

Capitalism and alienation: Towards a Marxist theory of alienation for the 21st century

European Journal of Social Theory
2022, Vol. 25(3) 440–457
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DOI: 10.1177/13684310211021579
journals.sagepub.com/home/est



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Abstract

Alienation is among the most influential terms in Marxist theory, but also one of the most ambiguous and controversial. Unlike previous literature, which has tended to focus on Marx' early philosophical writings, this offers a novel reinterpretation of the theory of alienation found in Marx's later works. Rather than conceiving alienation as a subjective experience or an inherent feature of social organization, I contend that alienation in the Marxist sense can be understood as an objective process arising from the appropriation of the results of production and their transformation into capital. This interpretation resolves the main theoretical problems conventionally associated with alienation theory, for example the tendency towards essentialism and moral paternalism. In particular, a Marxist theory of alienation explains the paradox of social power and isolation that characterizes contemporary capitalist societies, in which feelings of powerlessness and loneliness are intensified despite objective increases in humanity's social power and interdependence.

Keywords

Alienation, capitalism, critical theory, Marxism, social domination

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The revival of alienation theory

Alienation theory is enjoying a resurgence. Long considered a relic of early critical theory due to its tendency towards essentialism and moral paternalism, the concept of alienation nevertheless possesses an explanatory power that makes it difficult to abandon (Honneth, 2014). According to Choquet (2021, p. 2), ‘recent debates in philosophy and the social sciences allow us – and, in fact, they *encourage* us – to retrieve and consolidate the critical resources traditionally associated with the concept of alienation’. Among the contemporary issues calling for a new theory of alienation are a global rise in self-reported loneliness, isolation and mental illness, humanity’s paradoxical powerlessness in the face of humanly created cultural, technological and environmental change and the rise of political movements seeking to capitalize on widespread feelings of social frustration and political disenfranchisement (Berardi, 2017; Brown, 2019; Hertz, 2020). During the recent decade, several attempts have been made to develop and apply the concept of alienation to our present societies (Choquet, 2021; Jaeggi, 2014; Sayers, 2011; Tyler, 2011). This article contributes to this scholarship by constructing a theory of alienation based on Marx’s later writings, and in particular the *Grundrisse*. Written as a series of notebooks during the winter of 1857–1858, the *Grundrisse* contains unique insights into Marx’s theoretical and political thinking that are only hinted at in his other writings. With a few exceptions (see Carver, 2008; Sayers, 2011; Zoubir, 2018), few studies have dealt extensively with the theory of alienation found in Marx’s later works. Instead, most studies either predominantly or exclusively cite the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (EPM) written by Marx in 1844 (Acevedo, 2005; Choquet, 2021; Hochschild, 2011; Jaeggi, 2014; Tyler, 2011). In fact, the assertion is often made that the concept of alienation figured prominently in Marx’s early writings, but that he soon left the concept behind. For example, Choquet (2021, p. 2) writes that, while ‘Marx gave alienation a pivotal role in his early Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts [...] the concept actually disappeared from his mature economic writings’. This omission is significant because the EPM were written before what are generally held to be the most important developments in Marx’s thought, notably his turn towards historical materialism and political economy, and are as such seen by some as either partially or wholly incompatible with developed Marxism (Althusser, 2005 [1965]). Alienation therefore occupies a somewhat uncomfortable position within the Marxist conceptual apparatus, to the point that it is a controversial question whether or not there even exists a Marxist theory of alienation at all (Sayers, 2011).

This article is premised on the claims that the concept of alienation is integral to Marx’s analysis of capitalism, that reconstructing a Marxist theory of alienation has the potential to address several of the theoretical problems conventionally associated with alienation theory, and that such a theory is valuable for understanding our present societies. I then contend that it is in Marx’s late work, in particular in the *Grundrisse*, that we find the most valuable resources for this endeavour. The article’s theoretical argument is laid out in four main steps. The first two sections deal with the relationship between human nature, labour and society and define alienation as a process in which the results of production are appropriated and transformed into capital. I then discuss alienation in the context of Marx’s description of capitalism’s impact on social development,

before proposing that the progressive potential of capitalist development is subverted by a dialectic of alienation and socialization in which objective expansion in social power and interdependence are experienced as a corresponding increase in powerlessness and isolation.

The approach I take in this article is based on an understanding of Marx's work and, Marxism more generally, as a discontinuous project that has undergone numerous reformulations, but in which the central issue – namely the analysis of capitalism and its implications for society, humanity and history – nonetheless remains constant (Zoubir, 2018). While the theme of alienation is central throughout Marx's writings, I argue that there is enough variation between his early and late views on alienation to warrant an approach exclusively focused on the latter. I will therefore not deal extensively with the theory of alienation found in the *EPM*, which is substantially covered elsewhere in the literature (Acevedo, 2005; Choquet, 2021). My interpretation of Marx is inspired by and indebted to works by Gyorgy Lukács (1971 [1923]), Jean-Paul Sartre (2004 [1960]), Moishe Postone (2003) and Sean Sayers (2011) and is written primarily as a contribution to contemporary social theory. To this field, the article contributes by developing a theory of alienation that exclusively highlights the understanding of alienation found in the *Grundrisse*, in specifying and addressing the four conventional problems of alienation theory, in proposing the dialectic of socialization and alienation as a general frame for understanding the consequences of capitalism on social development, and by drawing out the empirical and sociological implications of the Marxist theory of alienation in more detail than what has previously been accomplished. As an example of the theory's relevance for contemporary social research, the final section suggests how the Marxist theory of alienation may help explain what I term as the paradox of social power and isolation in contemporary capitalist societies, and proposes some hypotheses through which the social and psychological consequences of alienation can be empirically examined.

Background

In this section, I will outline what I take to be the four main criticisms that are generally directed towards alienation theory and which the present article seeks to address. The first criticism concerns what Ricoeur (1968) has termed as the concept of alienation's semantic overload. As one of the few terms from Marxist theory to have entered into ordinary language (Sayers, 2011), the word 'alienation' is used to refer to subjective experiences of estrangement, powerlessness, isolation and detachment, as well as to general processes of social fragmentation and disintegration. Related to this is the lack of a clear boundary between alienation and other Marxist concepts, for example commodity fetishism and reification, and to anomie, social disintegration, individualization and similar sociological constructs (Acevedo, 2005; Bauman, 2000; Lukács, 1971 [1923]). While a testament to the term's intuitive explanatory power, the variety of scientific, normative and political meanings attached to the concept of alienation arguably dilutes its scientific and analytic potential, as well as muddling its implications for political action and social critique.

The second criticism is arguably the most influential and concerns the concept's seeming reference to an essential human nature that seems antithetical to the historicizing mode of argument that otherwise characterizes Marx's thought. A particularly strong version of this argument was formulated by Althusser (2005 [1965]), who argued that Marx's first texts (including the *EPM*) were separated from his later works by an epistemological break in which Marx largely rejected his earlier views. Singling out the concept of alienation in particular, Althusser argued that the concept presupposes the existence of a 'unified human essence', whereas scientific Marxism is based on a radical break 'with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man'¹ (Althusser, 2005 [1965], p. 193). According to Althusser, the theory of alienation put forth by Marx in the *EPM* is not really Marxist at all but merely a remnant of Hegelian and Feuerbachian philosophy. For Althusser, therefore, continued talk of alienation within critical theory represented a foreign ideological tendency that threatened the development of scientific Marxism and should be replaced by a principled 'anti-humanism' that rejects the framing of structural problems as 'problems of man' (Althusser, 2005 [1965]: xi–xii, 206).

Althusser's reading of Marx remains controversial, and the project of creating a scientific Marxism cleansed of philosophy, idealism and ideology has few contemporary proponents (Sayer, 2011; Thompson, 2008 [1978]). However, the claim that the concept of alienation in the *EPM* belongs exclusively to Marx's early work, and the related idea that Marx's conception of alienation is tentative and underdeveloped, is still widely reproduced in the scholarly literature (e.g. in Choquet, 2021 and Hochschild, 2011). More influential still is Althusser's critique of essentialism, which, according to Jaeggi (2014), has been adopted as 'common sense' within Left-oriented critical theory. Appeals to human nature are now generally associated with political conservatism as they are often invoked to either justify the existing social order or to argue a return to more earlier and traditional ways of human life. Presupposing and idealizing a foundational human essence may also lead to a conception of alienation as an expression of an inevitable conflict between the individual and society. This view is particularly common in existential theories of alienation (Jaeggi, 2014) but is sometimes attributed to Marx as well. For example, an article by Acevedo (2005, p. 81) comparing Durkheim's theory of anomie with Marx's writings on alienation in the *EPM* describes a 'Marxian point of view' in which humans are 'complete when they are unregulated and uninhibited and are only later corrupted by the presence of oppressive social forces'. Acevedo's (2005) interpretation is typical for how the critique of alienation is sometimes interpreted as a critique of social organization *tout court*, with the implication that alienation can only be transcended through individual escape or regression to a pre-social state of nature.

The concept of alienation has also been criticized for paternalistically assuming the existence of a human good that may overrule people's own experiences and desires (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 28). This paternalism becomes especially oppressive if coupled with the notion that people may possess a 'false consciousness' that prevents them from subjectively realizing their own alienation. In *One Dimensional Man*, for example, Marcuse (1991 [1964], p. 11) describes a subject that is so 'swallowed up by its alienated existence' that it comes to identify with and embrace her own estrangement, and argues that this constitutes a 'more progressive state of alienation' compared to a situation in

which people actually experience discontent with the social order. A by-product of this moral paternalism may be a disdain for mass culture and 'inauthentic' ways of life, in which determining the human good essentially becomes the prerogative of the theorist. The conservative and paternalist implications of alienation theory make the concept seem difficult to reconcile with the Marxist political project, dedicated as it is to the vision of a social order that both breaks with and develops out of capitalist modernity, and which is to be accomplished through a radical process of democratization and mass mobilization (Marx, 1978 [1875]).

So far I have reviewed four main theoretical problems associated with alienation theory, namely the concept's *semantic overload*, *essentialism*, *conservatism* and *paternalism*. Motivating the present article is the claim that the Marxist theory of alienation can only be salvaged from these problems if alienation is conceived neither as an individual and subjective experience, nor an inherent part of human agency or an unavoidable consequence of social organization, as earlier interpretations have tended to do (Acevedo, 2005; Choquet, 2021; Jaeggi, 2014; Tyler, 2011). For the theory of alienation to be compatible with the Marxist critique of capitalism, I contend, it needs to be able to (a) explain alienation as a specific feature of capitalist societies rather than a universal condition of human existence, (b) detail how alienation arises as an objective process from the organization of production and (c) be compatible with a progressive political vision of a more socialized and less alienated form of society. Constructing a Marxist theory of alienation that meets these requirements allows us to provide a sociological explanation for individual experiences of powerlessness, detachment and isolation, in a way which re-centers the importance of a critical understanding of capitalism in the struggle for more democratic, equitable and ecologically sustainable societies.

Production, the subject and society

The *Grundrisse* begins with a critique of what Marx terms the *18th-century individual*, which is the image of the human as an isolated and preformed individual that acts rationally to achieve predetermined (and usually economic) aims. Marx specifically objects to the portrayal of this form of individuality as an expression of certain essential human traits, such as reason, self-interest or the propensity for barter, and the use of this portrayal to naturalize capitalism as a social order. Instead, Marx explains the 18th-century individual as the product of a historical transition in which people are separated from traditional roles and instead come to operate as independent and formally equal agents. The subjective experience of detachment that this transition creates obscures the fact that humans under capitalism are objectively more interconnected than at any previous point in history (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 84), a theme to which we will return later. Marx's critique of the 18th-century individual prefigures sociological criticisms of the notion of the *homo economicus* for ignoring the social conditioning of human agency, with the important twist that the conception itself is explained as the result of the transition to capitalism. While Marx was clearly critical towards the theory of humanity put forth by the bourgeois economists of his time, this does not automatically imply that he was opposed to the concept of a human essence in principle. On the contrary, Marx's work contains several passages in which he expounds on this very subject (see also

Cohen, 2000 [1978]; Geras, 2016 [1984]). For my purposes, it is sufficient to highlight two themes from Marx's writing on this issue: (1) humanity's capacity for engaging in conscious production² and (2) our tendency to do so in cooperation with other people.

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes labour as a process in which we set in motion the natural forces belonging to our bodies to appropriate natural materials in a form adapted to our needs (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 283). While all living animals go through some version of this process, it is according to Marx an 'exclusively human characteristic' that we work to create outcomes that we have consciously conceived prior to the act of production. By altering external reality according to our subjective intentions, needs and desires, we also develop our own capabilities and self-understanding. For Marx, production is therefore both an expression of our subjectivity and the chief mechanism through which this subjectivity is developed. Through production, we not only develop ourselves as individual agents but also enter into and develop our relations to nature and to other people. For Marx, the results of production are not limited to the economic products as such but also include 'the bearers of [the productive process], their material conditions of existence and their mutual relations', the aggregate result of which is precisely 'society, considered from the standpoint of its economic structure' (Marx, 1978 [1894], p. 439). In contrast to the separation between the economy and the rest of society often assumed by both classical and contemporary economics, and which critics of economic reductionism sometimes reproduce, Marx supposes what may be called an *expanded view of production* in which production, human subjectivity, nature and society are fundamentally intertwined. As I later will argue, this expanded view of production is essential for explaining the pervasiveness of alienation in capitalist societies.

Production becomes social through direct cooperation but also through the establishment of a division of labour in which we produce for each other. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx portrays the latter as a core facet of human sociality:

The fact that this need on the part of one can be satisfied by the product of the other, and vice versa, and that the one is capable of producing the object of the need of the other, and that each confronts the other as owner of the object of the other's need, this proves that each of them reaches beyond his own particular need etc. as a human being, and that they relate to one another as human beings; that their common species-being [*Gattungswesen*] is acknowledged by all. (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 243)

Production is therefore 'social' in a double sense – firstly in the sense that production is socially organized, and secondly in the sense that the results of production includes 'society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations' (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 712). Hence, production is a precondition for society not only in that it provides the material basis for human survival but also because economic cooperation constitutes a basic mechanism for social recognition. Also implied is that our capability to relate to one another will increase with the expansion of cooperation and diversification of human needs. Rather than seeing the division of labour as the primary cause of alienation, as some interpretations have argued (e.g. Acevedo, 2005), Marx argues that production for others is an integral part of what makes the social possible at all.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx notes that political economists have traditionally portrayed labour as an unpleasant activity forced upon the individual against her or his will. What the political economists had failed to realize, according to Marx (1993 [1939], p. 611), was that the overcoming of obstacles through labour in itself is a liberating activity, in which ‘external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour’. An important nuance in this quote is that productive activity is described as emancipating precisely because it liberates us from external *natural* urgencies and instead allows us to socially determine the aims of our endeavour. Hence, while Marx did operate with a conception of human nature, he emphatically did not view this nature as an ideal we should replicate or return to, but as a starting point that humanity should and does strive to transcend. If humanity can be said to have an ‘essence’, therefore, it does not refer to a static set of ‘natural’ or pre-social traits, as is commonly assumed, but rather to our transformative drive to act, produce and create. In other words, it is a ‘thin’ conception of essence that emphasizes our capacity for development, change and reinvention and in which social production provides the main mechanism for this capacity. The implication for the theory of alienation is that we will be alienated if we are deprived of the ability to freely use and develop our productive capacities or if the results of our activities are estranged from us and turned against our intentions. In the following sections, I will demonstrate that Marx portrays capitalism as precisely such a social order.

The appropriation of the results of production and their transformation into capital

Before we move on to the main part of the argument, it is necessary to first clarify an important conceptual nuance, namely the difference between *objectification* and *alienation*. Up to this point, I have emphasized what may be described as Marx’s *optimistic* conception of production as the primary source of human self-realization and social development, a conception which generally focuses on the productive *process*. More complicated, however, is the relationship between the act of production and its results. During production, our activities are fixed into externally existing objects, a process which is referred to as *objectification*. In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre (2004 [1960]) describes objectification as a process in which we produce an external reality that reflects our activity back to us in the form of worked matter that prescribes certain social imperatives, obligations and resistances. For Sartre, worked matter appears as simultaneously the product of and negation of practice and a conversion of the living into the mechanical in which the latter appears as ‘our inverted reflection’ (Sartre, 2004 [1960]: 180). Through objectification we therefore create an objective reality that is simultaneously a reflection of our own existence and an exterior force that stands outside our direct control and which continually threatens to restrict and dominate our free activity (Marx & Engels, 1978 [1845], p. 160). While this account may be interpreted as overly pessimistic, it is important to note that worked matter does not necessarily dominate living labour but merely has the potential to do so. Furthermore, Sartre also

describes the conflict between living and objectified labour as having beneficial consequences, as it provides the impetus for social development by motivating labour to continually transcend its material circumstances.

While objectification is a feature of all productive activity, ‘alienation in the Marxist sense begins with exploitation’ (Sartre, 2004 [1960], p. 227), that is, in the relationship between capital and labour. In an important passage, Marx describes the difference between objectification and alienation as follows:

The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being objectified, but on the state of being alienated, dispossessed, sold; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 832)

In this passage, Marx clearly states that alienation is distinguished by the fact that the results of production are not only objectified but also dispossessed and converted into capital. It is important to emphasize that the word ‘capital’ here refers both to the direct results of production as well as a set of social relations that simultaneously produce and are reproduced through the production process (Marx, 1978 [1849], p. 207). Marx (1993 [1939], pp. 453–455) elaborates on the distinction between the two meanings of capital by describing how the product of labour under capitalism both appears as *alien property*, objectified ‘as value in its being for itself’, and as an *alien power* that compels labour to the production of surplus value and the capital–labour relationship. While the Marxist theory of exploitation is primarily concerned with the appropriation of value in the form of objective property, the concept of alienation centers the processes in which the results of production are imbued with and put to work for capital as a subjective force. As capitalism develops, Marx argues, the social and technological basis of production are increasingly reshaped into forms that are compatible with capital’s economic interests. Examples of this process are the development of machinery designed to increase the productivity of labour but also include the commodification of emotions in new forms of labour, the creation of a neoliberal subject compelled to view her own capabilities and relationships in terms of market value and the reorganization of social space described by Marxist geographers (Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2017; Hochschild, 2011). These examples illustrate how the results of productive activity under capitalism are objectified in ways that reproduce and strengthen capitalism as a social system, a process which not only takes place within the workplace as traditionally defined but is also extended to the activities, relations and subjectivities on which production depends.

Alienation can therefore be defined as a process in which the products are estranged from their producers in two ways: Firstly by being *appropriated* as private property, and secondly by being *transformed* into a social force that operates outside the producers’ control and against their interests. Grounding alienation in the relationship between labour and capital represents a significant development in Marx’s thought. In the *EPM*, Marx (1988 [1932]) variously describes alienation as a universal condition of labour in general, as caused by the division of labour, as the specific result of wage labour or as rooted in the institution of private property. Adding to these inconsistencies is a remark

in *The Holy Family* that ‘the possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation’ (Marx & Engels, 1978 [1844], p. 133), which implies that alienation is a universal aspect of the human condition. By contrast, Marx in the *Grundrisse* consistently describes alienation as a process rooted in the capitalist mode of production that specifically affects the working class. In the discussion, I will consider how taking an expanded view of capitalist production enables us to conceive alienation as occurring also outside the labour–capital relationship. For now, what is important to note is that alienation denotes a alteration of the general contradiction between living and objectified labour into the specific confrontation between labour and capital. Under capitalism, the results of production are not only transformed into an exterior and potentially foreign reality but also imbued with a social power that confronts the worker as an alien and antagonistic Other (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 307). In other words, whereas objectification is a feature of all work, alienation is a specific feature of wage labour under capitalism (Lukács, 1971 [1923], p. 549). Neglecting the difference between objectification and alienation leads to an interpretation of alienation as an inherent feature of all forms of socially organized production. Considering that some form of social production is a precondition for any kind of social order, what is posited is essentially a fundamental and transhistorical conflict between individual and society, leading to the conservative and individualist implications that I have previously discussed. In the next section, I will show that this is in fact the exact opposite of Marx’s position and argue that capitalist alienation can be interpreted as simultaneously a progressive and contradictory feature of social development.

Capitalist socialization

In order to more fully understand the causes and consequences of alienation in contemporary society, it is necessary to consider an often underappreciated feature of Marx’s thought, namely his assessment of capitalism as a force of socialization. Throughout his work, Marx repeatedly and consistently emphasized capitalism’s extraordinary capacity for stimulating technological, social and scientific change, perhaps most famously in the *Manifesto*’s prophecy that the ‘constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ under capitalism will create a perpetually accelerating dynamic in which all traditional social relations will melt into air (Marx & Engels, 2004 [1848], p. 7). While the destructive and anarchic nature of capitalist development is a core point in the Marxist critique of capitalism, Marx (1993 [1939], p. 409) argues in the *Grundrisse* that the development of capitalism has a progressive function in producing and cultivating what he significantly terms a *social* human being. This social human being has a diverse set of needs, qualities and relations that is distinguished from previous needs, qualities and relations in that they arise from society itself. Describing the socializing impact of capitalism, Marx in particular highlights the tendency of capitalism to replace traditional and hierarchical social relations with an expanded and impersonal economic system in which people at least formally are endowed with equal social rights. Corresponding to this de-traditionalization is a change in the perception of our external reality, in which both nature and society are stripped of their mystical and powerful aura and instead come to

be treated as objects that can be rationally known and controlled. Writes Lukács (1971 [1923], p. 176), capitalism therefore produces the ‘abolition of all “natural barriers,” and its transformation of all relations between human beings into purely social relations’. The disenchantment of reality produces the realization that no higher power exists than humanity itself, compelling us to ‘face with sober senses’ our real conditions of life and our relations to each other (Marx & Engels, 2004 [1848], p. 7).

A similar process takes place within the sphere of production. Due to scientific progress, the development of technology and increasingly complex forms of cooperation, the importance of human labour power gradually decreases relative to the objectified results of previous labour. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx envisions the end point of this process as a fully automatic system of ‘mechanical and intellectual organs’ in which ‘the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages’ (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 692). Development of the productive forces vastly increases the productive power of the social collective, while also diminishing the importance of the individual worker. Marx therefore argues that capitalism will trigger a process in which knowledge and the social individual will gradually appear as the most important force of production, in the form of a ‘general intellect’ capable of controlling the processes of social life.

While Marx’s position on this issue is still debated, his description of the socializing tendency of capitalism is sometimes interpreted in the context of the now widely controversial theory of history as a teleological process leading towards a predetermined outcome (see Cohen, 2000 [1978]). Marx’s description of capitalism as a socially progressive force has also been challenged by Federici (2004), who has demonstrated how the transition to capitalism increased the oppression of women and non-White populations. However, it is not necessary to accept a teleological vision of history to appreciate Marx’s description of the socializing consequences of capitalism, from which I will highlight four broad themes: the creation and cultivating of new needs, interests and desires; the disruption of traditional social relations; the expansion of a social system of formally equal relations; and the increase of the productive power of the social collective. In the next section, I will argue that the socializing tendency of capitalism is subverted by a *dialectic of socialization and alienation* which produces a conflict between social development and capitalism as an economic system.

Capitalism as an abstract mode of social domination

While capitalism functions as an engine of socialization, social development under capitalism ultimately proceeds in a contradictory manner that subverts its progressive potential. Unlike previous social systems, production under capitalism is not conducted with the aim of fulfilling human needs directly, but with the purpose of creating and realizing a surplus value. Under capitalism, therefore, the development of production (and therefore also of the subject, nature and society) is subjugated to the production of value, which in turn becomes the primary precondition for the system’s continued existence. Writes Marx (1993 [1939], p. 308):

The progress of civilization [...] such as results from science, inventions, division and combination of labour, improved means of communication, creation of the world market,

machinery etc. – enriches not the worker but rather *capital*; hence it only magnifies the power dominating over labour.

Under capitalism, the development of production for the producers appears as a process of self-alienation, in which the economic imperatives of capitalism gradually emerge as the primary barrier to continued human and social development (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 541). Remembering the definition of alienation as a process in which the results of production are *appropriated* and *transformed* into capital, it follows that productive development does not increase the social power of the producers themselves, but rather strengthens the power of capital as an alien and antagonistic force. Given that the results of production also include the productive subject and her social relationships, the conflict between capital and labour eventually extends to society as a whole. Here we come to one of the key facets of Marx's critical theory, namely the argument that capitalism tends to produce abstract and impersonal forms of social organization. While space limitations prevents me from detailing the rationale behind Marx's analysis, suffice it to say that Marx described capitalism as distinguished from previous social formations by the fact that economic activity is mediated through abstract economic categories, the primary of which being the commodity form and the categories of abstract value and labour that it embodies. The development and expansion of capitalism therefore substitutes direct social relations with an abstract social order that subjects everyone to the same set of universal and seemingly impersonal economic imperatives. Writes Marx, what initially 'appears as a personal restriction of the individual by another, appears in the latter case as developed into an objective restriction of the individual by relations independent of him and sufficient unto themselves' (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 163). In Postone's (2003) interpretation, social power under capitalism does not appear as the direct coercion of people over people, or even of one class over another, but as a mode of abstract domination that seemingly arises spontaneously from within the social itself. While capitalist domination is ultimately rooted in the exploitation of labour by capital, this relationship is naturalized and expressed as a general confrontation between individual and society. In other words, capitalism produces a social order that appear as a set of objective restrictions not dissimilar to Durkheim's (2013 [1901]) conception of 'social facts' as external constraints on individual agency. Unlike Durkheim, however, the external and coercive character of society is not viewed as an inherent feature of social life as such, but rather as arising from the alienated nature of the capitalist mode of production. Specifically, capitalism subjects humanity to economic imperatives that appear to grow more independent of us the more dependent we become on them, and which invariably come into conflict with non-economic social aims and interests.

Summing up the analysis thus far, I propose that alienation can be defined as the result of a *dialectic of socialization and alienation* rooted in the appropriation of the results of production and their transformation into capital. Through scientific and technological development, the removal of traditional, spatial and natural barriers, the diversification of needs and the expansion of social cooperation, capitalist development vastly increases humanity's material and social power. However, this power is subverted by an economic system in which the results of production serve to reproduce a social order whose

economic imperatives appear as a set of abstract, impersonal and dominating structures. Under capitalism, the development of social production serves to create an objective reality that stands opposite the individual as an alien and unassailable force, and in which society itself appears as the greatest threat to human development and flourishing. As a result of this dialectic, what is objectively an expansion of social power is experienced as fatalism and powerlessness, while what is objectively an expansion of human cooperation and interdependence produces explosive rates of loneliness and isolation. An obvious example is the development of technologies for automation and artificial intelligence, which has been described by moderate accounts as triggering a structural change in which large sections of today's workforce will be forced into other sectors of employment, and by pessimistic accounts as threatening the very institution of wage labour itself, both of which would radically destabilize the everyday lives of millions of workers worldwide (Vermeulen et al., 2018). In this case, the results of production do not only function to threaten large segments of the working class with unemployment, deskilling or dislocation but also to destabilize the capitalist social order itself, at least to the extent that it is structured around and dependent on the institution of wage labour. Consider also the development of Internet-based technologies for collecting and analysing behavioural data, which are used by firms such as Facebook and Google to predict and control human behaviour for commercial ends to numerous harmful psychological and social consequences (Zuboff, 2019). What makes these examples alienating in the Marxist sense is the way in which the progressive potential of technological development is subverted by the economic imperatives of capital, so that the productive potential of humanity is changed into a menacing and apparently uncontrollable force. In both cases, alienation emerges from the results of living labour and technological development, but only in so far as they are objectified in the form of a capitalist system that we continually – though certainly not always consciously or voluntarily – reproduce. In other words, alienation does not arise from the confrontation between the individual and society as an external object, which would imply that alienation could only be transcended through a regression to less developed forms of sociality. Rather, alienation is the expression of a contradiction rooted in the social organisation of production, and which can only be transcended through more, rather than less, social development and cooperation.

Discussion: Re-claiming a Marxist theory of alienation

Above, I have proposed that social development under capitalism is characterized by a dialectic of socialization and alienation that generates a structural conflict between social development and the economic order. Before moving on to consider the sociological implications of this interpretation, I will demonstrate how it addresses the four problems traditionally associated with alienation theory that I identified at the beginning of the article. While these issues are to some extent overlapping, for example in the previously noted link between essentialism and conservatism, treating them separately is still useful for analytic reasons. I will therefore discuss the four issues in order, before discussing the theory's more general implications in the concluding discussion.

Firstly, the concept of alienation's semantic overload is resolved by giving the concept a more specific definition as the appropriation and transformation of the results of

social production into capital. Rather than conceiving alienation as an inherent part of human agency or social organization, as suggested by Tyler (2011) and Acevedo (2005), the Marxist approach insists on explaining alienation as the specific result of the capitalist mode of production. Of course, this does not mean that all feelings of estrangement, detachment, powerlessness and isolation are produced by capitalism or that it is impossible to conceive of any alienation-like experiences in non-capitalist social systems. However, grounding the theory in the analysis of capitalism is vital for re-claiming alienation as a specifically Marxist concept distinct from sociological descriptions of similar phenomena, as well as for constructing a concept that is specific enough to produce predictions that can be examined empirically.

Furthermore, the theory of alienation's tendency towards essentialism is significantly reduced by presupposing a thin theory of humanity that merely emphasizes our capacity for action, creativity and self-reinvention. Accordingly, alienation is not conceived as a fall from a foundational state of nature, but as the distance between our social potential and our ability to direct this potential towards goals of our own determination, a distance which is always immanent, relative and historically determined. Significantly, it is a gap that can only be closed through increased social development and democratization and not through a regression to earlier and more 'authentic' modes of existence. In this respect, the Marxist theory of alienation avoids the conservative tendency to romanticize pre-capitalist societies, as well as the portrayal of society itself as inherently oppressive and alienating. In other words, recognizing capitalism as an alienating mode of social domination enables us to critique the ways in which certain forms of social organization produce a conflict between individual and society, without generalizing this critique into a rejection of the social itself.

Finally, the theory of alienation proposed here also avoids the concept's paternalist implications in that it does not presuppose adherence to a strong notion of the human good. Identifying and critiquing the alienating consequences of the capitalist mode of organization does not require that we believe that being a carpenter is more or less authentic than being a professional philosopher or that writing poetry is a more or less worthy form of human endeavour than watching horror movies. Rather, the only normative assumptions that the Marxist theory of alienation requires us to accept is that a situation in which people are generally free to determine the means and ends of their own activities is more desirable than a situation in which this freedom is curtailed and that a society that appears as transparent and controllable is preferable to one that appears as incomprehensible and impervious to change. As such, the theory of alienation is compatible with Marxism as a progressive form of social critique that remains committed to the idea that the only preferable alternative to capitalism is one that is more socialized than the system in which we currently live.

Limitations

A possible objection against the conception of alienation I have proposed is that the focus on capitalist production excludes the agency and experiences of the substantial part of the global population that do not participate in the economic sphere as wage labourers. However, this issue is easily resolved by including non-waged work that contributes to

the (re)production of capitalist society in line with the expanded view of production discussed previously. As Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) have convincingly argued, capitalist production is not limited to the 'economic' sphere as it is conventionally defined but depends on a social order that includes the reproductive work that has historically been performed by women, the expropriation of natural resources, political institutions that secure and compensate for the workings of the market, as well as the hyper-exploitation facilitated by imperialism, neo-colonialism and racial oppression. Also important in this respect is capitalism's tendency to subsume and colonize ever more aspects of social life, creating what Tronti (2019 [1966]) has termed a 'social factory' in which all sections of society are involved in value production. The development of capitalism will therefore tend to generalize alienation as a social experience, in a way that creates the potential for more general forms of organized resistance than what is afforded by orthodox Marxist interpretations of the industrial working class as the primary agent of anti-capitalist struggle.

Furthermore, the appraisal of capitalism's historical role as a force of socialization may also be criticized for dramatically underestimating the ecological consequences of capitalist development, not least of which is the existential threat of climate change that has been created by the centuries-long practice of dominating and forcefully converting natural wealth into abstract exchange value. In particular, climate change renders problematic the notion that the historical mission of capitalism is to liberate humanity from scarcity and its natural environment (see e.g. Cohen, 2000 [1978], pp. 306–307). According to Malm (2018), environmental disaster constitutes a storm moving towards the image-fixated 'mega-city' of postmodern capitalism and a stark reminder of capitalism's ultimate dependence on nature and labour. Extending this analysis, the theoretical standpoint developed in this article suggests that climate change may be interpreted as a particularly dramatic expression of the mutual alienation between the abstract imperatives of capitalism and the material processes through which it is produced. It suggests that humanity's ability to dominate nature will continue to represent a threat as long as this capacity is harnessed for the reproduction and expansion of capital and that the growth of technological power under capitalism will ultimately manifest in a social powerlessness to avoid environmental disaster. Complementing Malm's (2018) argument, it also implies that a truly sustainable solution to the ecological problem must be accomplished by a development to a less alienated social order in which humanity's social power is not to be lamented or suppressed but rather put to better use than what is presently the case.

Conclusion

Boltanski and Chiapello (2018 [1999, p. 38]) distinguished between *artistic* and *social* critiques of capitalism, in which the former represents 'bohemian' indignations with capitalism's lack of beauty, authenticity and freedom, whereas the latter refers to a 'socialist' critique of social inequality and private egoism. While Boltanski and Chiapello described artistic and social critiques of capitalism as fundamentally incompatible, reconstructing a Marxist theory of alienation arguably provides a missing link between the two. It does so by connecting the loss of freedom to the exploitation of labour and the loss of meaning to the transformation of the results of social production into a foreign

and dominating social order in which all other aims are subjugated to the production of economic value. As familiar as these themes are within Marxism and critical theory, retrieving the concept of alienation allows for highlighting cultural and psychological aspects that are often overlooked in more structural Marxist accounts, while also giving a material grounding to social critiques that otherwise risk becoming moralistic or merely aesthetic. More generally, the Marxist theory of alienation focuses the critique of society on what Weber described as ‘the most fateful force in our modern life’, namely an economic order in which all human activities, aims and aspirations are subordinated to the accumulation of capital (Weber, 2001 [1904], p. xxxi).

It should also be emphasized that the theory of alienation I have outlined here does not primarily attempt to describe the psychological experience of living in capitalist societies but objective processes that produce the subjective sensations that alienation theory has conventionally described. Indeed, an important implication of the Marxist theory of alienation is that we should distinguish between alienation as an objective social process and the subjective experiences that this process engenders. While it is obviously not the case that all feelings of estrangement can be traced back to the capitalist mode of production, it nonetheless seems reasonable to assume that a substantial portion of our sensations of powerlessness, isolation and despair is related to the social organization of production and that it is valuable to distinguish those feelings from similar experiences caused by other factors. In contrast to theories that conceive alienation as a universal and inescapable feature of human agency, which by their nature have limited empirical applicability, the Marxist theory of alienation is also able to produce empirical predictions about the magnitude of alienation between and within societies. For instance, the theory predicts that alienation will increase if productive and technological development coincides with or is achieved through processes of commodification and marketization, and if institutions for democracy and collective self-determination are dismantled and replaced by market mechanisms. The theory also predicts that alienation will be exacerbated by increasing economic inequality, and in particular by increasing disparity between workers and capital owners. Finally, those groups who are most exposed to the market forces and who are most deprived of the social power to influence their social circumstances are likely to be at particular risk at the subjective experiences of fatalism, hopelessness, loneliness and despair.

During the recent decade, scholars from different social scientific disciplines and of various political stripes have described contemporary society as characterized by surging social inequalities, political fatalism and disenfranchisement, social disintegration, and increasing rates of loneliness, isolation and mental health issues (Brown, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018; Hertz, 2020; Piketty, 2020). Among the benefits of Marxist alienation theory is the potential to explain how these and other issues can be related to the basic organization of capitalist society. In particular, the Marxist theory of alienation as I have outlined it here may be helpful for highlighting and examining what may be referred to as the *paradox of social power and isolation*. The first part of the paradox, which is summarized by Bauman’s (2000) comment that we have never been so free and also felt so powerless, refers to the experience of collective powerlessness in the face of humanly created ecological, technological, political, cultural and social change, a social experience that coincides and even seems to be produced by what is objectively an

increase in humanity's social and material power (Berardi, 2017). The second part of the paradox refers to the increasing rates of self-reported loneliness that have been observed during the last decade (Hertz, 2020). Here as well, loneliness and isolation emerge at a historical moment in which humans are objectively more interconnected and interdependent than at any previous point in history, and in which technologies for communication and social interaction have never been more readily available. Together, these phenomena reflect what may be described as a breakdown in the capacity for collective action in contemporary society, characterized by an increasing divergence between humanity's objective potentiality on the one hand and our abilities to control and utilize this potential on the other. Retrieving the Marxist concept of alienation at this moment reminds us that this breakdown cannot be seen in isolation from a social order in which the results of our productive activities are appropriated and transformed into capital as an abstract, dominant and uncontrollable social force, a force that nevertheless contains within it the radical possibility of a non-alienated society.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the anonymous referees at the *European Journal of Social Theory* and Sigrid Strømmen for their valuable comments on previous versions of the article.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. As is typical for older texts, several of the authors cited in this article (including Marx himself) routinely use male pronouns in order to refer to humans of all genders. For the sake of textual clarity, I have chosen to preserve the original wording of these quotations.
2. Marx (1990 [1867]) generally uses 'labour' as a term for productive activity in general, and 'labour-power' to refer to the abstraction of labour into an exchangeable commodity under capitalism. Since Marx's time, the first term has been increasingly subsumed under the latter, with the result that productive activities outside of the narrowly defined 'economy' are excluded and made invisible. Marx's conception of labour has also been criticized for betraying an 'industrialist' bias that excludes non-value-producing kinds of work (e.g. by Hochschild, 2011), a criticism that has been convincingly challenged by Sayers (2011). To avoid these issues, I will use 'production' as broad and inclusive terms for human activities that seek to effect some change in the world, and which requires time, effort and intent.

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