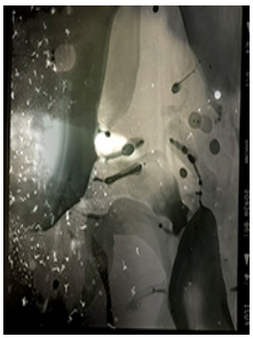

Angelaki
Journal of the Theoretical Humanities

ISSN: 0969-725X (Print) 1469-2899 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cang20

# STRANGE SAMENESS

*hegel, marx and the logic of estrangement*

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**To cite this article:** Ray Brassier (2019) STRANGE SAMENESS, Angelaki, 24:1, 98-105, DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2019.1568737

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1568737

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ANGELAKI
journal of the theoretical humanities
volume 24 number 1 february 2019

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## *hegel, marx and the logic of estrangement*

> This simple infinity, or the absolute concept, is to be called the simple essence of life, the soul of the world, the universal bloodstream, which is omnipresent, neither dulled nor interrupted by any difference, which is instead itself both every difference as well as their sublatedness […] For the estrangement has already taken place, the difference has been excluded from what is selfsame and set to one side; what was supposed to be selfsameness is thus already one of the estranged moments rather than being the absolute essence itself. "The selfsame estranges itself" means that it, as what is already estranged, thereby sublates itself, and sublates itself as otherness.[1]

## an ambiguity in the potentiality of genus-being

Dialectics is the logic of estrangement. If Hegel and Marx are thinkers of alienation, it is because they are dialectical thinkers. Self-relating negativity is the pulse, the "universal bloodstream" of dialectics. But what is this "simple infinity," which is at once every difference and its overcoming? For Hegel, the idealist, it is "the absolute concept." It is more difficult to say what it is for Marx, who is supposed to be a materialist. Perhaps it is what the young Marx called "free conscious activity"? Free conscious activity is self-determining: its means and ends are not dictated to it by any extrinsic determinants, whether natural or social. This too can sound idealist, unless one specifies that it is not the activity of consciousness alone but of social practices freed from the imperatives of satisfying want and valorising capital. Yet this makes it seem as if Marx has merely relocated self-estranging sameness from the concept to human "genus-being" (*Gattungswesen*), understood as a historically variable "ensemble of social relations" rather than a fixed generality.[2] If this were what Marx were doing, he would be endowing human genus-being, or rather, the collective activity generated through this ensemble of social relations, with a capacity for self-transformation that is effectuated through the means and relations of production but blocked by the institutions of property, class, and state. On this account, the ensemble of social relations harbours a potentiality to become that is at once enabled and disabled by the social divisions of labour and class that they have generated.

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/19/010098-8 © 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1568737

I think this interpretation is broadly correct. But it is vitiated by an ambiguity in its invocation of potentiality. The dialectical cast of Marx's thinking requires that this potentiality is at once generative of and generated by concrete social relations, including the divisions of labour and class. But given this interdependence (the fact that social practices generate social relations and are generated by them in turn), how can the social relations generated by money and value be reprehended for impeding the generative potential of practice? The question is not: why do these relations determine the potencies of practice? Given the feedback between practices and relations, it is obvious why money and value (as social forms) determine (just as they are determined by) social practices. The question is rather: if we grant this interdependence between social practices, forms, and relations, on what grounds can practices be said to harbour an unrealized potential in excess of the actual forms and relations with which they are co-dependent? What unrealized surplus do practices retain once we have subtracted their co-constitution by existing social forms and relations? In other words: what allows us to find the social practices concomitant with capitalism wanting once we have de-substantialized human genus-being and reduced it to an ensemble of historically variable social relations? If we flatten genus-being onto the historically variable ensemble of social relations, there is no latency left in it which could be said to be unactualized by actual social practices. But if some aspect of genus-being transcends the ensemble of social relations and is held in reserve as an unactualized potential, we risk re-substantializing it as an a-historical essence. Free conscious activity is either completely or incompletely realized in actual social relations: if completely, they cannot be found wanting; if incompletely, it cannot be wholly constituted by social relations: genus-being must harbour a transcendent potential.

It may be tempting to terminate this line of questioning with a terse rejoinder: what is wrong with capitalist social relations is exploitation, the extraction of surplus-labour from wage-labour. Acknowledging the necessarily exploitative character of the wage relation, and the mass immiseration which is its concomitant, requires no metaphysical perplexity. This rejoinder is politically salutary, but it misses the philosophical point (perhaps deliberately). Exploitation is an analytical category that tells us nothing about the nature of the potency proper to unexploited labour, or why it harbours a greater transformative potential than wage-labour. By what yardstick do we measure the discrepancy between labour's actual and unactualized potential? It is this ambiguity in the potentiality attributed to human genus-being – the fact that it seems to be both immanent and transcendent vis-à-vis actual social relations – that leads Marx's detractors to accuse him of invoking a transcendent conception of human essence even as he insists that this essence is a function of historically variable social relations. For empiricists, it is hard to see what is materialist about Marx's insistence that human sociality need not be founded upon the divisions of labour and class, despite their prevalence through human history. Given their historical predominance, why not admit that these divisions are inevitable? Is it not idealist to reject their necessity and maintain that society can be re-founded upon their abolition? This objection targets what it takes to be the secret idealism at the heart of Marx's materialism: the conviction that what is, ought not to be, while what is not, ought to be. If this charge is warranted, communism is not a "real movement" immanent to history but an unrealized ideal, a pure potential with respect to which actual history is found wanting. I want to parry this objection by suggesting that Marx's materialism requires Hegel's self-estranging sameness in order to dissolve the apparent dichotomy between immanence and transcendence in the potency ascribed to practice. Doing so is not merely a scholastic indulgence; it is necessary if the communist imperative – the realization of free conscious activity in social relations – is not to be mistaken for the fantasy of un-estranged propriety.

## externalization and estrangement

Notoriously, both Hegel and Marx deploy two terms for alienation, *Entaeusserung* and *Entfremdung*, and seem to use them interchangeably. In his translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller marks the distinction by rendering *Entaeusserung* as "externalization" and *Entfremdung* as "estrangement." Of course, much ink has been spilled by scholars debating whether this heteronymy masks an underlying synonymy. But Italo Testa has argued compellingly that there is indeed a logic to their distinction. While Spirit's self-externalization is constitutive, Hegel distinguishes between those externalizations through which Spirit realizes its freedom and those through which it becomes subjected to a foreign agency or power, which is only itself in estranged form. Thus all estrangement is externalization; but not all externalization is estrangement. At its most fundamental, Testa sees this as a question of the dialectical interplay between Spirit's independence and its dependence. This interpretation is indebted to Adorno: Spirit frees itself from its subjection to nature (it achieves independence or autonomy), but in so doing generates culture as a second nature to which it is subjected (it becomes dependent on societal institutions, customs, and norms in a way that diminishes its freedom). As Testa puts it, naturalness or instinct is repeated within Spirit and manifests itself within it in an estranged form. Institutions, customs, and norms "start working as if they were nature, with a sort of *sui generis* causality, that is, as estranged, reified second nature."[3]

One way of encapsulating this idea is as follows: every self-conscious de-naturalization engenders an un-conscious re-naturalization. Testa cites two examples of this "return of repressed nature" within Spirit from Hegel's *Phenomenology*:

> […] the natural character which acts according to the estranged dialectics of destiny within immediate *Sittlichkeit* [i.e., ethical life]; the fact that once personhood is abstractly recognized in its spiritual form in the Roman system of rights, then the individual is consigned to the confusion of the multiplicity of natural internal and external forces and is exposed in its animal contingency; the fact that the concept of legal person is here groundless, that is, dependent for his positive recognition on the brute fact of a social power which within the empire manifests itself as a natural force of devastation.[4]

What is interesting about these examples is that they seem to be historical: the natural character subjected to fate in the Greek world governed by Divine Law; the legal entitlements of Roman citizenship secured through lawless force. These examples invite what I call a processual interpretation of the movement of alienation: first, there is subjection to necessity, then an externalization through which Spirit emancipates itself from this subjection, but in a way that is congenitally incomplete, generating another form of subjection. Feuerbach's critique of religion pivots upon this processual paradigm of externalization-estrangement, or double-alienation:

> Man – this is the mystery of religion – projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself.[5]

Objectification yields the first object, to which the objectifier is subjected, or objectified, in turn. This double objectification is decisive for the young Marx's conception of alienation. However, where Feuerbach construes double objectification as unfolding within the ambit of human self-consciousness, Marx roots it in human practice, and specifically in social production. Human social relations become objectified as relations among commodities, which become personified as agents to which humans are in turn subjected. What is crucial here is that for Marx as for Feuerbach, human genus-being is necessarily self-externalizing, which is to say, productive (practically for Marx, theoretically for Feuerbach), so that the termination

of subjection cannot be the reinstatement of interiority. Since practice is essentially self-externalizing, the negation of its estrangement (its self-subjection) is the negation of estranged externalization, not of externalization as such. De-estrangement is the re-externalization of estrangement, not its interiorization.

However, if, as Testa proposes, every externalization entails a concomitant estrangement, then it is a mistake to separate these moments as consecutive stages. Estrangement returns because the externalization of estrangement is also the re-estrangement of externalization. The processual interpretation of alienation encourages us to reify these moments and to conceive of externalization as generating either estrangement or non-estrangement. But estrangement is externalization's shadow. This is not to say that they are indistinguishable. Indeed, we are compelled to discriminate those institutions, customs, or norms to which we are subjected and which have become mechanically compulsive for us, from those through which we are able to exercise our free conscious activity (our genus-being). The point is that this discrimination is always historically circumscribed such that successively discriminating subjection to the object (objective estrangement) blinds us to our subjection to the subject (the estrangement of externalization) that makes this discrimination. But this is an enabling subjection. Thus the distinction between compulsion and freedom should not be turned into a Manichean opposition between disablement and enablement. However, before we can explore the further ramifications of this claim, we must reconsider the question raised earlier: if discriminating between estrangement and de-estrangement requires an appeal to genus-being, how do we measure the discrepancy between realized and unrealized degrees of free conscious activity?

## essence and becoming

To attribute a historically unrealized potential to human genus-being is to turn Marx's materialization of Hegel into a reversion to the traditional (Aristotelian) articulation of essence and becoming – the very articulation which is shattered by Hegel's self-estranging sameness. For Aristotle, essence determines potentiality. The ambit of becoming orbits around the fixed point of essential identity. Essence thereby delimits the possible from the impossible. This limit is circumscribed by the difference between the contraries encompassed by substantial form and the contradictories it excludes. Socrates can be young or old, standing or sitting, happy or sad, but since he is essentially a rational animal he cannot become irrational or inanimate without ceasing to be Socrates. Substantial form (e.g., rational animal) fixes in advance the limits of becoming, which is channelled through the furrows of generic division. But essence as self-estranging sameness subverts these divisions and dissolves the fixity of substantial form, thereby rendering contradictoriness constitutive of what is actual. Where, for Aristotle, the identity of essence entails that actualization is substantialization, i.e., the consummation of potentiality and the exhaustion of essential possibility, for Hegel, the self-estrangement of essence deformalizes substance and the essential contradictoriness of the actual turns actualization into de-substantialization. The subordination of becoming to substantial form is undone and the possible and impossible are desegregated. Only what has become can be retrospectively considered essential. And what has become essential retroactively determines what will be possible. Every becoming re-establishes the limit between the possible and the impossible as a division set to be undone by the practical actualization of the essential difference that underlies it.

Thus history is not the processual estrangement and de-estrangement of free conscious activity. Moreover, the possibilities commensurate with free conscious activity as what is essentially or generically human are not fixed by some supposedly originary, un-estranged essence. Marx's insistence on historical immanence entails that we cannot essentialize a criterion of non-estranged activity by generalizing the way we currently distinguish estrangement from de-estrangement: in every instance, the criterion will be immanent to forms of activity

grounded in specific modes of production. But if history is not a processual development, neither is it empirically given as a ready-made sequence of facts. To historicize is not a matter of stringing together pre-existing facts into a linear progression unfolding from past to present. As Marx puts it, "the anatomy of the human is the key to the anatomy of the ape."[6] To historicize is to unfold the past from the present, not the present from the past. It requires self-consciously projecting the retrospective preconditions that determine our current possibilities. We must retroject a previous un-freedom, or estrangement, in order to discern our current measure of freedom, not as a positive, substantial attribute, but as the estranging of estrangement.

## estranging estrangement

If Marx succeeds in materializing dialectics, it is precisely to the extent that he refrains from positivizing the potentiality he construes as generically human. This is to say that he does not characterize it as a positive essence but as what Simon Skempton calls "undetermined determinability": "this is a negative and contentless universality; the overcoming of all specific determinacy; thus it is not the universalization of any determination."[7] It is precisely the negative universality of being-human that is estranged in money and value. Thus Marx writes:

> The inversion and confusion of all human and natural qualities, the fraternization of impossibilities, this divine power of money lies in its being the externalized and self-externalizing genus-being of man. It is the externalized capacities of humanity.[8]

Skempton glosses this as follows:

> This alienation involves universal determinability taking the form of the "spectrality" of money and exchange value. For Marx, humanity's "generic being" is an insubstantial unessential universality, not tied to specificity, which is the basis of its social relationality, but which is alienated from the individual through capitalist social relations and the division of labour, which in turn tie her to specific determinacy.[9]

The question is whether this universal determinability has become estranged, or whether it is (retroactively) generated through this estrangement. If humanity's generic being is "insubstantial, unessential universality" then the alienation at issue cannot be that of the generic determinable's estrangement in its specific determination (as when theologians describe human power and wisdom as limited manifestations of God's limitless power and wisdom). For in this case the determinable's undeterminedness would be a subtraction from the determination of its species and its negativity would follow from the negation of determination, not the negation of negation. In other words, its negativity would remain positively haloed by specific determinacy: it would be a relative rather than a self-relating negativity. But to endow humanity with a generic transformative potential that has become estranged in the course of actual history is to construe this determinability as a distinct moment that pre-exists its self-estrangement. Essence is substantialized as one of the estranged moments – which it is – but without also being grasped as the splitting or estrangement as such. This is to construe negative universality as proper to the human: the human is not a difference in kind, but another kind of difference. Interestingly, this is Heidegger's characterization of *Dasein* as *seinkönnen* or pure-potentiality-to-be. In the case of Heidegger, it is instructive to note the conceptual link between the purity of potentiality and the pathos of propriety (*eigentlichkeit* or authenticity). Heidegger's fascism is prefigured by this entwinement of potency, transcendence, and propriety.

But the dialectical torsion consists in the claim that the negativity of this universality is not proper to the human because self-estranging negativity is the impropriety (or accidentality) upon which the determinability proper to the human depends. This is to say that the undetermined determinability ascribed to being human does not pre-exist its estrangement in the social forms of money and exchange; it becomes possible through them. The determinable is undetermined through its estrangement. Because

what is supposed to be selfsame is already one of the estranged moments, any potentiality harboured by it must be subsequent and not antecedent to its estrangement. Potentiality is determined *ex post* not *ex ante*. What is materialist in Marx is the suggestion that the negative universality of human sociality becomes actual as a real (rather than merely ideal) possibility in and through the social forms that seem to negate it. Communism does not release social activity in order to recover an estranged essence; a pure potentiality flattened by exchange and subordinated to capital's self-valorization. Rather, it perceives in the autotelic finality of money the estrangement of an estranging activity: the exchange abstraction is the appearance of an essence, human sociality, whose actuality it contradicts; yet this contradictoriness, and the political practice consequent upon it, provides the ground for re-founding the actuality of sociality. What we see in money and exchange is the potentiality of our externalizing activity given tangible form in its sheer determinability. Money and exchange are generated by our activities, but it is not until these activities appear as estranged in the illusory autonomy of money and exchange that these activities, and the possibilities generated by our perceiving their estrangement, become appropriable as our own.

## estranging freedom

We are never in complete possession of the resources through which we could definitively distinguish between alienating and non-alienating automatisms among contemporary institutions, customs, and norms. Acquiring those resources is a task of retrospective construction. The processual model suggests a movement from externalization to estrangement, and from estrangement to further externalization (de-estrangement). But the processual model reifies and separates the moments in what is for Hegel an indivisible movement wherein estrangement and de-estrangement, compulsion and freedom, coincide. Estrangement is not simply the return of repressed nature within free conscious activity – the repetition of compulsion within the undoing of compulsion – if this return or repetition is understood as the reiteration of an initial or preceding state. Rather, externalization is de-estrangement *as* estrangement. The prospect of de-estrangement emerges only by retrospecting an enabling estrangement. Objectification and subjection are facets of a single indivisible movement. This is why there can be no narrative about overcoming the need to overcome; no history in which the compulsion to repeat would be undone by the rememoration of compulsion. There is no self-relation uncontaminated by estrangement. Only retrospectively do we become able to distinguish between what frees us from compulsion and what compels us to be free. But this retrospection is compelled by history. Indeed, it is the way in which history is at once something we make and something that happens to us. The originary estrangement is the estrangement of history as this rift between our externalizing activity and its objective estrangement. To insist that estrangement has already taken place is to realize that the recurrence of originary dispossession is what enables us to take possession of ourselves and to affirm the necessity of this possession knowing that it entails further dispossession. History dispossesses us even as it provides us with the sole resource for becoming free.

## disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## notes

1 Hegel 98–99, §162; translation modified.

2 Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* in McLellan 172.

3 Testa 25.

4 Ibid.

5 Feuerbach 98.

6 Marx, *Grundrisse* in McLellan 390.

7 Skempton 200.

8 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in McLellan 118.

9 Skempton 126.

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