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Response Paper III
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Does Private Property lead to Alienation from the “act of production”?

Marx suggests that “estranged labour is the direct cause of private property.”¹ He argues that labor is estranged for the “*act of production* within the *production activity* itself.”² For Marx, the alienation from the act of production is when the worker sees the production activity as an alien activity which is turned against him and leads to *self-estrangement*. I will argue that alienation from the act of production cannot be explained as a result of private property alone.

The notion of private property has existed from the time man had just learnt to live in a community. But that does not seem to have alienated man from his labor. Despite the division of labor, man lived in harmony. One can argue that man would have lived in that same satiated state if there had not been those enterprising and ambitious few, among him, who aspired for greater land and leisure. Marx is correct to suggest that the capitalist form of production “replaces labour by machines.”³ But capitalism (private ownership of the means of production for Marx) alone, should not be blamed for this. One should consider the role of technological and mechanical advancements as well as human greed. But Marx (or a Marxist) would argue that I am too entrenched in the capitalist way of life and fail to understand capitalism’s exploitative tendencies.

To attempt to address this question, let me point out that though Marx is correct in his assessment of the plight of workers in his time, he fails to account for the

¹ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. The Marx-Engels Reader. p. 80.

² *Ibid.* p. 73.

³ *Ibid.* p. 73.

advancement, job security and benefits of workers in advanced capitalist societies that we observe today. Marx suggests that a worker is “at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.”⁴ This might be true for a part of the workforce, but there are large numbers of workers who would continue with their job even when “no physical or other compulsion exists.”⁵

Marx also claims that the capitalist mode of production “produces intelligence – but for the worker idiocy, cretinism.”⁶ This is not true for a part of the workforce that is involved in highly skilled activity today. Marx could not possibly foresee the extent to which capitalists would invest in the training and education of their employees. One might argue that this is mainly to advance the capitalists goals; however it endears the worker to his work rather than alienating him. Furthermore, employees are given a stake in the company in the form of shares and certain rights that make them part of the Marxist *bourgeois*, when they are really workers with property! But it should also be noted that there still are low paying, non-skilled workers who are faced with various hardships and low wages. I think it would be unfair and quite simplistic to cast the blame entirely on private property for their plight.

When Marx says “to labour it [capitalism] gives nothing, and to private property everything,” he might have a vested interest to portray private property (capitalism) as the cause of worker alienation to emphasize his political idea of communism to emancipate the working classes.

Based on our discussion above it should be clear that private property alone can not suffice as a cause of worker alienation from the act of production itself.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 74.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 73.