

For Karl Marx, Alienation Was Central to Understanding Capitalism

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Since they were first published in the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx's early writings on alienation have served as a radical touchstone in the fields of social and philosophical thought, generating followers, contestation and debate. It was in the [*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*](#) that Marx first developed his theory of alienation. His concept of "alienated labor" pushed beyond the existing philosophical, religious, and political notions of alienation to ground it in the economic sphere of material production. This was a groundbreaking move, but alienation was a concept that Marx never put down, and he would go on to refine and develop his theory in the coming decades.

Although thinkers on the topic of alienation have, for the most part, continued to make use of Marx's early writings, it is in fact in the later work that Marx provides a fuller, more developed account of alienation, as well as a theory of its overcoming. In the notebooks of the [*Grundrisse*](#) (1857-58), as well as in other preparatory manuscripts for [*Capital*](#) (1867), Marx delivers conception of alienation is historically grounded in his analysis of social relations under capitalism. If this important aspect of Marx's theory has been underappreciated until now, it remains nonetheless the key to understanding what the mature Marx meant by alienation — and helps provide the conceptual tools that will be needed in transforming the hyper-exploitative economic and social system that we live in today.

A Long Trajectory

The first systematic account of alienation was provided by Georg W. F. Hegel in [*The Phenomenology of Spirit*](#) (1807), where the terms *Entausserung* ("self-externalization"), *Entfremdung* ("estrangement") and *Vergegenständlichung* (literally: "to-make-into-an-object") were used to describe Spirit's becoming other than itself in the realm of objectivity. The concept of alienation continued to feature prominently in the writings of the Hegelian Left, and Ludwig Feuerbach's developed a theory of religious alienation in [*The Essence of Christianity*](#) (1841) where he described man's projection of his own essence onto an imaginary deity. But it subsequently disappeared from philosophical reflection, and none of the major thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century paid it any great attention. Even Marx rarely used the term in the works published during his lifetime, and discussion of alienation was notably absent from the Marxism of the Second International (1889–1914).

It was during this period, however, that several thinkers developed concepts that later came to be associated with alienation. In his [*Division of Labor*](#) (1893) and [*Suicide*](#) (1897), Émile Durkheim introduced the term "anomie" to indicate a set of phenomena whereby the norms guaranteeing social cohesion fall into crisis following a major extension of the division of labor. Social upheaval associated with major changes in the production process also lay at the basis of the thinking of German sociologists. Georg Simmel in [*The Philosophy of Money*](#) (1900) paid great attention to the dominance of social institutions over individuals

and to the growing impersonality of human relations. Max Weber, in [Economy and Society](#) (1922), dwelled on the phenomena of “bureaucratization” and “rational calculation” in human relations, considering them to be the essence of capitalism. But these authors thought they were describing unstoppable tendencies of human relations, and their reflections were often guided by a wish to improve the existing social and political order — certainly not to replace it with a different one.

The return to a Marxist theory of alienation occurred in large part thanks to Gyorgy Lukács, who in [History and Class Consciousness](#) (1923) introduced the term “reification” (*Versachlichung*) to describe the phenomenon whereby labor activity confronts human beings as something objective and independent, dominating them through external autonomous laws. When the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* finally appeared in German in 1932, the hitherto unpublished text from Marx’s youth caused waves throughout the world. Marx’s concept of alienation described the labor product confronting labor “as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.” He listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: (1) by the product of his labor, which becomes “an alien object that has power over him”; (2) in his working activity, which he perceives as “directed against himself,” as if it “does not belong to him”; (3) by “man’s species-being,” which is transformed into “a being alien to him”; and (4) by other human beings, and in relation “to their labor and the object of the labor”.

For Marx, unlike for Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labor and the transformation of labor products into objects standing opposed to producers. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labor, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular epoch of production: capitalism.

Diverging fundamentally from Marx, in the early part of the twentieth century, most of the authors who addressed alienation considered it a universal aspect of life. In [Being and Time](#) (1927), Martin Heidegger approached alienation in purely philosophical terms. The category he used for his phenomenology of alienation was “fallenness” [*Verfallen*], that is the tendency of human existence to lose itself in the inauthenticity of the surrounding world. Heidegger did not regard this fallenness as a “bad and deplorable property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves”, but rather as “an existential mode of Being-in-the-world,” as a reality forming part of the fundamental dimension of history.

After World War II, alienation became a recurrent theme — both in philosophy and in literature — under the influence of French existentialism. But it was identified with a diffuse discontent of man in society, a split between human individuality and the world of experience, an insurmountable *condition humaine*. Most existentialist philosophers did not propose a social origin for alienation, but saw it as inevitably bound up with all “facticity” (no doubt the failure of the Soviet experience favored such a view) and human otherness. Marx had helped to develop a critique of human subjugation in capitalist relations of production. The existentialists, by contrast, sought to absorb those parts of Marx’s work that they thought useful for their own approach but in a merely philosophical discussion lacking any specific historical account.

For Herbert Marcuse, like the existentialists, alienation was associated with objectification as such, rather than with a particular condition under capitalism. In [Eros and Civilization](#) (1955), he took distance from Marx, arguing that human emancipation could only be achieved with the abolition — not the liberation — of labor and with the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations. Marcuse ultimately opposed technological domination in general, losing the historical specificity that tied alienation to capitalist relations of production, and his reflections on social change were so pessimistic as to often include the

working class among the subjects that operated in defence of the system.

The Irresistibility of Theories of Alienation

A decade after Marcuse's intervention, the term alienation entered the vocabulary of North American sociology. Mainstream sociology treated it as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations, and the search for solutions centered on the capacity of individuals to adjust to the existing order rather than on collective practices to change society. This major shift of approach ultimately downgraded analysis of historical-social factors. Whereas, in the Marxist tradition, the concept of alienation had contributed to some of the sharpest criticisms of the capitalist mode of production, its institutionalization in the realm of sociology reduced it to a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social norms. These interpretations have contributed to a theoretical impoverishment of the discourse of alienation, which — far from a complex phenomenon related to man's work activity — became, for some sociologists, a positive phenomenon, a means of expressing creativity. In this form, the category of alienation was diluted to the point of being virtually meaningless.

In the same period, the category of alienation found its way into psychoanalysis, where Erich Fromm used it to try to build a bridge to Marxism. For Fromm, however, the emphasis was on subjectivity, and his notion of alienation, summarized in [*The Sane Society*](#) (1955) as “a mode of experience in which the individual experiences himself as alien” remained too narrowly focused on the individual. Fromm's account of Marx's concept based itself exclusively on the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and sidelined the role of alienated labor in Marx's thought. This lacuna prevented Fromm from giving due weight to objective alienation (that of the worker in the labour process and in relation to the labour product).

In the 1960s, theories of alienation came into fashion and the concept seemed to express the spirit of the age to perfection. In Guy Debord's [*The Society of the Spectacle*](#) (1967), alienation theory linked up with the critique of immaterial production: “with the ‘second industrial revolution’, alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production”. In [*The Consumer Society*](#) (1970), Jean Baudrillard distanced himself from the Marxist focus on the centrality of production and identified consumption as the primary factor in modern society. The growth of advertising and opinion polls had created spurious needs and mass consensus in an “age of consumption” and “radical alienation.”

The popularization of the term, however, along with its indiscriminate application, created a profound conceptual ambiguity. Within the space of a few years, alienation had been transformed to designate nearly anything on the spectrum of human unhappiness; it had become so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified.

With hundreds of books and articles being published on the topic around the world, it had become the age of alienation *tout court*. Authors from various political backgrounds and academic disciplines identified its causes as commodification, overspecialization, anomie, bureaucratization, conformism, consumerism, loss of a sense of self amid new technologies, personal isolation, apathy, social or ethnic marginalization, and environmental pollution. The debate became even more paradoxical in the North American academic context, where the concept of alienation underwent a veritable distortion and ended up being used by defenders of the very social classes against which it had for so long been directed.

Alienation According to Karl Marx

The *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-58 provides Marx's best account of the theme of alienation, though it remained unpublished even in Germany until 1939. When the text was eventually translated into European and Asian languages from the late 1960s, including its English-language publication in 1973, scholars focused more their attention on the way Marx conceptualized alienation in his mature writings. The *Grundrisse's* account recalled the analyses of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, but was enriched by a much greater understanding of economic categories and by a more rigorous social analysis. In the *Grundrisse* Marx more than once used the term "alienation" and argued that in capitalism:

the general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – appears as something alien to them, autonomous as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth.

The *Grundrisse* was not the only incomplete text of Marx's maturity to feature an account of alienation. Five years after it was composed, "[*Capital, Volume 1: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished*](#)" (1863–64) brought the economic and political analyses of alienation more closely together. "The rule of the capitalist over the worker", Marx wrote, "is the rule of things over human beings, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer". In capitalist society, by virtue of "the transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital", there is a veritable "personification of things and reification of persons", creating the appearance that "the material conditions of labour are not subject to the worker, but he to them".

Marx gave a similar account — much more elaborated than the one provided in his early philosophical writings — in a famous section of *Capital*: "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret". For Marx, in capitalist society, relations among people appear not "as direct social relations between persons ... but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things". This phenomenon is what he called "the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities". Commodity fetishism did not replace the alienation of his early writings. In bourgeois society, Marx held, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated this phenomenon from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities.

The eventual diffusion the mature Marx's writing on alienation paved the way for a departure from mainstream sociology and psychology's conceptualization of it. Marx's account of alienation was geared to its overcoming in practice — to the political action of social movements, parties and trade unions to change the working and living conditions of the working class. The publication of what – after the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in the 1930s – may be thought of as the "second generation" of Marx's writings on alienation therefore provided not only a coherent theoretical basis for new studies of alienation, but above all an anti-capitalist ideological platform for the extraordinary political and social movements that exploded in the world during those years. Alienation went beyond the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities. It took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

Since the 1980s, the world of labor has suffered an epochal defeat, the global economic system is more exploitative than ever, and the Left is still in the midst of a deep crisis. Of course, Marx cannot give an answer to many of contemporary problems but he does pinpoint the essential questions. In a society dominated by the free market and

competition among individuals, Marx's account of alienation continues to provide an indispensable critical tool for both understanding and criticizing capitalism today.