Bertell Ollman: Pitting “Human Nature” against Marx’s Humanism

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The intellectual’s alienated life in a world in crisis and disarray, his organic empiricism and isolation from the worker, bid fair to inundate us with still more books on the “backwardness” of the proletariat. As if the 308 pages of Alienation by Bertell Ollman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971) weren’t proof enough of that being its underlying concept, its author informs us: “I intend to explore the workers’ difficulty in attaining class consciousness in greater detail in a forthcoming work” (p. 307).

This promise is no individualistic exception. Hard as it is to believe that academia will once again attempt to return us to the McCarthyite 1950s when bourgeois intellectuals were busy proclaiming an “end to ideology,” the Nixon age unnerves even some intellectuals sympathetic to Marx. This has been a fact of life ever since the near-revolutions in 1968 proved to be stillbirths. Not only does the mass passion for a philosophy of liberation, when so many abort ed revolutions are all about us, appear incomprehensible to the intellectual separated from the workers by a wall of books, but Marx’s works themselves, if not totally incomprehensible, get so fragmented as to become abstract, losing their proletarian pivot as well as their dialectic totality.

Thus, where the left intellectual, in the activist mid-1960s, would not have thought of trying to bring about a division between Marx’s theory of alienated labor and its inseparable absolute opposite, “the quest for universality” [MECW 6, p. 190] the same intellectual, in the early 1970s, strives so intensely to be original as to attribute to Marx a theory of human nature he never enunciated, while denying Marx his new continent of thought—historical materialism as a “new Humanism.” Professor Ollman acts as if the “attempt to make Marxism ‘respectable’ to a hostile American public” compelled Erich Fromm “to abstract his (Marx’s) remarks on human nature from the rest of his theories in order to present him as a humanist” (p. 75).

1 The Unity of Idealism and Materialism

It wasn’t Fromm, but Marx, who spelled out his new Humanism as
a thoroughgoing Naturalism, or Humanism, [which] distinguishes itself both from Idealism and Materialism, and is, at the same time, the truth uniting both ... [and alone] capable of grasping the act of world history.¹

Moreover, this historic unity of idealism and materialism was expressed by Marx over and over again throughout the now famous 1844 Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts that dealt so profoundly with the concept of alienation which is the centerpiece of Ollman’s book.

So determined was Marx, in his critique of capitalistic alienated labor, to present the absolute opposite of this—labor as creative activity—that he separated himself also from “vulgar communism” which thinks that alienated labor can be abolished through the abolition of private property. Marx held that, crucial as it is to abolish private property, a new form of property (though it be collective) would not abolish what is most dehumanizing in all class societies: the division between mental and manual labor.

Therefore, though he credits communism with being “transcendence of private property,” he concludes: “Only by the transcendence of this mediation, which is nevertheless a necessary presupposition, does there arise positive Humanism, beginning from itself” [Appendix, p. 352]. That, and that alone, would denote the end of the pre-history of mankind imposed by class society, and begin the true self-development of men and women and children by creating the new human dimensions which can come only with total freedom. Then, and only then, would we know “human nature.” Then, and only then, would a new society initiate “the development of human power which is its own end.”²

Ollman would not deny this. Why then could this scholarly left intellectual not grasp the dialectics of Marx’s analysis of alienation and humanism, of the capital/labor relationship not merely as an “internal” versus an “external” relationship, but as so antagonistic a class relationship that he couldn’t possibly have written so narrowly, so one-sidedly and in so non-revolutionary a manner as Ollman about alienated labor, i.e., the very subject who is destined to achieve self-emancipation?

¹ There are many translations finally available of the Humanist Essays of Marx, but I was the first to translate them for the American public, and I am quoting that translation which appeared as an Appendix to the first (1958) edition of Marxism and Freedom [Appendix, p. 347].

² It is important to hold in mind that this is not from the early Humanist Essays, but from Marx’s greatest mature theoretical work, Capital (Vol. III, p. 954 [MCII1K, p. 954; MCII1P, p. 959]). This does not mean, as Bertell Ollman implies, that Marx’s thirty years of mature work was a matter of gathering “supporting material” for his early works. That unhistorical view tells the whole story about Ollman’s disregard of Marx’s self-development as well as of the historical development itself in those critical three decades when Marx was writing Capital.