that 'Marxism-Leninism reduced Marx's anti-alienation polemics to a demand for planning'. Even this, however, is insufficient because '[p]lanned production solves nothing if alienation is not overcome: that is, if workers do not become subjects in control of production and, by extension, everything else' (Ross, 2020: 536–537). Lenin is unpopular among Western Marxists because of the perception that he was a ruthless cold-hearted opportunist who overlooked alienation and founded Marxism-Leninism. By recognising that Lenin not only recognised alienation but also sought to overcome it, more socialists may recognise the emancipatory thrust of his theory and practice.

But that is not all. Lenin's legacy also offers a simple, yet important insight into alienation today, one that is often forgotten in discussions of past, present, and future socialist societies. This insight is that the abolition of alienation is a gradual and contradictory process, one that cannot occur overnight. As the history of the October Revolution demonstrates, even a radical social upheaval may not make major permanent inroads into alienation. Marx (1971: 16) predicted as much when he said that socialism would be 'stamped with the birthmarks of the society from whose womb it emerges'. Marx argued that socialism arises out of capitalism, not thin air, and so it will inevitably inherit some of the economic, social, political, ideological and cultural aspects of capitalism. Lenin's struggle shows that alienation is one of these capitalist birthmarks. Although the establishment of a workers' state provides the objective conditions for overcoming alienation, this is not a guarantee of its immediate destruction. It is necessary, above all, to empower the masses on a scale unprecedented in human history, by enabling them to democratically control the major political and economic decisions of society. This requires a hard and persistent struggle against centuries of mass oppression and ignorance. The struggle against alienation is particularly difficult in an international situation where only one country undergoes a socialist transformation; since the state must take emergency measures to ensure its survival. These measures may include policies that entrench alienation, such as the limited operation of private enterprise, the profit motive, the growth of bureaucratic control and the state itself. Scholars and activists should bear these problems in mind when evaluating alienation in socialist societies. Although alienation may remain in these societies, observers cannot expect them to have abolished the phenomenon a long time ago. These societies existed, and continue to exist, in a sea of capitalist hostility, and they are also relatively young. Only so much can be done to alleviate alienation considering these factors.

Lenin responded to the challenges of the October Socialist Revolution by making pragmatic concessions to alienation. Although these concessions were in several respects a step backwards, they reflected the principles of dialectical development. More importantly, they were necessary to keep the communist dream alive. Socialists today should learn from Lenin's legacy; and accept his finding that an unalienated society will take some time to achieve, even in a society governed by the working class.

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Notes

1. For Lenin's analysis of fetishism, see Tanner (2001) and Lenin (CW 3: 56).
2. 'CW' is an acronym for Lenin's *Collected Works*, while the number following it denotes the specific volume (Lenin, 1960–1980).
3. Although this article focuses upon alienated labour and political alienation, it is worth noting that Marx also associated alienation with 'legal and cultural relations' (Lotz, 2016: 270).

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