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# **Redefining Alienation: A Critical Analysis of Marx's Later Works and its Relevance to Contemporary Capitalist Societies**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of alienation within Marxist philosophy has been both influential and subject to ambiguity and controversy. This study offers a fresh perspective by examining alienation in Marx's later works. Marxist alienation is argued to be an objective phenomenon that results from turning productive outcomes in to capital, as opposed to being perceived as a subjective experience or an innate feature of social structure. This interpretation addresses key theoretical concerns related to alienation theory, such as essentialism and moral paternalism. It also provides a comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary capitalist societies, where increased social power and interdependence coexist with heightened feelings of helplessness and loneliness.

**Key Words:** Marxist, Alienation, Contemporary, Capitalism, Rethinking, Alienation.

## **Introduction**

The theory of alienation has seen a resurgence of scholarly interest despite historical criticisms of essentialism and moral paternalism (Burkitt, 2019). Current discussions in philosophy and the social sciences offer an opportunity to revitalize and reinforce the analytical tools associated with alienation (Büscher, 2022). "A sense of helplessness in the face of cultural, technological, and environmental changes, as well as widespread reports of loneliness, isolation, and mental health problems, are the driving forces behind this renaissance" (Büscher, 2022; Connine, 2019; Copley & Moraitis, 2021). The idea of alienation has been attempted to be applied to modern society in recent years (Øversveen, 2022; Sasan et al., 2022; Silver, 2019). This research supports this revival by creating a theoretical framework for alienation that draws from Karl Marx's later writings, especially "Grundrisse."

The majority of studies have mostly cited Marx's earlier work, such as the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (EPM) of 1844 (Copley & Moraitis, 2021; Fajardo, 2021; Harvey, 2020; Malherbe, 2021), despite the fact that there has been little research on alienation in Marx's later writings (Harvey, 2020; Malherbe, 2021; Øversveen, 2022). It is argued that alienation was central to Marx's early works but diminished in his later economic writings (Burkitt, 2019), leading to debates regarding the coherence of Marxist alienation theory (Harvey, 2020).

This article asserts that alienation remains fundamental to Marx's analysis of capitalism and that reconstructing a Marxist framework for understanding alienation can address theoretical issues associated with alienation theory and illuminate contemporary societies. The primary resources for this endeavor are found in Marx's later work, particularly the *Grundrisse*.

## **1.2. Background of the Study**

In this section, the author discusses four primary criticisms of alienation theory and the paper's objective to address these criticisms. The first criticism concerns the semantic complexity of the term 'alienation,' which has various connotations in everyday language, leading to confusion in its application within the context of Marxist theory (Chatterton & Pusey, 2020). This issue arises from the lack of a clear distinction between alienation and other related concepts like commodity fetishism and reification, as well as sociological constructs such as anomie and individualization (Ross, 2020; Sørensen, 2019; Venkatesh, 2021). The second criticism revolves around the perceived implication of an inherent human nature in the concept of alienation, which contradicts Marx's historical and contextualized perspective (Musto, 2020). Althusser argued that Marx's early writings, like the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (EPM), deviated from his later works, suggesting a cohesive human essence in the former. This essentialist interpretation conflicts with scientific Marxism, which rejects the grounding of history and politics in a fundamental human essence (Fuchs, 2020).

The third criticism focuses on the paternalistic nature of alienation theory, which presupposes a universal human good that may override individual preferences (Matthews, 2019). This paternalism becomes problematic when combined with the concept of "false consciousness," suggesting that individuals may not be aware of their estrangement (Hanappi, 2020). This can lead to a contemptuous attitude toward mass culture and a thinker's responsibility to define the human good, posing challenges in reconciling alienation theory with the Marxist political project (Musto, 2020). The fourth criticism relates to the potential conservatism associated with alienation theory, as it may romanticize a fundamental human essence and yearn for a pre-social state of nature (Malherbe, 2021). This perspective can undermine the transformative goals of Marxism, which aims to evolve from capitalist modernity through democratization and mobilization (Comninel, 2019).

Reevaluating alienation theory is advocated by the author as a means of effectively addressing these criticisms. It shouldn't be understood exclusively as a personal, subjective experience or as a component of human agency. Instead, it should be understood as a distinct characteristic of capitalist societies emerging from the organization of production (Copley & Moraitis, 2021; Fajardo, 2021; Harvey, 2020). This perspective aligns with the Marxist critique of capitalism and envisions

a society that is less afflicted by alienation and more democratic, equitable, and environmentally sustainable.

### **1.3. Research Questions:**

1. How does Marx's concept of alienation evolve in his later works, and how can it be applied to understand contemporary capitalist societies?
2. What are the key theoretical challenges associated with alienation theory, and how can a Marxist framework address these challenges?
3. What is the dialectical relationship between alienation and socialization within the context of capitalism, and how does it affect individuals' experiences of powerlessness and isolation?
4. How can the Marxist theory of alienation, as drawn from Marx's later work, help explain the paradox of social power and isolation in contemporary capitalist societies, and what empirical research can support this explanation?

### **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The research methodology employed in this study is grounded in a qualitative approach that involves a thorough interpretation and analysis of Karl Marx's body of work, with a particular emphasis on his later writings, notably the "Grundrisse" (Marx, 1857-1858). The research methodology follows a systematic process of critically examining Marx's ideas and arguments about alienation. It entails a comprehensive review of Marx's later works to identify and synthesize key themes and concepts associated with alienation and its relevance to understanding capitalism in contemporary society. The research intentionally avoids an exhaustive analysis of alienation in Marx's early writings, as this topic has been extensively explored in existing scholarly literature. Additionally, the study acknowledges and draws upon the broader framework of Marxism as an evolving intellectual endeavor with a consistent focus on examining capitalism and its societal implications. The contributions inform the research of prominent Marxist scholars such as Gyorgy Lukacs, Jean-Paul Sartre, Moishe Postone, and Sean Sayers "(Lukacs, 1971 [1923]; Sartre, 2004 [1960]; Postone, 2003; Sayers, 2011)", and aims to reconstruct a Marxist framework for comprehending alienation in contemporary contexts while addressing pertinent theoretical concerns within the field of alienation theory.

### **3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 Production, The Subject and Society**

In "Grundrisse," Karl Marx critiques the 18th-century concept of the individual as rational and autonomous, pursuing predefined economic objectives. He condemns this portrayal for legitimizing capitalism and argues that it emerged as individuals detached from conventional societal duties to become autonomous actors, masking their increased interrelatedness in capitalist society (Marx, 1993). Marx's analysis anticipates sociological critiques of homo-economics, a concept neglecting social factors' influence on human behavior. He attributes the emergence of this theory to capitalism. While he critiques bourgeois economists' theory of humanity, it does not

inherently indicate opposition to the fundamental notion of a human essence (Sayers, 2011). Two key ideas from Marx's discourse are worth highlighting: mankind's ability for deliberate creation and the inclination to engage in such activities collaboratively (Marx, 1993).

In "Capital," Marx elucidates labor as a transformative process where individuals use their physical capabilities to acquire resources aligned with their needs (Marx, 1990). He emphasizes that consciously conceiving results before production is unique to humans, allowing them to modify the external world in line with subjective intentions, enhancing talents, and deepening self-comprehension. Marx sees production as a means to express subjectivity and as crucial in its development. It cultivates personal growth and strengthens connections with the natural environment and others, challenging the separation between the economy and society in classical and contemporary economics (Marx, 1990; Marx, 1978). Marx's view highlights the fundamental interconnectedness of production, human subjectivity, nature, and society, providing insight into the widespread occurrence of alienation within capitalist societies (Marx, 1993).

The production process becomes a social endeavor through direct cooperation and the division of labor, where individuals produce goods and services for one another. Marx highlights the division of labor as a fundamental aspect of human sociability in the "Grundrisse":

"The mutual satisfaction of needs between individuals, where each can fulfill the other's requirements, demonstrates their capacity for reciprocal production. This interaction leads to the recognition of each other as possessors of objects satisfying their needs, transcending individual concerns and fostering engagement on a human level. This acknowledgment reflects their shared species-being as human beings and is universally applicable (Marx, 1993: Marx, 1939)".

Marx's perspective on production highlights its dual social nature. Firstly, production is socially organized, involving collective and coordinated efforts. Secondly, the outcomes of production encompass society itself, involving individuals and their social relationships (Marx, 1993).

Consequently, production is a fundamental requirement for society, providing the basis for human sustenance and establishing social recognition through economic collaboration. The growth of cooperation and diversification of human wants further enhance our capacity to establish connections and foster relationships.

Contrary to certain interpretations (Acevedo, 2005), Marx posits that the division of labor is not the primary source of alienation. Instead, he asserts that producing for others is a fundamental component that enables society's existence. In his work "Grundrisse," Marx observes that political economists historically depicted labor as an arduous endeavor imposed upon individuals against their will (Marx, 1993). However, Marx contends that these economists failed to recognize the inherent liberating nature of labor. Through labor, individuals overcome obstacles and transform external goals into self-imposed aims, leading to genuine freedom. According to Marx, labor serves as the active manifestation of this freedom.

A significant aspect to consider in this context is the portrayal of productive activity as emancipatory due to its ability to free individuals from external natural imperatives, enabling them to select the objectives of their pursuits collectively.

Marx considered the concept of human nature but explicitly rejected the notion of idealizing or reverting to this nature. Instead, he perceived it as a foundational premise humanity should strive to surpass. If one were to argue for a human "essence," it would not consist of unchanging, inherent, or pre-existing characteristics, as is often presumed. Instead, it would pertain to our inherent inclination to engage in transformational actions, generate outcomes, and engage in creative endeavors. In alternative terms, the concept being discussed might be characterized as a "limited" understanding of essence that prioritizes the human ability to grow, transform, and adapt, with social production serving as the primary means through which this capacity is facilitated.

According to the concept of alienation, people can feel alienated when they are not given the chance to fully develop and use their productive abilities or when the results of their efforts are taken out of their hands and used against their original intentions. The subsequent sections will illustrate how Marx presents capitalism as a social arrangement that leads to such alienation (Marx, 1993).

### **3.2 When Products of Labor are Converted into Capital**

Before delving into the central aspect of the argument, it is imperative to clarify a crucial conceptual distinction: the difference between objectification and alienation. So far, the emphasis has been placed on Marx's positive perspective regarding production as the primary catalyst for individual self-actualization and societal progress, particularly centered on the process of production. The connection between the production process and its outcomes is more intricate.

In the context of production, human actions are transformed into externally existing entities, a phenomenon known as objectification. In his work titled "The Critique of Dialectical Reason," Sartre (2004) explicates the concept of objectification as a dynamic process wherein individuals generate an external reality that mirrors their actions by manifesting as tangible material that imposes specific social mandates, duties, and obstacles. According to Sartre, the concept of working matter may be understood as both a result of and a contradiction to human practice. It represents a transformation of living beings into mechanical entities, seen as a distorted reflection of ourselves (Sartre, 2004: 180).

By objectifying, we establish an objective state of affairs that serves as both a manifestation of our own being and an external entity that exists independently of our immediate influence. This external force poses a constant risk of constraining and exerting control over our unrestricted actions (Marx & Engels, 1978). Although some may perceive this perspective as too negative, it is crucial to acknowledge that past work's influence on present labor is not absolute but contingent upon certain conditions.

Moreover, Sartre elucidates the confrontation between living labor and objectified labor as yielding advantageous outcomes, as it engenders the urge for societal progress by compelling labor to surpass its material conditions consistently. According to Sartre (2004), objectification is inherent in all forms of economic activity. However, as defined by Marx, the concept of alienation specifically originates from the exploitative connection between capital and labor.

Marx delineates the distinction between objectification and alienation in a significant excerpt:

"The focus shifts from the state of being objectified to the state of being alienated, dispossessed, and commodified. This highlights the condition where the formidable external power, which is constructed by social labor as one of its components, does not belong to the worker but to the personified production conditions, namely capital. (Marx, 1993, page 832)"

Within this text, Marx explicitly articulates the concept of alienation, emphasizing its distinctiveness through the dual process of objectification and dispossession, whereby production outcomes are transformed into capital.

In this context, it's essential to note that the term 'capital' encompasses not only the tangible products of production but also a complex network of social interactions that arise within the production process (Marx, 1978). Marx (1993, pp. 453-555) thoroughly examines the distinction between these two meanings of capital in his work. He explains how, within a capitalist system, the product of labor takes on the form of externalized possession, being objectified as "value in its being for itself." Simultaneously, it appears as an external force that shapes the capital-labor dynamic and compels labor to generate surplus value. The Marxist theory of exploitation revolves around the creation of value through objective property.

However, at the heart of the concept of alienation remains the process by which capital becomes infused with and appropriated by the products of production, becoming an arbitrarily powerful force. Marx argues that as capitalism advances, the social and technological foundations of production change to better serve the economic interests of capitalists. Examples of this phenomenon include the development of machinery to increase labor efficiency, the commodification of emotions as marketable labor, the emergence of the neoliberal individual who assesses abilities and relationships based on market value, and the restructuring of societal domains, as discussed by Marxist geographers (Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2017; Hochschild, 2011). These examples illustrate how the outcomes of productive activities within a capitalist framework are transformed into tangible objects, thereby perpetuating and reinforcing capitalism as a societal structure. This process extends from the conventional workplace to various activities, relationships, and individual identities integral to production.

Alienation can be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon in which products undergo a dual estrangement from their creators. This estrangement occurs through two distinct mechanisms: firstly, through appropriation as private property, and secondly, through the transformation of these products into a social force that operates independently of the agency of the producers and in opposition to their interests. The conceptualization of alienation, particularly in the context of the relationship between labor and capital, represents a significant advancement in Marx's theoretical framework. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (EPM)*, Marx (1988) provides a multifaceted analysis of alienation, attributing it to the fragmentation of labor, the consequences of wage labor, and the foundations of private property.

Adding to the complexity is a statement found in *The Holy Family*, where Marx and Engels (1978) assert that "the possessing class and the proletarian class represent

the same human self-alienation" (p. 133). This statement suggests that alienation is an inherent characteristic of the human experience. However, Marx consistently describes alienation as a feature specific to the capitalist mode of production, especially in its impact on the proletariat. In this discussion, we explore the implications of adopting a broader perspective on capitalist production, allowing us to conceptualize alienation as extending beyond the labor-capital dynamic. It's crucial to acknowledge that alienation transforms the conflict between living and objectified labor into a distinct confrontation between labor and capital. In the context of capitalism, production outcomes undergo a process of externalization, potentially becoming disconnected from the worker and assuming a societal influence that appears unfamiliar and adversarial (Marx, 1993, p. 307). To clarify, alienation is unique to wage labor within capitalism, while objectification is a feature shared by all forms of labor (Lukács, 1971). Failing to distinguish between alienation and objectification could lead to an interpretation in which alienation is seen as a fundamental aspect of all socially structured production.

Considering that social production is fundamental to establishing any social structure, the underlying concept proposed here represents a timeless and fundamental struggle between the individual and society. As previously discussed, this conflict ultimately yields conservative and individualistic implications. In the following section, we demonstrate that this viewpoint fundamentally contradicts Marx's perspective. Capitalist alienation can be viewed as a paradoxical and progressive aspect of societal development.

### **3.3. SOCIALIZATION BASED ON CAPITALISM**

Marx's ideology, often centered on the critique of capitalism, also acknowledges its role as a catalyst for socialization. Marx highlighted capitalism's remarkable capacity to drive technological, social, and scientific progress throughout his writings. This is best illustrated by the Communist Manifesto's assertion that long-term social relations will eventually dissolve as a result of capitalism's ongoing revolutionization of production, disruption of social structures, and perpetual state of uncertainty (Marx & Engels, 2004).

While the Marxist critique of capitalism often focuses on its destructive and anarchic aspects, Marx argued in the *Grundrisse* that capitalism serves a progressive purpose by fostering what he termed a "social human being" (Marx, 1993). This "social human being" possesses diverse wants, attributes, and connections that differ from prior needs, attributes, and connections emerging from within society. According to Marx, capitalism triggers a process of detraditionalization that replaces conventional hierarchical social interactions with a broader, more impersonal economic framework, superficially granting individuals equal social entitlements. This societal shift is accompanied by a transformation in our understanding of the external world, demystifying nature and society as objects that can be understood and managed rationally. Capitalism, as Lukács argues, eliminates "natural barriers" and transforms all human relationships into social relationships, prompting individuals to confront their living conditions and interconnectedness rationally.

A parallel transformation occurs in the realm of production. Advancements in science, technology, and collaboration reduce the significance of individual labor compared to the tangible outcomes of collective work. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx

envisions a future where a comprehensive automated system, consisting of mechanical and intellectual components, renders workers as conscious intermediaries (Marx, 1993). Developing productive forces enhances collective productivity while diminishing the importance of individual workers. Capitalism, Marx predicts, will lead to a society where knowledge and the social individual become the primary productive force, akin to a 'universal intelligence' governing social processes.

Scholarly discourse surrounding Marx's perspective on capitalism's socializing tendencies is ongoing. While some view it within a teleological framework of historical progression leading to a predetermined outcome (Cohen, 2000), others, like Federici, argue that capitalism exacerbated the subjugation of marginalized groups. Nonetheless, one can avoid adopting a teleological view to acknowledge Marx's portrayal of capitalism's societal effects. Four key themes emerge: the generation of new needs, interests, and aspirations; the disruption of established social connections; the expansion of a social framework marked by ostensibly equal relationships; and the augmentation of collective productive capacity.

### **3.4. Capitalism as a Way to Control Society**

Capitalism, while fostering socialization, paradoxically undermines true progress. Unlike prior systems, capitalism prioritizes surplus value over direct human needs. The relentless pursuit of value creation takes precedence, with production, individuals, and society subordinated to this imperative (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 308):

"The advancement of human society, as evidenced by scientific discoveries, technological breakthroughs, the specialization and collaboration of labor, enhanced methods of communication, the establishment of a global marketplace, and the utilization of technology, primarily benefits capital rather than the laborer. Consequently, it amplifies the influence exerted by capital over labor".

Alienation, as perceived through a Marxist lens, can be dissected as the result of a dialectical process intricately interwoven with both socialization and alienation itself. In the framework of capitalism, this complex dance is mainly about obtaining the products of production and turning them into capital. Despite being a driving force behind socialization, capitalism paradoxically undermines true societal progress. Unlike preceding societal systems, capitalism prioritizes creating surplus value over directly fulfilling human needs. This relentless pursuit of value creation takes precedence, subordinating production, individuals, and society itself to this economic imperative (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 308).

Marx (1993 [1939], p. 541) posits that within the capitalist framework, the advancement of production for producers can be seen as a manifestation of self-alienation. Economic demands, he argues, progressively emerge as the principal hindrance to ongoing human and societal advancement. This highlights a critical aspect of alienation in capitalism – the conflict between capital and labor extends beyond mere economic outcomes and encompasses the producing subjects and their social interactions. One of Marx's core critiques of capitalism is its tendency to replace immediate interpersonal connections with abstract economic concepts, forming an impersonal economic framework. The commodity form, abstract value, and labor categories become the primary conduits through which economic activity occurs. Capitalism, in its relentless expansion, transforms personal relationships into

a broader economic structure that seems devoid of personal attributes, resulting in what could be termed 'objective limitations' (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 163). This abstraction of social relationships under capitalism, often portrayed as an inherent conflict between the individual and society, generates a sense of alienation.

While some argue that the power dynamics within capitalism stem from labor exploitation, Marx's perspective delves deeper. Capitalism creates a societal structure that imposes economic imperatives detached from human intentions and interests. This external coercion takes on an abstract and dominating form, shaping the course of society in ways that appear to emerge organically from within the capitalist system (Postone, 2003).

In summary, alienation in capitalism arises from a dialectical process that encompasses socialization and alienation itself. The relentless pursuit of surplus value under capitalism, prioritizing economic demands over human needs, creates a conflict between capital and labor, affecting not only economic outcomes but also the individuals and their social interactions. Capitalism's transformation of personal relationships into abstract economic structures generates a sense of alienation. This alienation, however, is not an inherent aspect of all societal structures but rather a product of the detached nature of capitalist production. In essence, overcoming alienation requires not a retreat to less advanced forms of social interaction but rather a progression towards increased social development and cooperation. Alienation is rooted in the structure of capitalist production and necessitates a transformation of this structure to be fully addressed (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 163).

#### **4. DISCUSSION: REDEFINING ALIENATION THEORY BY KARL MARX:**

The dialectical relationship between alienation and socialisation in the context of capitalism creates a fundamental conflict between the advancement of society and the established economic system. To comprehensively evaluate this interpretation, addressing the four predicaments typically associated with alienation theory, as previously outlined, is essential. These concerns will be examined individually, followed by a discussion of broader implications.

Firstly, a more precise definition is needed to address the semantic ambiguity surrounding alienation. Alienation is defined as the process of appropriating and converting the outcomes of social production into capital. This definition distinguishes it as a direct consequence of the capitalist mode of production. While not all instances of estrangement, detachment, powerlessness, and isolation can be solely attributed to capitalism, situating the theory within this framework is crucial for clarity and empirical analysis.

Second, by taking a minimalist view of human nature and highlighting our ability for action, creativity, and self-transformation, the theory's tendency towards essentialism is lessened. A sense of alienation happens when we can't use our social potential to reach our own goals. Historical factors influence this gap and can be closed through enhanced social development and democratization. This perspective avoids idealizing pre-capitalist societies while refraining from characterizing society as intrinsically estranging.

Thirdly, the theory of alienation does not imply strict adherence to a particular conception of the human good. It does not assert the superiority or inferiority of specific activities or roles. Instead, it assumes two normative positions: a preference for a state where individuals have the general freedom to determine their activities and goals and a preference for a society that is transparent and amenable to transformation.

In summary, the Marxist theory of alienation navigates the challenges associated with semantic ambiguity, essentialism, and paternalism by providing a precise definition rooted in capitalism, adopting a minimalist conception of human nature, and maintaining a normative stance prioritizing individual freedom and societal transparency. This perspective aligns with Marxism as a progressive mode of societal analysis that envisions a more socialized alternative to capitalism.

## **5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

One potential critique of the proposed notion of alienation is its perceived limitation in scope as it primarily focuses on capitalist production, potentially neglecting the experiences of those not engaged in wage labor. However, this limitation can be addressed by acknowledging the role of unpaid labor in sustaining capitalist society. Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) contend that capitalism transcends the realm of the economy and includes a number of components, including the exploitation of natural resources, the predominance of women in reproductive labor, the establishment of political frameworks that facilitate market forces, imperialism, and racial subjugation. Capitalism's tendency to dominate all aspects of societal existence, as described by Tronti (2019), leads to the concept of the "social factory," where all segments of the population contribute to economic value generation. This perspective opens up the possibility of broader forms of resistance beyond traditional Marxist views.

Criticism may also arise regarding assessing capitalism's historical impact on socialization, particularly its underestimation of ecological consequences. Climate change, resulting from exploiting natural resources for economic gain, challenges the idea that capitalism aims to emancipate humanity from scarcity (Cohen, 2000). This perspective suggests climate change signifies a fundamental disconnect between capitalism's abstract principles and tangible mechanisms. It argues that continued reliance on nature and labor for capital reproduction poses an ongoing threat. Sustainable ecological problem-solving might necessitate a shift towards a less alienated social structure and more effective use of human social power.

## **Conclusion**

Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) differentiate between artistic and social criticisms of capitalism. The artistic critique articulates discontent with capitalism's perceived deficiency in aesthetic allure, genuineness, and freedom, while the social critique centres on a socialist assessment of societal inequity and individualism. These two critiques are seen as fundamentally incompatible, but the reintroduction of a Marxist theory of alienation can bridge the gap.

Marxist alienation theory connects the loss of meaning and freedom to labor exploitation and the transformation of socially produced goods into a dominant social order solely driven by economic value. This perspective allows for the exploration of cultural and psychological dimensions often overlooked in traditional

Marxist analyses, providing a solid foundation for social criticism that goes beyond moralizing or purely aesthetic explanations. In a broader sense, the Marxist theory of alienation directs its criticism towards the economic system, as described by Weber as the most influential force in modern society. This system prioritizes the accumulation of capital over all human activities, goals, and aspirations (Weber, 2001).

In a broader context, the Marxist theory of alienation directs its criticism towards the economic system, prioritizing the accumulation of capital above all else. This economic order subordinates all human activities, goals, and aspirations.

It's crucial to emphasize that this theory primarily focuses on explaining the objective processes underlying the subjective sensations described in traditional alienation theory, rather than the psychological experience of living in a capitalist society. Furthermore, this theory distinguishes alienation as an objective social process from the subjective experiences that ensue as a crucial distinction.

According to the theory, alienation can vary among and within societies. It is expected to increase when productive and technological development align with commodification and marketization, and when democratic and collective self-determination institutions are replaced by market mechanisms. Additionally, growing economic inequality, driven by the disparity between capital owners and workers, exacerbates alienation. Vulnerable marginalized groups with limited control over their social conditions are particularly susceptible to subjective feelings of pessimism, hopelessness, loneliness, and despair due to their heightened exposure to market forces.

Over the past decade, researchers from various social science fields have described modern society as characterized by increasing social inequality, political disenfranchisement, social disintegration, and rising rates of mental illness, loneliness, and isolation (Brown, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018; Hertz, 2020; Piketty, 2020). The application of Marxist alienation theory can elucidate the interrelationships between these concerns and the underlying framework of capitalist society.

The Marxist theory of alienation, as elucidated in this context, illuminates the paradoxical relationship between social power and isolation. The first aspect of this paradox involves the contrast between heightened personal freedom and a simultaneous sense of powerlessness, stemming from various changes in society driven by human actions. The second aspect pertains to the increasing prevalence of self-reported loneliness despite greater interconnectedness and advanced communication technologies. This suggests a breakdown in society's ability to take collective action, marked by a growing gap between humanity's potential and its ability to harness and control it.

Redefining the Marxist concept of alienation highlights the importance of recognising a societal framework in which the fruits of labour are seized and converted into capital, a prevailing and unmanageable social power. However, this force also possesses the capacity to create a society devoid of estrangement.

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