

Just as estranged labor is not about the unusual predicament of a few workers, estranged learning is not limited to a few individuals who might learn in peculiar or agonized ways. Instead, Marx's essay is a disquisition on the organized, structured character and effects of political economic relations, the only game in town, by which everyone goes about making their lives and fortunes through their own labor or other people's labor. Alienation lays an indelible shape on all aspects of their lives, including learning.<sup>15</sup> It will have its effect on:

1. What workers produce through daily efforts,
2. the processes of doing so,
3. their collective relation to nature and to themselves, and
4. their relations with each other.

The analysis of alienated labor provides a logic for analysis of the products and practices of learning and equally of how learners can be alienated from themselves and each other.

#### Aspect I

Paragraph 7 plunges directly into the first of the four conceptual relations, the alienation produced in the *product* of labor:

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

The last sentence contains not one, but several relations internal to the initial observation that “the worker [learner] becomes all the poorer the more wealth [learning] he produces. . . .”

labor produces commodities	<i>learning</i> produces commodities
labor produces labor	<i>learning</i> produces <i>learning</i>
labor produces the laborer as a commodity	<i>learning</i> produces the <i>learner</i> as a commodity

Just as the result of alienated labor is embodied in the things produced, so the object of alienated learning becomes material in the things learned – as lessons with exchange-value. Just as a product becomes a market thing, so learning becomes a school thing; and just as labor itself becomes a product, so being a pupil or a student is a thing one becomes. Similarly, learning becomes embodied in a credential, and being credentialed is a thing to

<sup>15</sup> We do not grapple in this essay with distinctions between the terms “estrangement” and “alienation,” but see the work of Torrance (1977).

become. This bundle of objects confronts the alienated learner as “something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (paragraph 8), and “the learner becomes all the poorer the more learning he produces” (paragraph 7). The learner becomes all the poorer the more he becomes subject to the whim of the educational system. Poverty is as much a condition of the mind as of the account book. Three years after “Estranged Labor,” Marx reiterates just how poor a thinker can be: “The same men who establish social relations comfortably with their material productivity, produce also the principles, the ideas, the categories, comfortably with their social relations. Thus these ideas, these categories, are not more eternal than the relations which they express. They are historical and transitory products” (1847: 119).

We have left the commodity concept untouched to this point (see Table 6.2), for it lives almost as obviously in the educational sphere as elsewhere in relations of capital. But what kinds of commodities does alienated learning produce? We have several registers available: The first can be found in any school office where homework, school assignments, test performances, test scores, grades, report cards, student records, educational credentials, academic degrees, and assessed potential all get recorded. A second register can be found most easily among parents or school counselors who reify alienated categories of learners from official and other professional perspectives. There is also a budget line attached to each of these categories, and these make us understand learners as commodity producers who produce themselves as objects of the expert labor of the educational system – as, say, the gifted, the slow, the disadvantaged, the learning disabled, the emotionally disturbed, etc. A third register is perhaps the most ubiquitous and develops a most invidious distinction between commodified products of learning and things that are interesting. Just as Marx (paragraph 20) says of the laborer:

He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home.

We can say of the learner:

He feels interested when he is not learning in school, and when he is learning in school he does not feel interested.

The distinction lies at the pivot where the use-value of exploring the as-yet-unknown parts company with its exchange-value. We can now rewrite Paragraph 7, keeping in mind that “learning” here refers to the alienated character of learning under capitalism:

The *learner* becomes all the poorer the more *learning* is produced for others to assess, compete with, diagnose, and remediate, the more the *learner's* production increases in power and size. The *learner* becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the *increasing value* of the world of *commodities* proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of *learning* in everyday life. *Alienated learning* produces not

only commodities: it produces itself and the *learner* as a commodity – and this in the same general proportion in which it produces commodities.

The point: the *product* of laboring to learn is more than the school lessons learned. Over time, laboring to learn produces both what counts as learning and learners who know how to do it, learners who know how to ask questions, give answers, take tests, and get the best grades. Making what counts and making those who seek to be counted, these together compose the product of learning-labor.

This works for Paragraph 8 also:

(8) This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor's *product* – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labor appears as loss of *realization* for the workers; objectification as loss of *the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.

(8) This fact expresses merely that the object which *learning* produces – the *learner's product* – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the *learner*. The product of *learning* is *learning* which has been embodied in *a test score or promised credential*, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of *learning*. *Learning's* realization is its objectification. In the sphere of *learning theory* this realization of *learning* appears as loss of *realization* for the *learners*; objectification as loss of *the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.

Marx clarifies what he means by objectification (paragraph 11–16).<sup>16</sup> Human praxis is a matter of doing and being in relations with objects – things and people – external to the person. But the reification of labor and learning under capitalism results in estrangement and loss to learners and other workers, as learning is turned into the product of educational theory, school organization, teaching, testing, and credentialing. Learners are diminished by their own industry. What they are given to learn is not theirs but the school's product – including objectifications of the learner by more powerful others. Marx reiterates (paragraph 16) the view of traditional political economy that expresses the alienation of the worker in a mystified way – it speaks of the worker as becoming barbarous.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Marx treats objectification as inherent in human praxis and also argues that the historical character of objectification under capitalism – alienation – has a political-economic character that creates and expresses profound social dislocation in the name of surplus value. We emphasize contemporary relations of alienation, though we are aware of interpretative debates over the history and bounds of the concept with respect to objectification.

<sup>17</sup> The text: "The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his object thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he

So the school speaks of students as becoming barbarous. Not farfetched, consider a recent newspaper front page article:

School Lockers are Making a Comeback.

... after receiving relentless complaints from parents and students, officials in the Pasadena Unified School District have begun unsealing lockers that had been shuttered since the 1970s. "There was this perception that each locker was a den of iniquity," said Bill Bibbiani, director of research and testing for Pasadena Unified. "But there are better ways to handle problems than to treat each locker as if [it is] a hole-in-the-wall gang hide-out." (*Sunday Los Angeles Times*, Orange County Edition, September 2, 2001)

The solution offered from the school district is an expensive system of surveillance cameras and lockers that can be locked down from the principal's office. The parents complain, with data in hand, that it is their children's backs that are suffering from carrying heavy books around all day – a case of descriptive accuracy and analytic obtuseness. Political economy, official and parental views, and educational practice conceal alienated labor-learning. Marx argues that this concealment is brought about and sustained by a refusal to draw front and center the direct relation between workers and production, between learners and their learning.

*Educational theory* conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of *alienated learning* by not considering the direct relationship between the *learner* and production (*of learning*). (paragraph 17)

This conclusion is obvious, but easy to ignore under current arrangements: To understand learning, in all its complexities, keep the investigative eye fixed – if you can imagine this – on learning.<sup>18</sup>

#### Aspect II

The second aspect of alienated learning follows from the first. Active alienation is manifested in processes of production, that is, in the activities of production.

How could the *learner* come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity... In the estrangement of the object of *learning* is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of *learning* itself. (paragraph 20)

creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more *ingenious labor* becomes, the less ingenious becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature's bondsman" (paragraph 16).

<sup>18</sup> Dreier (1993, 1997, 1999) points to the "desubjectification" of family therapy and similarly the curriculum in schools as foci that evade attention to learning.

What constitutes the alienation of learning processes? Alienated learning is “external to the learner,” not freely undertaken. In his work, the learner does not “. . . affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (paragraph 22). It is activity experienced as suffering. Alienated learners are only themselves when they are not learning – think of common distinctions between “real learning” and “real life” (Lave, 1988). Such learning does not satisfy a need: It is coerced, forced, and a means to satisfy needs external to it. If it belongs to learners, it is second-hand, on loan from others. It is a loss of self.

### Aspect III

Alienation reduces collective life to the individual and utilitarian: Estranged from nature and the most productive life activities, estranged labor – and no less estranged learning – changes the life of the species into a means, merely the means, of satisfying the need to maintain physical existence, and further it becomes only a means to *individual* life.

First it [labor under capitalism] estranges the life of the species and individual life, and secondly it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract and estranged form. (paragraph 27)

Marx’s dense discussion of the alienation of humankind from nature and from themselves (their “own active functions” and their “life activity”) develops as he contrasts the relations of people and animals to nature, in theory and in practice, and as matters of consciousness and activity. Relations of humans to nature are multiple, mutually constitutive, and contradictory. Marx’s vision is dialectical: All of nature is theoretically included in human consciousness. In practice, nature is part of human life and activity. . . . Nature is his direct means of life, and the material object and instrument of his life activity. Man lives on nature, man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature and thus nature is linked to itself.

Without exploring all dimensions of Marx’s argument, it is possible to trace his path from collective social and spiritual relations with nature to the isolated individual caught in a web of utilitarian relations. Marx takes the “life of the species” – in a wonderful phrase, “life-engendering life” – to consist of “labor, life activity, productive life.” Alienated labor disrupts collective life and its relations in/with nature. By working upon the objective world (the active species life), people prove themselves part of the species being. Through labor, through production, nature appears as their work, their reality. The object of labor is the objectification of specifically human collective life. The argument thus arrives at human life as a practice of objectification.

Now consider the specifically, historically, alienated character of objectification under capital. “In tearing the object of his production away from man, estranged labor tears him from his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species” (paragraph 33). Marx explains in this way how alienation from nature and society derives from the alienation of workers from their own products (the first aspect of alienation). Then he shows how estrangement from nature and society derives from the alienation of productive activity (the second aspect of alienation). Aspect III follows from the first two: In degrading spontaneous free activity to a means, estranged labor makes species life a mere means to physical existence. The consciousness that people have of their social being generally and collectively is transformed by estrangement into life as only a means.

Read in terms of “Estranged Labor,” alienation at work reverses the relation between collective and individual life, and collective life becomes the means to pursue individual life rather than the other way around. Read in terms of “Estranged Labor/Learning,” alienation – at school (and no less at work or at home) – reverses the relation between collective and individual life, and schools become the means to pursue careers and not the way to contribute to collective well-being.

### Aspect IV

Finally, the fourth aspect of relations of alienated labor:

An immediate consequence of the fact that learners are estranged from the product of their learning, from their life activity, from their species being is the estrangement of person from person. When learners confront themselves, they confront other learners. What applies to a learner’s relation to his work, to the product of his learning and to himself, also holds of a learner’s relation to the other learner, and to the other learner’s learning and object of learning. (paragraph 38)

Marx directed us to the relations of competition, ambition, and monopoly in the opening paragraphs of “Estranged Labor.” This final aspect of alienation suggests *how* learners enter into their own alienation, coming to see others, what they know, what they might know, etc., as fearsome comparative dangers that make failure a possible, even necessary, consequence of struggles to acquire school learning (McDermott, 1993, 1997; Varenne and McDermott, 1998). The puzzle of learning as a competition is pursued further in the next section.

*Observations.* If learning is alienated in the comprehensive ways labor is alienated, Marx’s text allows for three immediate conclusions: First, the problem of alienated learning, like alienated labor, is ubiquitous. Second, it is not enough to understand learning problems, like other production problems, as simply an absence of knowledge or even a well-situated absence of knowledge, but necessarily as a mystification, a false focus, a problem that

hides more than it makes available to reform. And, third, if “remedies” are devised, but only for those mystified problems, such “solutions” are never enough and, often, not even a little bit helpful.

1. Alienated learning is endemic: Marx’s analysis distinguishes between apparently free labor and a darker underlying reality of alienated labor, and greatly expands the scope of analysis required to characterize labor in practice. The same is true if we follow Marx’s analysis of the four aspects of the relations that compose alienated labor to arrive at an equally relational conception of alienated learning. This conceptual complexity must surely be counter-intuitive for learning theory (which reduces learning to the mental labor of the learner on brief occasions when knowledge is transmitted, internalized, or tested) and even for the social analysis of education (which often ignores learning altogether). Marx is specifically critical of the distanced and privileged attempts of classical theorists to pretend away the alienated character of social life and, as a result, to capture it only in a mystified way that conceals the real social processes that produce it. This overcoat certainly fits a critique of learning theory.
2. Alienated learning is so situated in the social system of production that it is hard to find, describe, and confront: Economic categories are troublesome if allowed to refer to abstract entities when instead, says Marx, their very existence, or better, their function in the organization of experience, is fragile, dependent, situated, contextual, emergent (all that is easy enough to say), and (and here’s the rub) estranged, alienated, and mystified in the relations among people and their activities in the political economy. We can say the same for categories of learning, which, by current practice, are treated institutionally as objects – a stockpile of objects, really: attention, memory, problem solving, higher-order skills, and so on – and not as activities well tuned to the relations among people and their world. So we say, over and against the mainstream, that learning is dependent, situated, contextual, and emergent; all this has not been easy enough to say and must still be said, relentlessly so. But it is only the first half of a critique of learning theory as currently institutionalized. A second half can use Marx to stretch even theories of situated learning into theories that (and here’s the rub) confront learning and its market place as estranged, alienated, and mystified, that is to say, confront learning and even its apparent absence as two versions of a single educational commodity on sale.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “There is an absence, real as presence,” warns the poet, John Montague (1984). An absence real as presence: yes, made up, but consequential; made up, but requiring a hero to confront

3. Quick and partial solutions are distorting: Marx takes to task the impulse to produce an immediate or literal remedy. The poverty of labor, for example, cannot be fixed up by a simple increase in wages.

An enforced *increase in wages* . . . would therefore be nothing but *better payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity. (paragraph 61; emphases by Marx)

Similarly, in a system in which success is defined by the failure of others, in a system in which everyone has to do better than everyone else, there is no way for everyone to achieve school success (Varenne and McDermott, 1998). In a now-classic analysis of a balanced equilibrium for keeping the people on the bottom from ever climbing too high, Berg (1970) gave us a picture of the race between groups from the bottom of the social hierarchy doing well in school on the one hand and ever-increasing demands for school success as a criterion for access to jobs on the other; every achievement on the school front, says Berg, has been countered by an equal measure of unattainable requirements for employment.

Similarly, calls for more “authentic” curriculum and learning activities for school learners often leave the world unchanged relative to what children either have to learn in school or at least show off as having learned in school in ways that employers can use (Cuban, 1993). Systematically complex and contradictory relations between the school worlds of children and adult workplaces underscore Marx’s skepticism about cosmetic fixes for the systemic ills of wage labor.

Marx honors his own prescription in “Estranged Labor” to stick squarely focused on relations of labor (learning) to understand how their practices produce the sphere of political economy in all its multiple structures, relations, and complexities. Just as Marx (paragraph 59) says of political economy, that it:

. . . starts from labor as the real soul of production; yet to labour it gives nothing, and to private property everything.

So we can say of the school theory of learning that it:

. . . starts from learning as the real soul of education; yet to learning it gives nothing, and to professional education everything.

it; made up, but in a world defined by what we are not, alienated what it takes away. The poor are too often defined by what they cannot do, by what they do not know, by what they cannot say (McDermott, 1988; Ranciere, 1991). The poor are forced to carry their alienation not only in their wallets, but in their heads and on their tongues. Apparent learning and its absence make each other real and consequential.

Rereading "Estranged Labor" insists that we notice that relations of learning are as thick and complex as relations of labor.

#### PART IV. ALIENATED DISTRIBUTION

In the last half of the essay, Marx turns from an analysis of the concept of alienated labor to consider how the "concept must express and present itself in real life" (paragraph 43). At the same time, he begins to look at the same relations, until now understood as *internal* to the concept of alienated labor, as they inhere in the relation *between* labor and private property, between self-alienation and the way this un-free activity is produced in the service or dominion of others, between workers and men of means.

When we began rewriting "Estranged Labor," we left the main theoretical terms of Marx's analysis alone and found that even this minimalist approach yielded interesting ideas about learning under conditions of formal education. But toward the end of "Estranged Labor," Marx challenges the reader to develop new categories of political economy built up analytically from a base of alienated labor and private property.

Just as we have derived the concept of private property from the concept of estranged, alienated labor by analysis, so we can develop every category of political economy with the help of these two factors; and we shall find again in each category, e.g., trade, competition, capital, money, only a definite and developed expression of these first elements. (paragraph 65)

If we start with a critique fashioned from the perspective of alienated labor and its ties to private property, promises Marx, we might be able to pursue "a definite and developed expression" of alienated learning in educational production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

We could explore the relations of learning in any one of the concepts of political economy and education, though "Estranged Labor" itself is not a powerful auger: The essay focuses overwhelmingly on relations of production. Exchange is mentioned four times (only in the introductory paragraphs), consumption once, and distribution not at all. Curiosity suggests the last holds promise. A more serious consideration is that modern state school systems have made distribution of learners' futures their primary concern, if not analytically or even rhetorically, then experientially and symptomatically.

Care is required. Marx had something more profound in mind than taking on distribution or any other political economic relation out of context, one at a time, or in a simple sequence (as learning theories seem disposed to arrange in line: pregiven knowledge, then transmission, then internalization followed by learning transfer). In the essay, "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy," he dismisses as "a sequence, but a very superficial

one" the political economists' conceit that:

Production, distribution, exchange and consumption . . . form a proper syllogism; production represents the general, distribution and exchange the particular, and consumption the individual case which sums up the whole. (1857: 130)<sup>20</sup>

He shows us how trivial the sequence is by promptly scrambling its order (in a fashion still agreeable to the classical political economists):

Production is determined by general laws of nature; distribution by random social factors, it may therefore exert a more or less beneficial influence on production; exchange, a formal social movement, lies between these two; and consumption, as the concluding act, which is regarded not only as the final aim but as the ultimate purpose, falls properly outside the sphere of economy. . . . (1857: 130)

The *force* of the 1857 essay lies in Marx's argument that production and distribution, production and consumption, the other relations in pairs, and all of them together, are deeply interrelated in multiple ways and mutually constitutive of one another.

Charged with understanding distribution in terms of alienated learning and private property, we are reminded that distribution and production are formative of one another, that the division of productive labor is a distributed part of the production of wages, goods, and profits (to be distributed). We can now sharpen our project to reflect this view: How is it, we may ask, that alienated learning, and stocks of knowledge and other property of the education establishment, find definite and developed expression in the laborious production of educational distribution?

It is not a new idea to approach the analysis of schooling in terms of basic political economic concepts. It has been done with sophistication as a matter of exchange and with great rhetoric as a matter of consumption. Exchange first: Two notable ethnographic accounts of learners in high schools, one in England, one in the U.S., locate a central relation between the students and teachers as a relation of exchange. Willis (1977: 64) explores clashing expectations over the exchange of respect by students for knowledge from teachers. Eckert's (1989) analysis of a high school in the Midwest hinges on the exchange of students' compliance to reasonable scholastic demands from teachers in return for the right to configure their social life in the school setting away from the family purview.

Now consumption: It is fashionable of late for educational policy to style students as consumers. Signs are everywhere. A recently appointed

<sup>20</sup> In 1857, Marx wrote an introduction to a planned six volume work that he would never finish (the three volumes of *Capital* being less than his plans for a first volume). In English, the "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy" appears as an Afterward to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and as an Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1857-58). In both cases, it carries the title of its content: "Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation)."

superintendent in an upscale California district gave her place in the system to a local newspaper:

I'm like the CEO of a company, and the company I'm running is education. Her teachers produce education, and the children consume it. Her job is quality control: You can never stay on status quo – it's either moving up or down. I want to continue the cycle and build on success.

At the other end of the cycle of success are parents who can sue the school system if the proper education (positively assessed knowledge and displays of success) are not delivered in time for the children to move up and out. In education, the consumers are organized.

That brings us to distribution, or rather, to an educational establishment view of education as distribution. Recall that, in Table 6.1, when we summed up initial word shifts from political economy to education, we replaced private property with standardized knowledge, curriculum, assessments, and inherent intelligence. We replaced the products of Marx's "men of means" – their political economy and its theory – with the educational establishment and its learning theory. Derived from a privileged position, we would expect a mystified account of alienated learning and indeed that is what they produced. In the hands of educational theorists, distribution is treated as a simple, abstract, uncontested process. "Naturally" access to education is differently distributed, just as inherent intelligence is assumed to be distributed. Schooling in a meritocracy helps sort and distribute its alumni into previously constituted social categories of class, race, ethnicity, etc. For some, this is the purpose of education, to distribute the right persons to the right places. For others, it is the beginning of a critique. Either way, distribution dominates most every consideration in educational institutions. Consider "special" education, aimed at nurturing people at both ends – disabled and gifted – of every continuum of assessed performances. Or consider Latour's critical analysis that links common assumptions about the dissemination of science with the necessity, inside such a diffusion (distribution) theory, for a first generator, a genius discoverer or inventor (1987, 1988; Fujimura, 1996). Schools for children and research laboratories are alike in their attention to the production of distributions of "knowledge." The *differences* in their practices contribute to the importance of distribution in educational theory and practice. To cite crucial phrases in "Estranged Labor": each "takes for granted what it is supposed to explain" (paragraph 2) and treats the distribution of educational excellence – no, make that the distribution of the *attribution* of educational excellence – as the "*necessary, inevitable and natural consequences*" of birthright and hierarchies of access and not the necessary, inevitable, and natural consequences of their own activities in relation to production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

Further, as this theory goes, "real learning" is distributed on the other side of a divide that segregates schools from "real life" (a mystified claim

that hides alienated everyday school practices while attesting to them). Perhaps the most mystifying and in the end the most alienated and alienating assumption is specifically a matter of distribution. This is a widely and deeply felt distinction that separates the production of official knowledges (e.g., science, literature, national curricular frameworks), always elsewhere, from their distribution throughout school practices. "The production of knowledge stocks" is carefully distinguished from what boils down to their apparently non-generative, unchanging distribution as they are "transmitted" through schooling, "learned," and "transferred" beyond. These renderings of learning and distribution do not heed the admonition to fix the investigative eye on learning, and they do not lend themselves to a *relational explanation* of processes of alienation, understood as learners' alienated learning labor and its mutually constitutive ties to distributive practices.

For a reticular, relational view of distributive practices, we can try, instead, to develop a conception of learning and schooling as a matter of the production (or labor) of distribution under conditions of alienated learning. Relations of distribution take on different – greater – significance in this context. Where we begin with a conception of learning as alienated, its distribution loses the abstract appearance of smooth circulation, or simple transportation. It no longer stands as a neutral process of allocation, transmission, or diffusion, as if according to a necessary and natural plan. We begin to think more of distributive practices that alienate, estrange, and appropriate learning, the products of learning, processes of learning, and learners themselves.<sup>21</sup> This makes it possible for us to think more systematically about how alienated learning participates in the self-valorization of capital.

In short, the distribution of alienated learning is at heart a matter of *political* economy. The organization of distribution partly defines working lines of power and contestation and how they lie in relation to alienated learning, including: estrangement, appropriation, struggles to keep, struggles to take away (variously: children, credentials, knowledge – and learning), attempts to "impart," and official processes of assessment. Once viewed as alienated, distribution is a matter of political struggle over societal "stocks of knowledge," credentials, gene pools, genius stocks, brains, and minds, all laid down in unequal relations between what Marx calls those of means and those without.

Further, the social relations that allow the translation of "private property" into educational establishment terms as "societal stocks of knowledge" depend on, as well as shape, the alienated character of distribution processes. *The institutionalization of predefined and fixed stocks of knowledge available for transfer and assessment both depends on and produces the estrangement of learning*

<sup>21</sup> Such an analysis could be read alongside Foucault (1975) and Rose's (1990) theories of normalizing disciplinary practices and schooling as a distributional endeavor.

from learners in institutional settings. If schools did not insist that learners engage in day-to-day competition to acquire what is called the core curriculum, the basics, cultural literacy, etc., it would not be possible to sustain the illusion of inherent intelligence, credentials to be earned, and a societal stock of knowledge to be transmitted. Its distributional potential is the defining feature of every item placed in the curriculum and especially on tests. School lessons are the sites for exercising stock options in a system of assessed "learning." If it is not assessed, it does not count in the distribution wars. The alienated learning of children in school and the propertied illusion of official knowledge make each other. *Learning-for-display in a world of positions distributed up and down a hierarchy of access and privilege is the more salient issue for participants to keep in focus.* That is why learning "in its relation to truly human and social property" (paragraph 69), just like labor, is hard to keep in view, and hard to keep at the core of education as its "real soul."

Institutionalized education cannot afford to keep learning in view, for it has always the more pressing task of reproducing what alienated men of means must guard as, and believe in as, the societal stock of knowledge and expertise. Alienated labor and learning produce and protect the alienated concept of private property and society's knowledge. Together, they produce the material and intellectual wealth of the established order. This is why children must go to school not to learn, but to not get caught not knowing required parts of standardized knowledge. Estranged learning is estranged because it is always done for others who use it for their own purposes. We know now what those purposes are. They use it to keep themselves (and their children) in place in a hierarchy of others, a hierarchy held together in part by a theory of learning that denies the relevance of the distribution system while making each participant's placement its most important product. Such circumstances of learning are caught up in what we have come to think of as a teaching crisis in which teachers and other "haves" are impelled to extract, distract, appropriate, and take on themselves the learning of learners who thereby are deprived of that relation themselves.<sup>22</sup>

The exercise Marx proposed at the end of "Estranged Labor" has brought us from a critique of production by way of alienated labor to a confrontation

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Mead long ago reminded us that not all societies live with a teaching crisis:

Miscarriages in the smooth working of the transmission of available skills and knowledge did occur, but they were not sufficient to focus the attention of the group upon the desirability of teaching over and against the desirability of learning. Even with considerable division of labor and with a custom by which young men learned a special skill not from a father or other specified relative but merely from a master of the art, the master did not go seeking pupils. (1943)

Similarly, a quick look at people in contemporary states learning languages, technologies, games, and job skills shows that most learning problems are created by schools in the service of the political economy.

with distribution by way of alienated learning. We like to think that Marx might have said the same thing about teaching and learning, and we get some confirmation from the short quote we offered from *Capital*. A longer version of that quote and our rewrite move us closer to what Marx might have said:

Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus-value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital. 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. The concept of a productive worker therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the worker as capital's direct means of valorization. To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune. . . . (1867: 644)

Here is our translation into the sphere of alienated learning and distribution:

*Learning under capitalist production* is not merely about the production of knowledge; it is, by its very essence, about the production and distribution of assessed knowledge. The learner produces not for himself, but for his or her place in the system. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to learn. He must produce knowledge appropriate to his situation. The only learner who is productive is one who produces test scores for the school, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization and redistribution of the educational hierarchy. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, students and teachers are productive when, in addition to belaboring their own heads, they work themselves 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. The concept of a productive learner therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of learning and its useful effect, between the learner and what is learned (and can be shown to have been learned), but also a specifically social relation of education, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the learner as the school's direct means of valorization. To be a productive learner is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune. . . .

*Observation:* One reason for publishing this exercise develops from our effort to understand how to conduct research and to teach in ways that squarely reflect our understanding of "learning." This practice of "reading" has given one answer: It does not treat scholarly work as a stock of knowledge property, nor reading as a means of acquiring it or transmitting it, but rather as a way to work generatively with it. This is surely a form of appropriation, but one

that cannot lose sight of the producer of the work so appropriated and the continuing relation between them. The duty to text, and the respect referred to earlier, are neither first and foremost competitive relations nor ones that should intensify alienation from scholarly colleagues, thus, the pleasure of such engagements.<sup>23</sup>

This leads, however, to another point. If we allow ourselves this pleasure but call it scholarship and not learning, we reveal the alienated position we occupy in a world in which we insist there is no relation between our labors and the labors of learners in schools (between something called "knowledge production" or "high culture" and something called "schooling" or "training," or "the reproduction of knowledge"). This insistence is in one sense correct – it affirms (and in doing so participates in) divisions under contemporary capitalism between an elite cultural establishment and the institution of schooling. It affirms divisions between elite practices of research, expertise, and management and the activities of "lay people," or those so managed, including learners in school. But it is incorrect as an analysis of learning as a "life-engendering life" practice (paragraph 30), of learning "in its relation to truly human and social property" (paragraph 69), which would surely include scholarly practices in the same theoretical sweep as learning everywhere else. We may now ask, what does the analysis of alienated learning tell us about scholarly processes of reading and vice versa?

### CONCLUSION

If Marx is correct that the very contents of our minds are working against us, where can we get new materials to reshape them and, because it is never enough simply to change minds, to put them back into the fray, into the reorganization of the society of problems to which we adhere? A conceptual undertow relentlessly threatens to pull us back to the mainstream, where children are primarily minds ready to be filled according to capacity, where teachers are transmitters of what everyone knows must be known, and where schools are a neutral medium for sorting out the best and the brightest according to fair tests, the same for one and all. Reinforced by our ethnographic work, we have long known that children are innocent players in a world of competing forces, that teachers are good people trying to work

<sup>23</sup> Calling attention to the constitutive importance of reading as part of scholarly practice and as a major mode by which academics, among others, relate to the work of colleagues past and present, contrasts with the alienated, commodity-oriented character of critical diagnoses over the last fifteen years of the ailments of ethnographic writing. Reducing traditional anthropology to the illusion of writing authoritative ethnographies reduces it to its most commodified moment and remains silent about the complexities of practices that reveal the interdependent relations of fieldwork, writing, reading, and rereading that are the generative basis of any new learning.

around those same forces, and that schools – a significant portion of the gross domestic product of modern nation states – are only a possible tool in the reform of those forces. To stay alive to these alternative formulations, and to give them analytic rigor and political punch, we must constantly develop new materials and procedures.

Working our way through "Estranged Labor" has given us an account of estranged learning. We have developed a new momentary place to stand and a new set of tools with which to confront mainstream assumptions. It has allowed us a conceptual advance, namely, to see, once again but in a new way, not just learning, but the nation's very ideas about learning as part of a wider system of cultural, political, and economic forces that organize and define education and its problems. Good for us, and hopefully we can find ways to make the insights cumulative. But the method also has us excited. Work with good texts, like work with records of human interaction, like ethnographic fieldwork, if done carefully, if done slowly and visibly, can be an endless source for confronting and restaging the contexts of learning.

Most texts cannot withstand the kind of scrutiny we have paid to "Estranged Labor," and few texts have enough internal energy and complexity to deliver messages to concerns far from their defined topics. Those that can make the reach are worth working with over and over. Every time we thought we had finished our analysis of "Estranged Labor," a new use and a new lesson seemed to emerge.

We can close with a final example. We wanted to write a conclusion in which we said why we had continued to work with Marx's text. As happened often over the months of putting this rewriting together, after an hour of discussion, we returned to the text to read again how Marx ended his essay. He did it twice, once in the penultimate three paragraphs and again in a last line, and we can use them both. The penultimate three paragraphs, with a little rewriting, can give us our conclusions.

First it has to be noted that everything which appears in the worker as *an activity of alienation, of estrangement*, appears in the non-worker as *a state of alienation, of estrangement*. (paragraph 71)

Our first instinct was to rewrite the paragraph, substituting learner for worker and teacher for non-worker. Good enough, and it makes the case of the paper once again. But there is a stronger ending in it, for we are often non-workers, busy non-workers, of course, but intellectuals and liable to fall into "*a state of alienation, of estrangement*." We cannot trust ourselves to think our way to the ideas we need to change our lives. We need help. One kind of help is to work on rich texts that force us systematically to relocate our work with the work of others, the work of teachers with the work of learners, the work of people alienated in one way with the work of people alienated in other ways.



The next paragraph is no less helpful to our conclusion.

Secondly, the worker's real, practical attitude in production and to its product (as a state of mind) appears in the non-worker confronting him as a theoretical attitude. (paragraph 73)

This time, substitute learner for worker and researcher for non-worker, and we can make the point of the paper again. The learner going to school faces not only difficult learning tasks, but a theoretical attitude – a theory of learning – that can turn the learner into a problem. The next substitution makes the point of our conclusion. We are the researchers, and it is difficult to escape the theoretical attitude that pays our salary as well as turning others into learning problems. We need help. In this case, it came from hard work with “Estranged Labor.” In our earlier research, it came from hard work with films of children in school or tailors learning their trade in Liberia. There is order everywhere – in texts, in human interaction, in various cultures – and although these orders are always symptomatic of various problems, they can always be used as well to reorder our theoretical attitudes and the relations that support them.

The third paragraph of Marx's first conclusion pushes us further in our attempt to say why we have worked so long on “Estranged Labor/Learning.”

*Thirdly*, the non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself; but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker. (paragraph 74)

It is time for us to do to ourselves part of what is done to learners all the time. It is time to submit ourselves to a theoretical attitude that can knock us off our moorings and show us where we stand in relation to others. It is time to locate ourselves in the alienated learning we have been hawking around the world. Rewriting “Estranged Labor” has subjected our own work, and our learning, to the larger critique Marx developed in 1844. It is not all that we have to do, but it has been reorienting. For a final comment, we cannot do better than to repeat Marx's last paragraph:

Let us look more closely at these three relations. (paragraph 75)

## “Our Working Conditions Are Our Students’ Learning Conditions”

### *A CHAT Analysis of College Teachers*

Helena Worthen and Joe Berry

#### INTRODUCTION

“Our working conditions are our students’ learning conditions.” This claim has been made again and again by contingent (adjunct, part-time, temporary, non-tenure track, or non-“regular”) faculty in adult and higher education in the United States, usually in the course of some part of a union organizing or bargaining campaign. It is both a protest against working conditions that undermine effective teaching and a declaration of intent to organize to improve those conditions.

It also indicates that, from the point of view of contingent faculty, the interests of the faculty lie increasingly with their students rather than with the institutional management that has command of those conditions.

This distinction between the interests of faculty and of institutional management, as we will explain, has emerged progressively over the last thirty years as the adult and higher education workforce has undergone a shift from majority tenured and tenure-track to majority contingent. However, this distinction is invisible to many. Furthermore, this invisibility is itself promoted, asserted, and promulgated, often in the name of “quality.” The argument goes that the interests of the institution and of faculty, meaning both tenured and contingent faculty, are identical because institution and faculty alike are committed to offering the best possible educational “quality” experience to their students. The key is that what “quality” means depends on what purpose one is serving.

Penetrating this invisibility is not a simple task. Faculty, both tenured and contingent, carry out their work in a single workplace; they deal with a single student body; they work under a single calendar; they teach from a single course catalog, and often teach the same courses and syllabi; a single set of criteria applies to students moving through the institution, whether