

## RECOVERING MARX'S THEORY OF ALIENATION: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM A CASE STUDY WITH COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS IN SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO

*Joseph E. Sawan*  
PhD Candidate,  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE),  
University of Toronto,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

---

### ABSTRACT

The expansive literature on *alienation* demonstrates how various treatments emphasize different parts of human estrangement. This recovery focuses on demonstrating how Marx's theory of alienation can prove fruitful in understanding social movement activity and promoting social justice. At the centre of collective action is a hope and vision for an alternative future, an imagination of communities based on mutual reliance and a strategy for de-alienation. In this paper, I begin with a review of Marx's theory with an emphasis on a philosophy of internal relations, followed by an application to a recently completed case study with housing activists in Scarborough, Ontario. By posing questions for further development, I conclude that social alienation and responses to it can be developed further when seen as a learning process; that is, to understand the learning processes of one's own estrangement as central to taking positive steps to overcome alienation.

---

### INTRODUCTION

We can continue this downward path toward a society ever more regimented, manipulated, and self-deceived, or we can band together with groups of friends and, looking away from our own comfort and convenience, face the poverty, cruelty, and tyranny that dominate the world. In bestirring ourselves to heal the world, we reassert our humanity and reclaim our lives for ourselves. Protesting our own commodification, we can affirm once again the humanity of each of us – that human beings are ends in themselves and should not be treated as means to the ends of power-hungry governments or corporations seeking fatter profits [...] Turning our backs on the seductive comforts and narcotizing conveniences of the world of commodities, we shall try to build a free society where each furthers his or her own well-being and promotes that of the others.

Richard Schmitt, *Alienation and Freedom* (2003:134)

**H**umanity's interest in understanding *and* overcoming alienation can be traced for thousands of years, from various academic disciplines and throughout the world. While the proposed causes of the alienated condition and strategies for de-alienation vary greatly, Schmitt's call to action resonates strongly with several key dimensions of alienation from classical sociologic and philosophic approaches. The expansive literature on social and ontological alienation demonstrates how various treatments emphasize different parts of human estrangement. Rather than presenting a review of these various treatments, I focus on demonstrating how Marx's theory of alienation can prove fruitful in understanding social movement activity and promoting social justice. At the centre of collective action is a hope and vision for an alternative future, an imagination of communities based on mutual reliance and a strategy for de-alienation. In an increasingly fragmented and individualized society, it becomes even more pressing to address the various forms of estrangement that manifest under neoliberalism.

With these considerations in mind, I begin with a review of Marx's theory of alienation with an emphasis on a philosophy of internal relations. This matter, I argue, is not simply theoretical in nature. Thus, I follow my review with an application to a recently completed case study with housing activists in Scarborough, Ontario. Specifically, the case study takes place in the Kingston Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood where residents are engaged in a variety of anti-poverty activities, from community gardening to direct action struggles for tenant rights. It provides a unique context where diverse strategies come together to promote community activities mediated by use-value and to emphasize lived experience. To what extent can Marx's theory of alienation provide a theoretical framework for research in social movement learning that encourages collective transformation and social change? Do activities mediated by use-value rather than exchange-value provide an initial framework for connecting everyday activities to broader movements for social change?

By understanding how alienation and responses to it can be seen as a learning process—that is, to understand the learning processes of one's own estrangement as central to taking positive steps to overcome alienation—I provide some initial considerations for the existing literature on social movement learning.

## **MARX, DIALECTICS AND A THEORY OF ALIENATION IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY**

During the 1960s and 70s, Marx's theory of alienation created significant interest among social scientists looking to understand alienation in advanced capitalism. A great number of works, particularly from social psychology, emerged with attempts to operationalize his theory (e.g., Seeman 1959). What is

often lost in attempts to understand his theory of alienation is the totality of Marx's work, which demonstrates continuity with his early works rather than a "break" from his philosophic foundations. Berardi explains that there were three Marxist tendencies in the 1960s, where scholars emphasized (1) the 'early Marx' and a continuity with Hegel; (2) the 'mature' Marx and *Capital*, a distinct break with Hegel; and (3) the importance of *Grundrisse* and the notion of "composition and general intellect, while maintaining conceptual links with phenomenology" (Berardi 2009:35). There is value in maintaining a clear understanding of continuity in Marx's work as it becomes difficult to understand the shifts in language and concept if one isolates particular works. However, there is cause to consider *Grundrisse* as a valuable text that demonstrates a bridge between his earlier and later works, which may help facilitate an updated theory of alienation that does not ignore important conceptual developments made after the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

In this section, we will begin by exploring Marx's method in more detail as it relates to his theory of alienation, followed by a detailed outline of the theory itself in relation to the work of recent scholars' treatments of alienation.

#### DIALECTICS AND A PHILOSOPHY OF INTERNAL RELATIONS

Marx's words are like bats. They have meanings, according to Engels, which are not only new and unusual but also inconsistent. This was said to result from viewing 'things and their relations [...] not as fixed but as changing'. It is this conception which made it impossible for him to operate with mutually exclusive social factors (Ollman 1976:11).

Among the numerous approaches to understanding Marx's method, Bertell Ollman (1976; 1993; 2003) focused on outlining three key theories that he suggests had been least studied: "Marx's philosophy of internal relations, his conception of human nature and the theory of alienation" (1976:239). Beginning with an elaboration of dialectics as a conceptual approach emphasising a philosophy of internal relations, Ollman demonstrates that "Marx's relational view of reality (which means too, his dialectic), his conceptual framework for dealing with human nature and his theory of alienation, one part of which is the labour theory of value, are extremely useful aids for understanding nature, man and society" (1976:240). Marx's notion of *reality* is an understanding of how various parts to a whole relate to each other and to themselves. To isolate parts of this whole would demonstrate an *abstraction*, which Ollman (1976:61) explains to be "a part of the whole whose ties with the rest are not apparent, it is a part which *appears* to be a whole in itself" and "to hold that the world is actually composed of such 'abstractions' is evidence of alienation." Therefore, the analytic

decision to emphasize certain parts must come with an understanding of their relations to each other as wholes and to a “larger whole.”

Thus, capital [...] served as one vantage point from which to work out the intricacies of capitalism; labor served another, value as another, and so on. In each case, while the interaction studied is the same, the angle and approach to it differ (Ollman 1976:63).

Throughout Marx’s work we see shifts from one angle to another, at times in the same breath, and with the intent to illustrate the dynamic relations in nature. Thus, he began his task in *Capital I* “with the abstractions, labour and value” while maintaining their internal relations “to the full picture he is trying to reconstruct with them” (Ollman 1976:62). If we move a few steps further with this analysis, it becomes clear that

[...] interaction is, properly speaking, *inneraction* [...] Of production, distribution, consumption and exchange, Marx declares, ‘mutual interaction takes place between the various elements. Such is the case with every organic body’. What Marx calls ‘mutual interaction’ (or ‘reciprocal effect’ or ‘reciprocal action’) is only possible because it occurs within an organic body. This is the case with everything in Marxism, which treats its entire subject matter as ‘different sides of one unit’ (*Ibid.*:17).

Marx’s words often appear obscure, particularly when looking at his early manuscripts, where much of his thought process is evident in his use of language. As I proceed with an outline of Marx’s theory of alienation, it is necessary to maintain an understanding of his dialectic method and use of relations (internal and external) as the units of analysis.

## MARX’S THEORY OF ALIENATION

“Alienation can only be grasped as the absence of unalienation, each state serving as a point of reference for the other” (Ollman 1976:131-2). Ollman reminds us that the risk of ignoring the dialectic nature of alienation can potentially abstract any holistic understanding of the human condition. At the same time, it is necessary to address the different parts before we return to the whole in concrete reality.

Marx’s thesis can be summed up as four distinct “breaks” or “separations”: from work (activity), products (material), each other (between persons) and the “species.” The last separation, from the “species”, can be interpreted as a separation from oneself or human nature. From the manner in which Marx discusses alienation, these four components, while distinct, are very much

related, and we can see evidence of his “method of abstraction” within this language:

The results of Marx’s method of abstraction are not only such new factors as the relations of production and surplus-value, but as well all the other factors that come into his investigation. They have all been individuated out of the whole which is relationally contained in each. And again, which group of qualities Marx chooses to treat as a unit is determined by the real similarities he sees in reality together with the particular problem under consideration (Ollman 1976:62).

Rather than separate and distinct categories, it becomes a question of emphasis within the different parts of a whole, hence a question of *relations*.

While Marx discusses alienation throughout his work, the most complete discussion of alienation and human nature can be found in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Early in his discussion, he outlines the theory in an explanation of relations under capitalism, which directly contribute to alienation and are mediated as a whole by the *money-system*:

[...] to grasp the essential connection between private property, avarice, and the separation of labour, 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* (Marx, 1961[1844]:68).

While illustrating the various components that mediate alienation under capitalism, he is careful to return to the relation between money and the “whole estrangement”, which is of particular interest to understanding whether human activity is mediated by money *and/or* basic human needs.

As the individual’s sense of reality is dominated by the commodity-form and its production/consumption, there is a distancing from her *human needs*<sup>1</sup>, now determined by external, *alien* products:

So much does labour’s realisation appear as loss of reality to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for [her] life but for [her] work (Marx, 1961[1844]:69).

Such a disconnect is at the heart of what drives collective action as there is a need to re-connect our activity to our basic human needs. The notion of *losing reality* through such estrangement poses questions related to how one’s activity contributes to the learning process, and results in either further alienation *or* opportunities for de-alienation.

## DEHUMANIZING EFFECTS OF ALIENATION

Alienation is considered to be a condition that leaves no one unaffected, but does impact people in different ways and extremities in relation to their status in society. In understanding this in relation to the commodity, Marx outlines its effect on all human beings:

Production does not simply produce man as a *commodity*, the *commodity-man*, man in the role of *commodity*; it produces him in keeping with this role as a *spiritually* and physically *dehumanised* being (Marx 1961:85).

This illustrates a connection between Marx's theory of alienation to the wide-ranging impacts of the commodity-form, and the reproductive nature of such abstractions. If the alienated individual is an "abstraction" who "has lost touch with all human specificity" (Ollman 1976:134) and capitalism has turned "the life of the species into a means of individual life" (Marx 1961:75), then how does one overcome such forms of isolation and powerlessness? More importantly, what is necessary to understand such disconnections between each other and ourselves in relation to commodification?

The opportunity to overcome alienation is precisely how Marx defines the alienated condition and the existence of an unalienated condition is not necessarily a romantic utopian vision, rather it is the reality that has been continuously interrupted and re-interrupted by capitalism. As explained in Barry Padgett's recent recovery of Marx's theory of alienation,

[t]he very structure of capitalism necessitates that I must exchange my productive activity and/or product for exchange value, whether I like it or not; and under these conditions my labor is the only product I have to exchange (Padgett 2007:10).

With the reality of commodity fetishism, capitalism attempts to reduce our activities to exchange-value, potentially blurring an understanding of our basic human needs.

Alienation distorts the nature of human beings. Human beings live on and by the products of nature (sunlight, water, plants, animals), including and progressing from the objects of natural science even to objects of art. Productive activity, then, is not just productive activity of the individual, but is the cumulative labor of the human species (Padgett 2007:7-8).

This distortion is dynamic and a process that does not occur in isolation. Once again, we may consider how money is a key mediator of the deprivation that Marx describes. Marx's concerns with private property and money are central to understanding the alienated condition, especially with statements like

“The less you *are*, the more you *have*; the less you express your own life, the greater is your *alienated* life” and “Everything which the political economist takes from you in life and in humanity, he replaces for you in *money* and in *wealth*; and all the things which you cannot do, your money can do” (Marx, 1961[1844]:119). From these direct statements regarding the relation between alienation and the conditions of capitalism, we must begin to ask two key questions; 1) How do individuals cope with such dehumanizing conditions? and 2) To what extent can social movement activity provide the means for coping *and* overcoming conditions of alienation?

### UNDERSTANDING DEALIENATION AS A LEARNING PROCESS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVITY

Activity, which is a defining feature that distinguishes the living from the nonliving, characterizes the life and purpose of beings. Freedom, another defining feature, characterizes the ability to engage in activities and to develop capacities, also central to life and purpose. Together these concepts form a part of the basis for a genuinely human life—a life in which purposeful activity is actualized in a context of freedom, self-expression, and fulfilment (Padgett 2007:5).

The discussion of *freedom* as central for the development of an unalienated condition has the potential of furthering a discussion that moves beyond strictly objective discussions of alienation. As we proceed to understand collective action and social movement activity, it is clear that freedom as a broad and often contentious concept is central to the concerns of social movement participants. At the same time, such a concept can fall prey to semantic and philosophic discussions disconnected from reality.

One consideration is to approach (de)alienation as a learning process, innately dynamic and relational, facilitated by various conditions and driven by one’s own interests and decisions. While there is a growing literature among social movement scholars regarding the importance of *learning* in relation to social movements (e.g., Hall and Turay 2006; Foley 2001; Eyerman and Jamison 1991), I focus primarily on a Marxist approach to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in relation to Ollman’s treatment of Marx’s philosophy of internal relations. Furthermore, the hope for emancipatory learning as outlined by Paulo Freire can guide philosophical foundations in developing models for popular education that emphasize strategies for de-alienation.

In this section, I illustrate some of the conceptual considerations of non-canonical CHAT and to introduce a narrative from a community activist involved with a recent case study in Scarborough, Ontario to demonstrate how *dealienation* as one’s object/motive can provide insight into how social movement participants engage in activity.

## MARXIST CHAT AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEARNING

[H]uman nature is a process of overcoming and transcending its own limitations through collaborative, continuous practices aimed at purposefully changing the world. In other words, it is a process of *historical becoming* by humans not as merely creatures of nature but as agents of their own lives, agents whose nature is to purposefully transform their world (Stetsenko 2008:483, emphasis in original).

Among various sociocultural approaches to learning, non-canonical CHAT provides a distinctly dialectical approach rooted in a “transformative relation to the world” where “it posits that human development is both continuous with *and* radically different from the processes in the rest of the animate world” (Stetsenko 2008:483). The long tradition of CHAT comes from Soviet Russian psychology in the works of Vygotsky, Leontiev and Luria who were deeply influenced by the work of Marx and Engels (Sawchuk 2006). Understanding *activity* as the unit of analysis, with the intent to present a “multivoiced theory” that “should not regard internal contradictions and debates as signs of weakness; rather, they are an essential feature of the theory” (Engeström 1999:20). These “contradictions” that emerge are central to breaking “down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from the culture and the society” and the manner in which activity is *mediated* is through “using and creating artifacts” (*Ibid.*:29). In social movement studies, the appeal of CHAT stems from its central goals of transformation and social change, and more specifically from the tools provided to understand learning and cognition from the individual and collective, simultaneously. As Krinsky (2008:3) argues,

It locates cognitive activity within a broader system structured by subjects motivated by goals or objects; mediating artifacts or tools; institutional rules and genres of discourse; relevant communities; and divisions of labor within those communities. Cognition is distributed within these larger systems. The systems, rather than the individuals, become the unit of analysis.

These “activity systems” become a useful way to begin to understand how individuals and groups are impact each other through the use of *artifacts*. The *object/motive* is the key component that must be emphasized in this discussion, especially in relation to social change. When considering the activities that individuals engage in, it does not suffice to look at pre-conditioned realities (e.g., personal biography versus conditions of poverty) to explain actions, but rather we must consider how the object/motive—and specifically the object-relatedness of activity—is produced vis-à-vis specific configurations of artifact mediation, understood (and enacted) in a dialectic fashion.

The challenges faced with CHAT are in the terminology, and we must explore their relational meanings in order to properly use the methodology.

Leontiev's three-level scheme—*motive/activity*, *goal/object* and *operation/conditions* (Engeström 1999:23)—provides a unique approach for understanding learning. In this model, we can begin to consider how the concept of *object/motive*<sup>2</sup> is central to analyses of the motivating factors among participants of social movements, and more importantly, how they change. Sawchuk (2010:3) provides a clear explanation of these terms in relation to each other:

It remains essential in the CHAT tradition to distinguish what are called *actions* and the conscious *goals* to which they are directed; to distinguish un-self-conscious *operations* and the corresponding *conditions* to which they respond; to distinguish the broader, socially established *object/motive of activity* to which the self-conscious chains of actions/goals and un-self-conscious operations/conditions are responding; and finally to distinguish clearly the relations between these core terms. Together they produce a dialectical, internally referential whole (emphasis in original).

The notion of “un-self-conscious *operations*” as opposed to “conscious *goals*” becomes the challenge that scholars of this tradition are constantly working through. Resolving the question requires significant empirical analysis, thus allowing for deeper understanding of particular social movements. Making these processes visible is of central concern, and it is in *contradiction* that we begin to reveal what's happening behind activity, or rather in and through activities over time.

When considering applications to social movement theory, there are several approaches that may be considered for understanding how “social movement cognition” may be an effective approach to capture the complexities involved in social action. As both Sawchuk (2010) and Krinsky (2008) illustrate in their analyses of labour-community activism and anti-workfare organizing respectively, there are significant benefits to this approach. CHAT allows the opportunity to not only understand the dynamics of contention, but also provide concrete discussions *with* participants regarding the various artifacts that impacted their development as well as reflection on the strategies employed by their campaigns. Furthermore, it allows the opportunity to consider how alternative activity systems emerge through social movements that emphasize *use-value* rather than *exchange-value*. Such spaces provide opportunity for understanding one's alienation and strategies for overcoming alienation through collective action.

In this regard, the concepts introduced from non-canonical CHAT provide us with one framework to look at alienation in a multi-dimensional approach. Specifically, the *object/motives* that emerge among discussions with activists demonstrate how activities mediated by feelings of alienation *and* visions of an unalienated condition are at the heart of social movement activity. As we will see

with housing activists below, this method of analysis can provide opportunity to learn from such activities and facilitate social change.

## LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR DE-ALIENATION IN SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO

In a recent case study on anti-poverty organizing in the Kingston Galloway-Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood in Scarborough, preliminary data is beginning to demonstrate how local activism is rooted in the complexities discussed above.<sup>3</sup> To understand how personal biographies, local histories and collective memory deeply impact how activism manifests, we are conducting in-depth interviews with local activists and participants in anti-poverty activities. In addition to these interviews, we have also engaged in focus group discussions where activists have the opportunity to reflect on the work they are engaged in, as well as the broader questions of anti-poverty organizing.

Central to these discussions of activist development and engagement is the question of how activists emerge. Rather than attempting to define who is or is not an activist, it is crucial to understand how ordinary life provides particular opportunities for extraordinary activities. When attempting to locate de-alienating activities, we must emphasize the process that precedes an unalienated condition.

The following excerpt highlights the work of a community activist who found a need to reconnect local youth with their community and did so in a non-traditional manner. As a volunteer, she engaged in activities based on the needs she saw in her community. In what residents called 'guerrilla gardening', she decided to plant daffodils along the median of a main arterial road in KGO. Beyond the act of planting daffodils, she recounts a unique experience that highlights how participants engage in community activity and the extent that this activity is a part of their productive life.

What happened is that we were offered these daffodils from [a foundation], but they were really adamant about [...] 'beautifying' the priority neighbourhoods, that was their goal. And you know, if you look at a map their idea was well, look there's a garden here [...] it's already got a gardening bed so we can just dump some daffodils [...] But I kept saying but these are already established parks in neighbourhoods of homeowners. How does that help the people at Galloway and Kingston Road? They're not going down to Eastview Park and looking at the daffodils. There's nothing to bring them down there. So, how did you help the priority neighbourhood? I didn't get that. And they were very adamant about doing already established spaces. And I said, but the spaces should be in the priority neighbourhoods, those spaces aren't. Just because it's near it. So we just ordered a ton of daffodils, and unbeknownst to [...] the Parks and Trees, one of the girls who was doing a placement [...] she hung out with the basketball team [...] and these

boys [...] they didn't know one end of a daffodil they had no idea, it was the most beautiful thing. To me that is one of the best things that came out of it [...] I show them a daffodil ball and they were all like [makes grunting noises], "I'm planting flowers, I'm gonna get my shoes dirty, these are my cool runners!" And they were just typical teenage boys, and I said look, we're going to go into the median of the road, who else lets you plant in the median of the road. I had no permission. We put over 700 daffodils in just over an hour [...] All I had to say to these boys was "(gasps) you dug that hole already?" That was it, they would dig the next hole faster [...] [I]n the spring if another teenager or kid goes to wreck those daffodils in the middle road, those teenage boys are on them. They're proud of what they did. They have a sense [...] They're empowered, they did it. And I mean they're planting them in the fall, they don't get their reward till the spring. It was just the most awesome thing that they were responsible and it took so little time. I think it's just so, so neat, and every spring it's like, yee-haw, here they come, you know (KGO10 Interview, APCOL KGO Case Study).

In this account of her work with the young men, there are several key concepts that help us understand her efforts to develop a strategy for overcoming alienation. First, she identified the need in her community (and for herself) to reclaim their spaces. Although the funding was meant to beautify spaces outside of her neighbourhood, she decided to resist this decision and engage in an activity mediated by the need she saw with her neighbours, as opposed to what institutions saw as beneficial. By organizing a group of residents, mostly youth, to come together and use resources to engage in productive activity, she effectively began a process of engaging in use-value mediated activity.

As development continues in the KGO neighbourhood, this activist realized that youth in particular are further alienated from their spaces, and she also saw a disconnect from each other. The act of planting daffodils could have been an alienating experience for the young men involved, had it been mediated by an object/motive related to exchange-value, but their willingness to challenge the organization is what provided an opportunity to reclaim public spaces that were designated differently. When attempting to understand opportunities for social change, activities mediated by external organizations and bureaucracy may be limited in their efficacy for overcoming alienation. In this respect, the level of commitment that participants have towards the outcomes of their activity is shown clearly when she explains how protective the teenagers are of their work. For the young men to have the patience to wait for the outcome of their work and defend its value demonstrates a keen sense of how they now contribute to their community through their productive activity.

This is a clear expression of de-alienation, as the activity and product are *not* abstracted; rather they are a part of their creative expression and liberation. In

this sense, the young men developed a sense of purpose and belonging through their productive activity and relations with other community members.

When considering different ways to understand social movement activities, we must be willing to look at the everyday activities that demonstrate the desire to overcome alienation. These are manifested in collective activities like planting daffodils in public spaces, protesting poor public transit or volunteering at a community garden. Furthermore, the means by which we understand such activity, as it is mediated by exchange-value or use-value, can provide insight into the degree to which participants are in fact reclaiming their communities and de-alienating their condition. This resonates most clearly with the work of Lefebvre in his explanation of *la vie quotidienne*:

The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of everyday life [...] A revolution cannot just change the political personnel or institutions; it must change *la vie quotidienne* which has already been literally colonized by capitalism (quoted in Sawchuk 2006:247).

Considering the object/motive levels of activity, where such a change in everyday life may occur, the case of the daffodils begins with a project mediated by exchange-value (i.e., property value increase as the goal), but this artifact is reclaimed by local activists who have different motives. For them, the goals and motive were driven by use-values (i.e., building community, mutual support, social justice), so they worked outside of the organizations that did not fit their interests and managed to make the changes they saw necessary. This change in object/motive was driven by a contradiction in goals identified by the community activist quoted above and communicated to the young men who joined her in the 'guerrilla gardening'. By establishing *illegitimate* spaces that contradicted capitalism,

Activity systems governed by use-value production are, on the whole, illegitimate under capitalism. Use-values such as comfort, sustenance, social justice, mutual need, and even democracy, to the degree they truly govern (as opposed to merely accompany) an activity system, are illegitimate at either the goal or motive levels of activity (Sawchuk 2006:251).

As we consider methods to understand alienation and the everyday activities that are in fact moments of resistance and withdrawal from capitalist domination, the vision of an unalienated condition emerges within the humanizing effect of social relations mediated by use-value. The daffodils are a simple, yet clarifying example of how a community manages to engage in productive activity that challenges capitalism through use-value mediated activity.

The narratives that emerged during the KGO case study demonstrate various aspects of activist learning and illustrate how artifact production becomes key in strategies for de-alienation. For the guerrilla gardener, it is clear that her efforts to effect change in the everyday lives of youth has provided opportunities to imagine alternatives to existing modes of production through gardening and other forms of community work.

## CONCLUSION

At the centre of discussions around alienation are questions of human nature that can lead us into conclusions that emphasise different aspects of the human condition throughout history. There is a danger in objectifying such conditions by deciding on fixed human states as either individualistic and greedy, or social and liberated. The reality is far more complex and ultimately must be treated dialectically. I proposed a Marxist CHAT approach as a promising framework to understanding the learning process encountered in social movement activity, and illustrated a preliminary analysis of a recent housing case study in Scarborough, Ontario.

The importance of maintaining a vision of an *unalienable condition* is central to understanding the *alienated condition*. As the contradictions of capitalism continue to emerge in various forms, there is a need for communities to develop alternatives that can provide spaces of productive and creative activities. Methods to facilitate this learning can be explored within popular education methods that can facilitate imagining strategies for de-alienation. Whether we consider forms of emancipatory learning (Freire 2000) or other approaches to adult education<sup>4</sup>, it becomes clear that *learning one's alienation* is a starting point to develop holistic approaches to overcoming alienation. In the case of Freire, much of his work directly address questions of how individuals can overcome alienation through popular education models, including his advocacy of "problem-posing education" as a method for educators to provide critical reflection and "affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire 2000:84). The notion of collective learning as central to one's "process of becoming" illustrates much of what Marx struggled with in outlining his vision of an unalienable social condition. As we consider solutions and alternative social relations that are mediated by freedom and humanity, it is crucial to avoid reactionary measures. Masanobu Fukuoka eloquently describes this "centripetal effect" in his treatise on the natural farming movement:

To the extent that people separate themselves from nature, they spin out further and further from the center. At the same time, a centripetal effect asserts itself and the desire to return to nature arises. But if people merely become caught up in reacting,

moving to the left or to the right, depending on conditions, the result is only more activity. The non-moving point of origin, which lies outside the realm of relativity, is passed over, unnoticed. I believe that even “returning-to-nature” and anti-pollution activities, no matter how commendable, are not moving toward a genuine solution if they are carried out solely in reaction to the overdevelopment of the present age (Fukuoka 1978:20-1).

I contend that there is a potential to better understand human activity by citing alienation as an intrinsic motive for activity—in terms of CHAT terminology, as a means to more effectively characterize the contradictory object/motive of activity which nonetheless always compels some form of transformation as Stetsenko argued in describing non-canonical approaches—and to understand how everyone engages in varying levels of resistance in order to return to a *nature* that is most fitting for each of us. Whether it is planting daffodils on Kingston Road or protesting the G20, we are engaged in similar activity to envision a community based on use-value rather than the commodity-form.

## NOTES

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Throughout Marx’s work, he often refers to “power” and “need”, but not with the basic meaning of the terms. Ollman explains “power” as one’s “faculty, ability, function and capacity” while “‘need’ refers to the desire one feels for something, usually something which is not immediately available” (1976:74-5).
  - <sup>2</sup> It is important to note how *object/motive* is explained by Leontiev: “It is understood that the motive may be either material or ideal, either present in perception or existing only in the imagination or in thought” (quoted in Sawchuk 2010:12).
  - <sup>3</sup> The case study is a part of a five-year SSHRC/CURA funded project, the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project, whose mission is to “examine grassroots popular education and learning strategies within anti-poverty community organizing campaigns in a sample of the highest poverty neighborhoods in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).” More information is available at <http://www.apcol.ca>.
  - <sup>4</sup> In discussing Erich Fromm’s (1956; 1961) work on alienation, Brookfield (2002:99) suggests: “Adult education as a force for resistance to false consciousness would make people aware of ideological manipulation and educate them for participatory democracy.”

## REFERENCES

Berardi, F. 2009. *The soul at work: From alienation to autonomy*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Semiotext(e).

- Brookfield, S. 2002. "Overcoming alienation as the practice of adult education: The contributions of Erich Fromm to a critical theory of adult learning and education." *Adult Education Quarterly* 52(2):96-127.
- Engeström, Y. 1999. "Activity theory and individual and social transformation." Pp. 19-38 in *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, edited by Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, R. Punamäki-Gitai, and International Congress for Research on Activity Theory. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eyerman, R. and A. Jamison. 1991. *Social movements: A cognitive approach*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Foley, G. 2001. "Radical Adult Education and Learning", *International Journal of Lifelong Learning* 20(1/2):71-88.
- Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). New York: Continuum.
- Fromm, E. 1955. *The Sane Society*. New York: Rinehart.
- , 1961. *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: F. Ungar.
- Fukuoka, M. 1978. *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*. Translated by C. Pearce, T. Kurosawa, and L. Korn. New York: Bantam.
- Hall, B. L. and T. Turay. 2006. *State of the field report: Social movement learning*. Vancouver: Canadian Council on Learning.
- Krinsky, J. 2008. "Changing Minds: Cognitive Systems and Strategic Change in Contention over Workfare in New York City." *Social Movement Studies* 7(1): 1-29.
- Marx, K. 1961 [1844]. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by M. Milligan. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- , 1974 [1939]. *Grundrisse*. Translated by M. Nicolaus. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Oldenquist, A. 1991. "Community and de-alienation." Pp. 91-108 in *Alienation, Community, and Work*, edited by A. Oldenquist and M. Rosner. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Ollman, B. 1976. *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Padgett, B. 2007. *Marx and alienation in contemporary society*. London: Continuum International Pub. Group.
- Sawchuk, P. 2003. *Adult Learning and Technology in Working-Class Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- , 2006. "Activity & Power: Everyday Life and Development of Working-Class Groups." Pp. 241-67 in *Critical Perspectives on Activity: Explorations Across Education, Work & Everyday Life*, edited by P. Sawchuk, N. Duarte and M. Elhammoumi. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- , 2010. "Socio-cognition and social movement theory: A Marxist

- 
- activity theory perspective on community/union mobilization and change," Paper presented at conference on Alternative Futures and Popular Protest, Manchester Metropolitan University, March 29-31.
- Schacht, R. 1994. *The future of alienation*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Schmitt, R. 2003. *Alienation and freedom*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Seeman, M. 1959. "On the meaning of alienation." *American Sociological Review* 24:783-91.
- Sekelj, L. 1991. "State and Communism: Alienated and De-alienated Community." Pp. 51-66 in *Alienation, Community, and Work*, edited by A. Oldenquist and M. Rosner. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Stetsenko, A. 2008. "From relational ontology to transformative activist stance on development and learning: expanding Vygotsky's (CHAT) project." *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 3:471-491.