

Critical Perspectives on Activity

*Explorations Across Education, Work,
and Everyday Life*

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Estranged Labor Learning

Ray McDermott and Jean Lave¹

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is in praise of the labor of reading profound and rich texts, in this case, the essay on “Estranged Labor” by Karl Marx. Comparing in detail what Marx wrote on estranged labor with current social practices of learning and education leads us to comprehensive and provocative ideas about learning – including the social practices of alienated learning. We then emphasize the importance of distribution in the institutionalized production of alienated learning. And we end this chapter with critical reflections on the importance of alienation for the relation between teaching and learning in the social practice of scholars.

In 1844, Karl Marx wrote “Estranged Labor,” an essay with a radical philosophical and political claim: labor, prices, profit, and ownership do not exist as things independent of historical circumstance. Rather, they exist only in relations between persons and their productive work. To make matters worse, claimed Marx, the same is true of the words and categories we have available to understand, confront, and reorganize these building blocks or any other relations that define and control our lives: the very content of our minds “takes for granted what it is supposed to explain” (Marx, 1844: 106).² Together, the two claims have it that the world is both complex and hidden, terribly so and politically so, even to us, its builders.

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¹ This chapter is a product of co-learning so intricate that questions of authorship feel inappropriate. The usual criteria – who did what, who did it first, who did how much – are the very stuff of estranged learning. For making a claim we must attend to, Karl Marx is the lead author, and the present paper is intended to be read in between two readings of Marx’s essay on “Estranged Labor.” Ole Dreier, Rogers Hall, Gill Hart, Rebecca Lave, Meghan McDermott, and Philip Wexler offered warm and helpful advice, and Seth Chaiklin’s relentless critique forced us to phrase the limitations of our effort. In Tokyo, Naoki Ueno generously arranged the first public presentation of our struggles with the text. Our appreciation to each and all.

² Hereafter citations of “Estranged Labor” are limited to paragraph numbers (1–75).

To make the case, Marx delivered a phenomenon that, upon examination, could convince readers that every named thing in human life is tied to every other named thing in ways that (1) feed current arrangements in the political economy and, worse, (2) keep the logic and consequences of the arrangements obscure, hidden from their participants, and reflexively constitutive of problems participants might want to solve. Marx makes the case with a neat reversal of common-sense assumptions about the relation of labor to profit. Here are the four sentences of Paragraph 7:

The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size.

The worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates.

With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men.

Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.

Counterintuitive? Yes. Arresting? No less. The harder someone works, the more the very same someone is rewarded. So goes Adam Smith's (1776) optimistic prognosis, and so now goes the cultural mainstream.³ But Marx sees, and so does anyone who looks beyond immediate rewards, that many of the hardest at work get the least pay, rarely enough to make more than the necessities that bring them to work for another day: "labor produces for the rich wonderful things, but for the worker it produces privation" (paragraph 17). And then Marx sees further. Even those who are seemingly paid well are only paid off momentarily, until it is their turn, until their inalienable rights are also sold off, until alienation becomes the primary fact of their lives. People, all people in a capitalist society, labor only to have their products taken from them, alienated, literally alienated, turned over to others, and legally so. This is neither the spirit of capitalism nor the Protestant ethic as Max Weber (1904) stated them. If alienation is ubiquitous in the human situation, and most destructive under capitalism, there is reason for doubting where we stand, how, and why. There is reason for supposing that learning in schools might also be a commodified and alienated practice.

Theorizing economy as abstracted and isolated from ongoing activity was troublesome for Marx in 1844. Theorizing learning as abstracted from

³ The opening words of *The Wealth of Nations*: "The annual labor of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes, and which consist always either in the immediate produce from other nations, or in what is purchased with that produce from other nations. According therefore, as this produce, or what is purchased with it, bears a greater or smaller proportion to the number of those who are to consume it, that nation will be better or worse supplied with all the necessaries and conveniences for which it has occasion" (Smith, 1776: lix).

situations of use and desire was similarly troublesome for Charles Dickens a decade later, as in the classroom of Gradgrind and M'Choakumchild:

"You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery. You cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use," said the gentleman, "for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste." (Dickens, 1854: 11)

Learning seems long away from the school grind choking these children. Yet the people characterized by Dickens have built an institution just for learning, and there they insist children repeat on demand the facts of learning. They were hard on children who did not do it well. Factory life, "in all things regulated and governed," delivers a narrow range of fact for learning and a narrow range of categories for thinking about learning. Gradgrind's theory of learning no doubt "assumes what it is supposed to explain."

And what about now? The illusion of measured learning makes substantial what is not and reifies it into numbers that align children within hierarchies that replicate injustices in the distribution of access and rewards. Institutionalized education has done to the productive learner what Marx revealed was done to productive labor: schools have commodified learning to the point that every learner must worry more about what others know than about what might be learned if people worked together. The contemporary state offers schools in which every child, like every capitalist in the larger world, has to do better than everyone else. Similarly, every learner, like every laborer under capitalism, is alienated from his or her own learning by virtue of the dominant concern for what every person does and does not know relative, and only relative, to each other.

Marx opposed a double-entry account book version of the human situation – the version that records how much money comes in, against how much money goes out, with as much as possible left over for profit. Dickens agrees: the same "just the facts" bottom line version strangling labor could strangle learning as well. Imagine Marx's response to the pretest/posttest, double-entry account book version of the human mind that we use today to strangle children in schools.

On the chance that reading Marx as if he were writing on estranged learning can suggest what he would say about contemporary schooling and give us as well a new slant on the political economy of learning, we have

been rereading "Estranged Labor" and keeping track of the changes that follow from our initial alteration. Our method, to use Seamus Heaney's (2000) phrasing, pays careful "duty to text," loaded with our own concerns, of course, but careful to take Marx seriously on his own terms.⁴ The rewrite starts as simply as dutifully: Whenever the word labor occurs, with occasional exceptions, it is replaced by the word learning. Marx's argument and imagery stay intact, and we get to approximate his opinion on an issue of moment over a century later. "Estranged Labor" uses about 5,000 words grouped into approximately 75 paragraphs (depending on the edition), and we have found it productive to spend more than an hour on many paragraphs translating from the English of political economy to the English of learning theory. This method of "reading" has led to a deepened understanding of Marx's essay with unanticipated ideas about the relations between estranged labor and estranged learning. It has helped us critique – in parallel and simultaneously – theories of political economy and theories of learning, and it has led to questions about how ideas of learning, intelligence, creativity, genius, stupidity, and disability have developed in tandem with ideas about production, consumption, exchange, and distribution.

Because we allow our analytic path to develop in detail along with Marx's text, the reader might need an account of where we are going. Simply put, in critiquing the theories of political economy available in 1844, young Marx unwittingly wrote a quite devastating critique of the theories of learning available in 2004. This is possible because education has been institutionalized under advanced capitalism as an integral part of the political economy. In *Capital*, twenty-three years later, Marx gave a strong hint of the relation between the two spheres of production:

If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation. (1867: 677)

The same critique applies to the workings of both economy and education because they are two facets of the same history, two versions of institutions rooted in alienated relations of production, consumption, distribution, and exchange, one officially of goods, the other officially of ideas, and in both cases, two sides of the same coin, the filthy lucre of commodified manual and mental labor.⁵

⁴ Translating from one topic to another demands more than a subjectivism: "the self-consciousness of one facing a text in a distant language, should not be confused with subjectivism, as some have suggested, for it is just the opposite – a respect for another voice, not an obsession with one's own" (Becker, 1995: 138).

⁵ We are not the first to reread "Estranged Labor" in other institutional registers: For a congruence, variously conceived, between Marx on estranged labor and language, see Volosinov

In addition to what we might learn about Marx, about learning, and about Marx on learning, there is a historical continuity behind our re-reading. It is close to how Marx himself proceeded. He read voluminously – Smith, Hegel, Feuerbach, Hess, Proudhon – and would enter into his notes systematic changes in their phrasing. Even the older Marx, in *Capital* (1867) and the *Ethnological Notebooks* (1880–1882), manipulated textual detail. Lobkowitz gives a glimpse of Marx at work around the time of "Estranged Labor":

Commenting upon Hegel's text paragraph by paragraph, and sometimes word by word, more often than not he became lost in a thicket of verbal arguments instead of trying to survey Hegel's political philosophy as a whole. Still this piecemeal procedure brought forth some remarkable results. (1967: 249–250; see also Struik, 1964; Wheen, 1999)

Sometimes Marx would keep track of his editing, sometimes not.⁶ A good example of his making analytic use of his changes comes from the following commentary, in *Theories of Surplus Value* (1860, Book 2: 349–50), on a paragraph from Adam Smith (1776, Book I, Chapter IV: 61), which Marx underlines as he reads (here in italics) and adds, first, a running commentary in parentheses inside Smith's paragraph, then a comment on the paragraph, and finally a rewrite of Smith side by side with Smith's own words:

"As in a civilized country there are but few commodities of which the *exchangeable value* arises from labour only" (here labour is identified with wages) "*rent and profit* contributing largely to that of the far greater part of them, so the *annual produce of its labour*" (here, after all, the commodities are the *produce of labour*, although the whole value of this produce does not arise from labour only) "*will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater quantity of labour than what was employed in raising, preparing and bringing that produce to market.*"

Marx's comment on and rewrite of Smith's paragraph:

The produce of *labour* [is] not equal to the *value* of this produce. On the contrary (one may gather) this value is *increased* by the addition of profit and rent. The produce of labour can therefore command, purchase, more labour, i.e., pay a greater value

(1929) and Rossi-Landi (1968); on estranged labor and science, Sohn-Rethel (1976); on estranged labor and sexuality, MacKinnon (1982).

⁶ An example of not making his edits visible: "in a 'translation' from French to German of Peuchet's essay on suicide," Marx (1945) "bends [the] text a bit, here changing Peuchet's phrase 'fundamental defect' to 'deficient organization' and thereby making the critique more social and less moralistic. At another point, without indicating that he has done so, Marx adds a phrase of his own, writing that 'short of a total reform of the organization of our current society,' any attempt to lower the suicide rate 'would be in vain'" (Anderson, 1999: 13).

in labour, than the labour contained in it. This proposition would be correct if it ran like this:

Smith says:

"As in a civilized country there are but few commodities of which the exchangeable value arises from labour only, rent and profit contributing largely to that of the far greater part of them, so the annual produce of its labour will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater quantity of labour than what was employed in raising, preparing, and bringing that produce to market."

According to Marx himself, it should read:

"As in a civilized country there are but few commodities of which the exchangeable value resolves itself into wages only and since, for a far greater part of them, this value largely resolves itself into rent and profit, so the annual produce of its labour will always be sufficient to purchase or command a much greater quantity of labour than what had to be paid" (and therefore employed) "in raising, preparing, and bringing that produce to market."

This is roughly the genre of translation we are offering. There is a version of science ideally done this way, but not enough of it. Apprenticeship to text may be far easier than duty to children in school, but they are identical in their respect for complexity, their delight in cooperative learning, and their appreciation of surprise.

We are engaged in reading and learning about alienated labor, alienated learning, and relations between them. We try to show what it is like to re-braid the text after introducing one significant change of topic, and then to move forward by trying different ways of recasting what follows to deepen the rewriting. We have read this text together and with students many times. Still, it would be a mistake to think of the rewrite as a concluded, polished, definitive "translation" displayed for the reader's consumption. It is not our intention to be supposed experts on Marx, nor are we offering a predigested account of our knowledge on work. Instead, if we can share our work bench, readers might follow the *process* of reading and re-reading, and work with our re-writing in their own way, on their way to working further on "Estranged Labor" and other texts.

The first two parts of the paper stay closer to how we did the work and the textual changes that developed along the way. Marx should not be read quickly, and our play with his text certainly insures that the reader has to slow down. In Part I, we offer the first paragraph of Marx's essay and explain how we worked out a sense for the demands of the text and its possibilities, for what Becker (1995) calls deficient and exuberant readings of the text. In Part II, we move to an only slightly quicker account of Paragraphs 2-4 for a gloss of Marx's argument, and we apply our changes to institutional education in general and the diagnosis of learning disability and the ascription of genius in particular.

After working through the thorny thickets of paragraphs 1-4, readers might benefit from a view of the forest. "Estranged Labor" elaborates a

theory of alienated labor in four successive steps encompassing the first half of Marx's essay. Part III of "Estranged Labor/Learning" does the same, rereading the main points of that theory in terms of alienated learning. Part IV is a selective rereading of the second half of Marx's essay. At one point, Marx proposes an exercise for the reader, and we take up the challenge. He suggests that relations internal to the keywords of political economy can be derived from alienated labor and private property. For our exercise, we focus on education as a distributional phenomenon and – still engaged in a process of re-reading "Estranged Labor" as "Estranged Labor/Learning" – explore how alienated distribution can be derived from alienated learning and private (educational) property. Our intervention challenges common ways of reading Marx and brings his work to bear on a current concern. It is serious work done twice. At the end of the paper, we draw together what we have learned about alienated learning and consider its relations with our practice of reading.

PART I: ALIENATED CATEGORIES

In the beginning is Marx's first paragraph:

We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed private property, the separation of labor, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land – likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc. On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production⁷; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that finally the distinction between capitalist and land rentier, like that between the tiller of the soil and the factory worker, disappears and that the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes – the property owners and the propertyless workers.

Now we can develop our own first paragraph. Once we have turned the topic from labor to learning, we must alter the first sentence: "We have proceeded from the premises of. . ."

Many substitutes are possible: educational psychology, most specifically; educational ideology, most politically; the educational establishment, most generally. Our choice is to use the most general reading, and if the text insists

⁷ As written, Marx describes a direct relation: the more richly the world's possibilities are produced by workers, the more workers are deprived of them; usually, he makes the same point by describing an inverse relation: as workers produce more and more for those who pay their wages, they receive less and less of what they are producing for themselves. We comment only because this phrase has brought our reading to a halt repeatedly.

on a tighter formulation, that can be made obvious as we move through the paragraph. So we have our first line, and the second line is generic enough to require no change:

We have proceeded from the premises of *the educational establishment*.
We have accepted its language and its laws.

Now it gets difficult. Marx gives us:

We presupposed private property,
the separation of labor, capital and land,
and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land –
likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.

As a substitute for private property, one of us suggested “controlled and standardized knowledge (curriculum)” and the other suggested “inherent intelligence”:

- a. We presupposed *standardized knowledge (curriculum)*...
- b. We presupposed *inherent intelligence*...

This is a difference that seems to make a difference, the first focused, as Marx would appreciate, on an institutional phenomenon, the educational banking system (Freire 1969), and the second focused more on the individual account, or seemingly so, and available for institutional analysis only after careful thought. The differences hardly make themselves felt in the rest of the sentence:

We presupposed *standardized knowledge (curriculum)*,
the separation of *learning, academic success, and natural capacities*,
and of *grades, credentials, and earning potential* – ...
We presupposed *inherent intelligence*,
– the separation of *learning, knowledge, and assessed potential*,
and of *learning, degrees, and success* – ...

If we continue to follow the two choices – curriculum vs. intelligence – through subsequent paragraphs, they do not organize readings as divergent as we anticipated. Although inherent intelligence at first invites other psychological terms to populate its semantic tree, it gives way to a picture of the institutional arrangements that make an exaggerated attention to measured intelligence, reportable, recordable, and consequential. We can use *standardized knowledge* (in the first line of translation a.), which constrains only slightly our choices for the second line. We cannot resist combining the translations of “rent of land”; instead of “natural capacities” (in the second line of a.) and “assessed potential” (in the second line of b.), we opt for *assessed capacities*, for there are two uses of the word “assessment” in modern

English: one for measuring land value, the other for measuring the value of a person’s mind. The fit is difficult to ignore.

The remainder of the sentence stands on its own:

– likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.

In education as in political economy, the division of labor is ubiquitous in its relevance. Competition is everywhere. The concept of exchange-value, by which everything is theoretically exchangeable for everything else, for example, knowledge in exchange for career line and/or profit, speaks to the heart of what most people seek when they go to school (and certainly what people must attend to when they leave school). So now we have three sentences rewritten:

We have proceeded from the premises of *the educational establishment*. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed *standardized knowledge (curriculum)*, the separation of *learning, academic success, and assessed capacities*, and of *grades, credentials, and earning potential* – likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange-value, etc.

We have translated “capital” into *academic success* and “profit from capital” into *credentials*. Both, of course, are won in competition: academic success is always achieved over others, and credentials are less about what they allow their owners to do than their non-owners not to do. This is consistent with Marx’s haiku-like definition of capital in the *Manuscripts*:

Capital,
private property
taken from other people’s labor?
(1844: 79, poetic license ours)

Good news: with variation, changes made in the first paragraph can last through the essay. The variations are interesting to trace, but are mostly self-explanatory. In Tables 6.1 and 6.2, we separate the terms we had to change (as we began analytically to pull apart, first, labor and learning and, second, political economy and education) from a few terms we did not have to change because they apply equally to both of these thoroughly enmeshed spheres of production.

Nota bene: The conceptual shifts are not one-to-one. The concepts in Marx’s text are mutually defined, and so it must be for the educational terms. The changes must be read from top to bottom as well as from left to right. The appearance of a one-to-one correspondence across terms would require the assumption of a one-to-one, and likely distorting, fit between political economy and education. The power of the rewrite lies ultimately in the relations among and across both sets of concepts as they have been historically established and fitted to different spheres of activity across quite

TABLE 6.1. *Conceptual Changes – Political Economy to Education*

Paragraph 1: Initial rewriting of Marx's concepts of political economy into educational terms (variations from later paragraphs are listed in parentheses)

political economy and its classical theory → educational establishment and its theory (educational theory, learning theory)
 private property → controlled and standardized knowledge (curriculum and tests)
 labor → learning
 capital → academic success (achievement), all at the expense of others
 land → capacities (access)
 wages → grades
 profit of capital → credentials, appropriated from others
 rent of land → assessed capacities
 capitalist → knowledge accumulator (scientists and scholars)
 land rentier → knowledge distributors (teachers and testers)
 his (man, him, he) → their (humankind, people, she and he)

different time lines. Although we stress similarities across concepts that serve both theories of political economy and theories of education, what does not translate is just as revealing, as when we argue, in Part IV, that production in education might be more akin to what Marx calls distribution in political economy.

The rest of the first paragraph turns into education as it might get articulated in a class-based democracy:

On the basis of *educational theory* itself, in its own words, we have shown that the *learner* sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the *learner* is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of *academic success* in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that finally the distinction between the *knowledge accumulator* (*scientist and scholar*) and the *knowledge distributor* (*teacher and tester*), like that between the *kinds of learner*, disappears and that the whole

TABLE 6.2. *Conceptual Continuity – Political Economy and Education*

Paragraph 1: Concepts applicable to both domains (variations from later paragraphs are listed in parentheses)

division of labor
 competition (meritocracy, showing off)
 exchange-value
 production
 commodity
 monopoly (nobility, knowledge)

of society must fall apart into the two classes – the credentialed and the non-credentialed.⁸

PART II: ALIENATED PROBLEMS AND ALTERNATIVES

For the next three paragraphs, Marx develops his argument: Experts on political economy can populate the world with supposed entities abstracted from the sensuous give and take of daily life and then struggle to write laws for how the entities interact, but they cannot explain how the entities have developed historically along with the partial perspectives that make them look real. For most modern thought, reality has been irremediably perspectival, but for Marx, all perspectives are also irremediably political. Objective reality not only depends on where one is standing, but where one is standing in relation to everyone else, whether measured by lineage, money, or access to power.⁹ Might the same be true for a critique of theories of education? Might where one stands in relation to everyone else be measured as easily by grades earned as by lineage, money, or access? For Paragraphs 2–4, we present the economic arguments of “Estranged Labor” and the educational arguments of “Estranged Labor/Learning” side-by-side for an easy to view contrast:

Paragraph 2:

(2) Political economy starts with the fact of private property, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulas the *material* process through which private property actually passes, and these formulas it then takes for *laws*. It does not *comprehend* these

(2) *The educational establishment* starts with the fact of *standardized knowledge*, but it does not explain it to us. It expresses in general, abstract formulas the *material* process through which *curriculum* actually passes, and these formulas it then takes for *laws*. It does

⁸ A note on the concept of production: In “Estranged Labor,” the internal relations of “production” that give it its meaning are labor under capitalism, workers’ relations with what they produce in the workplace, workers’ relations with capital and capitalists, and relations between alienated labor and private property. We explore comparable relations among learners, their self-formation, learning, the commodified products of learning in schools, learners’ relations with teachers, schools, and the educational establishment including its theorists and apologists. We compare the latter to the classical political economists, exploring with respect to educational theory Marx’s critique of political economic theory. Later in the chapter we consider production/distribution relations as a matter of alienated labor and learning. We are aware that exploration of the relations between political economy and education potentially raises distinctions between production and reproduction, distinctions of which we are critical. To maintain a critical perspective, we must remember that relations between labor and learning, political economy and education, the learning implied in estranged labor and the labor in estranged learning, are multiple and entangled.

⁹ Objective reality: “all that is appropriate to, noticeable within, and marked by the self-directed, or practical, actions of collectivities in situations of conflict” (Brown, 1986:15).

laws, i.e., it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of private property. Political economy does not disclose the source of the division between labor and capital, and between capital and land. When, for example, it defines the relationship of wages to profit, it takes the interest of the capitalists to be the ultimate cause, i.e., it takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. Similarly, competition comes in everywhere. It is explained from external circumstances. As to how far these external and apparently accidental circumstances are but the expression of a necessary course of development, political economy teaches us nothing. We have seen how exchange itself appears to it as an accidental fact. The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are *greed* and the war amongst the greedy – competition.

Substitutions become more complex in Paragraph 3. The argument is more layered, and each substitution must be paired across levels of analysis. In Paragraphs 1–2, Marx could say we had terrible problems and little analytic vocabulary for confronting them, an argument that holds for education as well as political economy. In Paragraph 3, Marx claims that the resolutions we devise for our historic problems are not only inadequate, but systematic products of, and thereby reflexively constitutive of the very same problems. In defining a problem and articulating a possible solution, it is possible to lose sight of the conditions that created the problem and move forward with the proposed solution:

Precisely because political economy does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of competition to the doctrine of monopoly, the doctrine of the freedom of the crafts to the doctrine of the guild, the doctrine of the division of landed property to the doctrine of the big estate – for competition, freedom of the crafts and the division of landed property were explained and comprehended only as accidental, premeditated and violent consequences of monopoly, of the guild system, and of feudal property, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.

It is a difficult paragraph. In Table 6.3, we offer a schematic of how Marx develops the argument in three parts of four steps each:

not *comprehend* these laws, i.e., it does not demonstrate how they arise from the very nature of *standardized knowledge*. *Educational theory* does not disclose the source of the division between *learning and achievement*, and between *degrees and assessed capacity*. When, for example, it defines the relationship of *grades to credentials*, it takes the interest of the *knowledge accumulators* to be the ultimate cause i.e., it takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. Similarly, competition comes in everywhere. It is explained from external circumstances. As to how far the external and apparently accidental circumstances are but the expression of a necessary course of development, *educational theory* teaches us nothing. We have seen how *teaching/learning exchanges* and *knowledge distribution* appear as accidental fact. The only wheels which *educational theory* sets in motion are *ambition* and the war amongst the *ambitious* – competition.

TABLE 6.3. *The Logic of Paragraph 3*

Problem	invites	Apparent Solution	because	Apparent Causes	masking	Real Conditions
Doctrine of Monopoly	↔	Doctrine of Competition	←	Accident	← // ←	Necessity
Doctrine of Freedom of Guilds	↔	Doctrine of Freedom of Crafts	←	Premeditation	← // ←	Inevitability
Doctrine of Big Estates	↔	Doctrine of Division of Landed Property	←	Violence	← // ←	Naturalness

It is tempting to read Marx's argument from left to right, across the rows one column at a time, as if the problem and solution pairs, say Monopoly ↔ Competition, could be understood, mistakenly, as caused by Accident, whereas the real connection is one of Necessity. Because we cannot always tell the difference between Necessity, Inevitability, and Naturalness and do not always see reasons for traditional political economists choosing between Accident, Premeditation, and Violence, we have merged these categories considerably. So we have three problem and solution pairs, each accounted for, inadequately, by Accident, Premeditation, and Violence, whereas each might be better accounted for by Necessity, Inevitability, and Naturalness.

1. In an economy of monopolistic control, access to competition must look like a wonderful alternative. But monopolies are the systematic outcome of competition run amuck. Monopolies make competition visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the institutionalized competition that led to monopolies *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more competition.¹⁰
2. In an economy of repressive guilds, access to free crafts must look like a wonderful alternative. Guilds are the systematic outcome of access to a market run amuck. Guilds make free crafts visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the market freedoms that led to repressive guilds *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more freedom.
3. In an economy of big estates, access to a more equitable division of landed property must look like a wonderful alternative. Big estates

¹⁰ So long as there is no disruptive transformation in the terms of debate, prescriptions for "new solutions" inevitably end up reproducing old problems, albeit in new trappings. We read "*necessarily, inevitably, and naturally*" (the italics belong to Marx) in hegemonic terms, not as a statement of absolute determination.

are the systematic outcome of the relations of private property run amuck. Big estates make individual land holding visible and attractive. It is not noticed that the rules of land ownership that led to big estates *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more private ownership.

Now we can rewrite Marx to see if it gives us an account of a reasonable, but invidious pairing between educational problems and educational solutions, all produced in ways that confuse “*accidental, premeditated, and violent consequences*” with “*necessary, inevitable, and natural*” ones. As Marx gives three examples, we give three examples. Marx’s examples – struggles to replace monopolies with competition, guilds with free crafts, and large estates with a more equitable division of land – are quite distinct from each other. Our educational examples – struggles to replace access to knowledge by elites only with a meritocracy, replacing education by privilege with equal access to education, and transforming an enforced conformity to a cultural cannon with self-cultivation – seem less distinct. As much as we are pointing to the continuities from political economy to education, the differences are also instructive. Marx was talking about large social changes across many centuries, whereas we are focusing on much smaller changes within a specific institutional setting across the last century.

[Paragraph 3] Precisely because *educational theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of *meritocracy* to the doctrine of *elite knowledge*, the doctrine of *level playing field* to the doctrine of *privileged access*, the doctrine of *cultivation of the self (individualism and multiculturalism)* to the doctrine of *a forced allegiance to a cultural* – for *meritocracy, level playing fields, and self-cultivation* were explained and comprehended only as accidental, pre-meditated and violent consequences of *nobility, of privileged access, and of a forced allegiance to a cultural cannon*, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.

1. The enforcement of a meritocracy may well look better than inheritance by a nobility, but neither challenges the principle of unequal access. The systematic outcome of competition among elites run amuck, displays of inherited knowledge make competition visible and attractive, if only because they developed together, as part of the same economic circumstances. It is not noticed that the institutionalized competitions that led to inherited entitlement *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more competition.
2. Equal access to education certainly sounds preferable to access to expertise by privilege, but it leaves hierarchy eventually in place. The systematic outcome of access to a market run amuck, expertise by privileged access makes meritocracy visible and attractive. It is not noticed

that the institutionalized freedoms that led to repressive expertise *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more expertise.

3. A focus on self-cultivation (self-realization, self-actualization, self-efficacy) simply wallows in decency in contrast with an enforced celebration of elite culture, but, no matter how hard fought for, individual rights are hollow until paired with control of the conditions for staging selves in relation to each other; in education, a focus on the motivated cognitive self seems an improvement over *race* and *gender* as explanations for school success and failure. Even if successfully claimed, it can still leave everyone relatively mired in place until the conditions for redefining knowledge, intelligence, and success are more in the service of the poor and disenfranchised than in the service of the already rich and knowledgeable. The systematic outcome of commodified selves run amuck, enforced conformity to a cultural cannon, makes a private cultivation of the self visible and attractive.¹¹ It is not noticed that the cult of well-groomed self-expression that led to the successful individual as the center of social relations *necessarily, inevitably, and naturally* led to a reform by the invocation of still more attention to personal desire.

The logic of Marx’s argument in Paragraph 3 lends itself to a more extended reading of problem and solution pairs popular in contemporary education. For example, two products of contemporary educational theory are learning disabled children and geniuses. The first is about seventy years old. The second has a longer history (Latin: *genio*), but has referred to a single person consistently of great ability for only about 300 or 400 years.¹²

¹¹ On this point, see an excellent discussion by Wexler (1983, 1993).

¹² See Murray (1988) for historical biographies of the term “genius” in use and DeNora and Mehan (1993) on the relation between genius and learning disabilities. A rough reconstruction of genius, starting with Huarte (1575), distinguishes:

- a medieval and renaissance genius as the medium of moment for rare gifts from supernatural sources, often tied to madness, mystical states, and drunkenness;
- an eighteenth-century genius, still rare, as a kind of person across context and circumstance;
- a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century genius, less rare, as a social role, with every generation its representatives;
- the romantic nineteenth-century genius, as role and goal, sought after, trained for, and dependent on others to realize and celebrate.

In the late nineteenth century, the very idea of genius begins to fragment and becomes:

- an inheritance and soon thereafter a genotype,
- a stereotype in invidious racial comparisons,
- an identifier of what most people are not, and therefore a source of unproductive alienation.

If the terms have developed along with the rise of capitalism, they should fit into Marx's critique of terms from political economy.

And sure enough, Learning Disability (which is, so they say, smart, but not quick to learn reading and writing) could develop as an alternative to a school system that was rendering so many children officially stupid, a theory of multiple intelligences could hold out hope for school failures, and appeals to self-esteem could be opposed to the hard truth that, in a system in which everyone has to do better than everyone else, there is only so much self-esteem to go around (McDermott, 1993; Mehan, 1993). Paragraph 3 translates easily into disability discourse:

Learning Disabilities in Paragraph 3:

Precisely because *learning theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose, for instance, the doctrine of *learning disability* to the doctrine of *stupidity*, the doctrine of *multiple intelligences* to the doctrine of *one general intelligence*, the doctrine of *self-esteem (individualism and multi-culturalism)* to the doctrine of *institutional discipline* – or *learning disabilities, multiple intelligences, and self-esteem* were explained and comprehended only as accidental, pre-meditated and violent consequences of *theories of stupidity, general intelligence, and institutional discipline*, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.

Similarly, genius can be read as a possible solution to the problem of how to talk about persons who think in new ways in a system articulate about, gauged by, and limited to celebrating performances by a chosen few on tests with a culturally pre-established content in a predigested format. Through the middle ages, the category of genius overlapped considerably with madness, and creativity was easily confused with special breeding and high birth. A few centuries later, the same people were more likely to be thought of as ingenious, exceptional, and creative individuals. This seems like a great improvement until the search for creativity became routinized into a search, by way of IQ tests and the like, for children who know what has been predefined as knowledge by adults. The limits of the first system of categories (genius as madness) invites solutions (genius as conformity) that get reworked to fit new relations of production, consumption, exchange, distribution, and representation. If intelligence cannot be measured by how much a person knows the answers to standardized questions, but is better tested by what a person does when no one knows what to do, then high degrees of intelligence, of genius, should be virtually unrecognizable and certainly untestable by non-geniuses working at testing services. The world of tests offers no new terrain for brilliance, and if it did, who would be able to grade it?

Genius in Paragraph 3:

Precisely because *learning theory* does not grasp the way the movement is connected, it was possible to oppose historically, for instance, the doctrine of *genius* to the doctrine of *madness*, the doctrine of *exceptional individuals* to the doctrine of *privileged access*, the doctrine of *creativity* to the doctrine of *high birth and good breeding* – for *genius, exceptional individuals, and creativity* were explained and comprehended only

as accidental, premeditated and violent consequences of *madness, privileged access, and high birth*, not as their necessary, inevitable and natural consequences.

Paragraph 4 nicely sums up the situation from the point of view of political economy and educational theory¹³:

(4) Now, therefore, we have to grasp the essential connection between private property, greed, and the separation of labor, capital and landed property; between exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of men, monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the money system.

(4) Now, therefore, we have to grasp the essential connection between *standardized knowledge, ambition*, and the separation of *learning, achievement, and access*; between *teaching and competition*, between *diagnostic assessment* and the devaluation of *children*, between *knowledge and showing-off*, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the *educational banking system*.

PART III: ALIENATED LEARNING

Alienation, Marx tells us in four steps, is created, first, in labor's products (paragraphs 7–8) and, second, in the process of laboring (paragraphs 20–23). Third, it follows from the first two that alienation characterizes human relations with nature and with the self (paragraphs 25–36). Finally and together, these relations result in the alienation of everyone from everyone else (paragraphs 36–42). These four aspects form the armature of the concept of alienation in "Estranged Labor."¹⁴

¹³ The theoretical "essential connections" of paragraph 4 should not be construed as fixed in functionalist terms, for those very essential connections in practice – like those we are discussing in relation to schooling – slip, twist, get mangled and transformed, often sustained by efforts to address what they are supposed to be, but are no longer.

¹⁴ There is an order to the way Marx analyzes estranged labor. He proceeds dialectically from abstract accounts of how labor functions in capitalism and gradually rises to a concrete historical comprehension of real persons suffering estrangement. Marx gives flesh to the concept of alienation as he moves from:

- the abstract political-economic fact of alienation in production (in the first sentence of paragraph 7:

"The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size.")

- to an analysis of the relations that compose the concept of alienation in (roughly) the first half of the essay,

- then turning to brief observations on the relations of alienation in real life,

- interspersed with a discussion of other relations that must be elaborated to discern alienation in a wide range of social events, for example, learning (on Marx's own descriptions of method, see paragraphs 43–51; also, Marx, 1847: 112–137; 1857: 112–137; see also Hall, 1973; Beamish, 1992).