When Marx informed his collaborator Arnold Ruge that he had decided to “make man into man,” he rejected the notion of a human being as no more than an estranged producer of commodities belonging to someone else. More importantly, Marx had communicated to Ruge the central idea that was to give purpose to his entire life’s work: the realization of the true character of men and women. Marx crystallized this idea in the intellectual fires that produced his differentiation from Hegel and Feuerbach. The idea persuaded him to concentrate all his remarkable energies on identifying the forces that could dissolve the contradiction between idea and reality. Therefore, Marx set out to discover those elements in social action that had the power to break down the existing socioeconomic relations—elements that, because of their own inner contradiction, would negate the general estrangement in social life.

Marx understood that these elements had to be found in the relations of active life. He realized that they were present in the relations that dominate as a nameless force the relations between persons—that is, in the economic relations wherein all estrangement originates. While commodities relinquish their ultimate qualities in money, men and women relinquish
their labor power becomes useless, unless it is sold. In society, the worker is not a human being but merely the exponent of an abstract commodity: labor power. In selling this commodity, the worker sells himself or herself, and thus the estrangement of men and women reaches its ultimate form. The economic theorists of capitalism therefore regard proletarians—the men and women who, without capital or ground rent, live entirely by their labor—as mere workers but not as human beings.

Unlike bourgeois economists and sociologists, Marx viewed the division of labor as problematic. He maintained that the division of labor established the mutual dependence of individuals and introduced the contradiction between the interests of the individual and the common interest of all individuals. In its complete form, the division of labor creates a situation whereby no one any longer disposes over the means of his subsistence. Now the relations of production and trade completely replace human relations, and men and women no longer face each other as men and women but as mere exponents of the anonymous and all-powerful relations of production that separate and estrange one human being from the other. Hence, the discovery of the laws of political economy was at the same time the discovery of the conditions that had to be met in order to achieve the self-realization of the human being. This is the reason for Marx’s tireless analysis of economic laws and their development as reflected in his Kapital and kindred writings.

Isidor Wallimann’s study of Marx’s theory of estrangement introduces the long-needed proof that the concept of estrangement remained fundamental to Marx’s thought throughout his life’s work. Equally important is the author’s interpretation of the involuntary nature of the division of labor as the fundamental cause of estrangement. Most importantly, Wallimann’s work shows in detail that Marx employs two different conceptions of human nature, and it explains how the relative (historical) and nonrelative (biological) conceptions of human nature bear upon Marx’s theory of estrangement. For the first time, Wallimann shows that Marx speaks of estrangement only in those instances wherein individuals are prevented from living according to their human nature (biologically conceived). The structure of society prevents individuals from fully exercising the faculties nature has given them: they are estranged. For instance,
they are prevented from subjecting their labor power and the product of their labor to their own will, although by nature they are capable of doing so.

Wallimann's interpretation is methodical, rigorous, impeccably judicious, and based on an impressive mastery of the primary and secondary sources. As such, it has raised the standards for academic Marxist scholarship.

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