

Revisiting Marx's Concept of Alienation

I. Introduction

Alienation was one of the most important and widely debated themes of the 20th century, and Marx's theorization played a key role in the discussions.

Yet, contrary to what one might imagine, the concept itself did not develop in a linear manner, and the publication of previously unknown texts containing Marx's reflections on alienation defined significant moments in the transformation and dissemination of the theory.

The meaning of the term changed several times over the centuries. In theological discourse it referred to the distance between man and God; in social contract theories, to loss of the individual's original liberty; and in English political economy, to the transfer of property ownership. The first systematic philosophical account of alienation was in the work of G.W.F. Hegel, who in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) adopted the terms *Entäusserung* (literally self-externalization or renunciation) and *Entfremdung* (estrangement) to denote Spirit's becoming other than itself in the realm of objectivity. The whole question still featured prominently in the writings of the Hegelian Left, and Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religious alienation – that is, of man's projection of his own essence onto an imaginary deity (in *The Essence of Christianity* [1841]) – contributed significantly to the development of the concept. Alienation subsequently disappeared from philosophical reflection, and none of the major thinkers of the second half of the 19th century paid it any great attention. Even Marx rarely used the term in the works published during his lifetime, and it was entirely absent from the Marxism of the Second International (1889-1914).

During this period, however, several thinkers developed concepts that were later associated with alienation. In his *Division of Labour* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897), Émile Durkheim introduced the term 'anomie' to indicate a set of phenomena whereby the norms guaranteeing social cohesion enter into crisis following a major extension of the division of labour. Social trends concomitant with huge 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; while Max Weber, in *Economy and Society* (1922), dwelled on the phenomena of 'bureaucratization' in society and 'rational calculation' in human relations, considering them to be the essence of capitalism. But these authors thought they were

describing unstoppable tendencies, 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.

II. The rediscovery of alienation

The rediscovery of the theory of alienation occurred thanks to György Lukács, who in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) referred to certain passages in Marx's *Capital* (1867) – especially the section on 'commodity fetishism' (*Der Fetischcharakter der Ware*) – and introduced the term 'reification' (*Verdinglichung, Versachlichung*) to describe the phenomenon whereby labour activity confronts human beings as something objective and independent, dominating them through external autonomous laws. In essence, however, Lukács's theory was still similar to Hegel's, since he conceived of reification as a structural given. Much later, after the appearance of a French translation [1] had given this work a wide resonance among students and left-wing activists, Lukács decided to republish it together with a long self-critical preface (1967), in which he explained that '*History and Class Consciousness* follows Hegel in that it too equates alienation with objectification'. [2]

Another author who focused on this theme in the 1920s was Isaak Rubin, whose *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (1928) argued that the theory of commodity fetishism was 'the basis of Marx's entire economic system, and in particular of his theory of value'. [3] In the view of this Russian author, the reification of social relations was 'a real fact of the commodity-capitalist economy.' [4] It involved '"materialization" of production relations and not only "mystification" or illusion. This is one of the characteristics of the economic structure of contemporary society.... Fetishism is not only a phenomenon of social consciousness, but of social being.' [5]

Despite these insights – prescient if we consider the period in which they were written – Rubin's work did not promote a greater familiarity with the theory of alienation; its reception in the West began only with its translation into English in 1972 (and from English into other languages).

The decisive event that finally revolutionized the diffusion of the concept of alienation was the appearance in 1932 of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a previously unpublished text from Marx's youth. It rapidly became one of the most widely translated, circulated and discussed philosophical writings of the 20th century, revealing the central role that Marx had given to the theory of alienation during an important period for the formation of his economic thought: the discovery of political economy. [6] For, with his category of alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*), [7] Marx not only widened the problem of alienation from the philosophical, religious and political sphere to the economic sphere of

material production; he also showed that the economic sphere was essential to understanding and overcoming alienation in the other spheres. In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation is presented as the phenomenon through which the labour product confronts labour 'as something alien, as a power independent of the producer'. For Marx,

'the externalization [*Entäusserung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.'^[8]

Alongside this general definition, Marx listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: 1) from the product of his labour, 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';^[9] 3) from 'man's species-being', which is transformed into 'a being alien to him'; and 4) from other human beings, and in relation to their labour and the object of their labour.^[10]

For Marx, in contrast to Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labour and the transformation of labour products into objects standing opposed to producers. The political difference between these two positions is enormous. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labour, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular, capitalist, epoch of production, and thought it would be possible to overcome it through 'the emancipation of society from private property'.^[11] He would make similar points in the notebooks containing extracts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*:

'Labour would be the free expression and hence the enjoyment of life. In the framework of private property it is the alienation of life since I work in order to live, in order to procure for myself the means of life. My labour is not life. Moreover, in my labour the specific character of my individuality would be affirmed because it would be my individual life. Labour would be authentic, active, property. In the framework of private property my individuality has been alienated to the point where I loathe this activity, it is torture for me. It is in fact no more than the appearance of activity and for that reason it is only a forced labour imposed on me not through an inner necessity but through an external arbitrary need.'^[12]

So, even in these fragmentary and sometimes hesitant early writings, Marx always discussed alienation from a historical, not a natural, point of view.

III. Non-Marxist conceptions of alienation

Much time would elapse, however, before a historical, non-ontological, conception of alienation could take hold. In the early 20th century, most authors who addressed the phenomenon considered it a universal aspect of human existence. In *Being and Time* (1927), for instance, Martin Heidegger approached it in purely philosophical terms. The category he used for his phenomenology of alienation was 'fallenness' (*Verfallen*): that is, the tendency of Being-There (*Dasein* – ontologically constituted human existence) to lose itself in the inauthenticity and conformism of the surrounding world. For Heidegger, 'fallenness into the world means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, in so far as the latter is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity' – something truly quite different from the condition of the factory worker, which was at the centre of Marx's theoretical preoccupations. Moreover, Heidegger did not regard this 'fallenness' as a 'bad and deplorable ontical property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves', but rather as an ontological characteristic, 'an *existential mode* of Being-in-the-world'. [13]

Herbert Marcuse, who, unlike Heidegger, knew Marx's work well, identified alienation with objectification as such, not with its manifestation in capitalist relations of production. In an essay he published in 1933, he argued that 'the burdensome character of labor' [14] could not be attributed merely to 'specific conditions in the performance of labor, to the social-technical structuring of labor' [15], but should be considered as one of its fundamental traits:

'In laboring, the laborer is always "with the thing": whether one stands by a machine, draws technical plans, is concerned with organizational measures, researches scientific problems, instructs people, etc. In his activity he allows himself to be directed by the thing, subjects himself and obeys its laws, even when he dominates his object.... In each case he is not "with himself" ... he is with an "Other than himself" – even when this doing fulfils his own freely assumed life. This externalization and alienation of human existence ... is ineliminable in principle.' [16]

For Marcuse, there was a 'primordial negativity of laboring activity' that belonged to the 'very essence of human existence'. [17] The critique of alienation therefore became a critique of technology and labour in general, and its supersession was considered possible only in the moment of play, when people could attain a freedom denied them in productive activity: 'In a single toss of a ball, the player achieves an infinitely greater triumph of human freedom over objectification than in the most powerful accomplishment of technical labor.' [18]

In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse took an equally clear distance from Marx's conception, arguing that human emancipation could be achieved only through the abolition of labour and the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations. He discarded any possibility that a society based on common ownership of the means of production might overcome alienation, on the grounds that labour in general, not only wage labour, was

'work for an apparatus which they [the vast majority of the population] do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live. And it becomes the more alien the more specialized the division of labor becomes.... They work ... in *alienation* [... in the] absence of gratification [and in] negation of the pleasure principle.'^[19]

The cardinal norm against which people should rebel was the 'performance principle' imposed by society. For, in Marcuse's eyes,

'the conflict between sexuality and civilization unfolds with this development of domination. Under the rule of the performance principle, body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor; they can function as such instruments only if they renounce the freedom of the libidinal subject-object which the human organism primarily is and desires.... Man exists ... as an instrument of alienated performance.'^[20]

Hence, even if material production is organized equitably and rationally, 'it can never be a realm of freedom and gratification.... It is the sphere outside labor which defines freedom and fulfilment.'^[21] Marcuse's alternative was to abandon the Promethean myth so dear to Marx and to draw closer to a Dionysian perspective: the 'liberation of eros'.^[22] In contrast to Freud, who had maintained in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) that a non-repressive organization of society would entail a dangerous regression from the level of civilization attained in human relations, Marcuse was convinced that, if the liberation of the instincts took place in a technologically advanced 'free society'^[23] in the service of humanity, it would not only favour the march of progress but create 'new and durable work relations'.^[24] But his indications about how the new society might come about were rather vague and utopian. He ended up opposing technological domination in general, so that his critique of alienation was no longer directed against capitalist relations of production, and his reflections on social change were so pessimistic as to include the working class among the subjects that operated in defence of the system.

The two leading figures in the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, also developed a theory of generalized estrangement resulting from invasive social control and the manipulation of needs by

the mass media. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) they argued that 'a technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself.' [25] This meant that, in contemporary capitalism, even the sphere of leisure time – free and outside of work – was absorbed into the mechanisms reproducing consensus.

After World War II, the concept of alienation also found its way into psychoanalysis. Those who took it up started from Freud's theory that man is forced to choose between nature and culture, and that, to enjoy the securities of civilization, he must necessarily renounce his impulses. [26] Some psychologists linked alienation with the psychoses that appeared in certain individuals as a result of this conflict-ridden choice, thereby reducing the whole vast problematic of alienation to a merely subjective phenomenon.

The author who dealt most with alienation from within psychoanalysis was Erich Fromm. Unlike most of his colleagues, he never separated its manifestations from the capitalist historical context; indeed, his books *The Sane Society* (1955) and *Marx's Concept of Man* (1961) used the concept to try to build a bridge between psychoanalysis and Marxism. Yet Fromm likewise always put the main emphasis on subjectivity, and his concept of alienation, which he summarized as 'a mode of experience in which the individual experiences himself as alien', [27] remained too narrowly focused on the individual. Moreover, his account of Marx's concept based itself only on the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and showed a deep lack of understanding of the specificity and centrality of alienated labour 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) and led him to advance positions that appear disingenuous in their neglect of the underlying structural relations.

'Marx believed that the working class was the most alienated class.... [He] did not foresee the extent to which alienation was to become the fate of the vast majority of people.... If anything, the clerk, the salesman, the executive, are even more alienated today than the skilled manual worker. The latter's functioning still depends on the expression of certain personal qualities like skill, reliability, etc., and he is not forced to sell his "personality", his smile, his opinions in the bargain.' [28]

One of the principal non-Marxist theories of alienation is that associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and the French existentialists. Indeed, in the 1940s, marked by the horrors of war and the ensuing *crise de conscience*, the phenomenon of alienation – partly under the influence of Alexandre Kojève's neo-Hegelianism [29] – became a recurrent reference both in philosophy and in narrative literature. Once again, however, the concept

is much more generic than in Marx's thought, becoming identified with a diffuse discontent of man in society, a split between human individuality and the world of experience, and an insurmountable *condition humaine*. The 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 favoured such a view) and human otherness. In 1955, Jean Hippolyte set out this position in one of the most significant works in this tendency:

'[alienation] does not seem to be reducible solely to the concept of the alienation of man under capitalism, as Marx understands it. The latter is only a particular case of a more universal problem of human self-consciousness which, being unable to conceive itself as an isolated *cogito*, can only recognize itself in a word which it constructs, in the other selves which it recognizes and by whom it is occasionally disowned. But this manner of self-discovery through the Other, this objectification, is always more or less an alienation, *a loss of self and a simultaneous self-discovery*. Thus objectification and alienation are inseparable, and their union is simply the expression of a dialectical tension observed in the very movement of history.'

[30]

Marx helped to develop a critique of human subjugation, basing himself on opposition to capitalist relations of production. The existentialists followed an opposite trajectory, trying to absorb those parts of Marx's work that they thought useful for their own approach, in a merely philosophical discussion devoid of a specific historical critique.

IV. The debate on Marx's early writings about alienation

[31]

The alienation debate that developed in France frequently drew upon Marx's theories. Often, however, it referred only to the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*; not even the sections of *Capital* that Lukács had used to construct his theory of reification were taken into consideration. Moreover, some sentences from the 1844 Manuscripts were taken out of context and transformed into sensational quotes supposedly proving the existence of a radically different 'new Marx', saturated with philosophy and free of the economic determinism that critics attributed to *Capital* (often without having read it). Again on the basis of the 1844 texts, the French existentialists laid by far the greatest emphasis on the concept of self-alienation (*Selbstentfremdung*), that is, the alienation of the worker from the human species and from others like himself – a phenomenon that Marx did discuss in his early writings, but always in connection with objective alienation.

The same glaring error appears in a leading figure of postwar political theory, Hannah Arendt. In her *The Human Condition* (1958), she built her account of Marx's concept of alienation around the *Economic-Philosophical*

Manuscripts of 1844, even then isolating out only one of the types mentioned there by Marx: subjective alienation. This allowed her to claim:

'expropriation and world alienation coincide, and the modern age, very much against the intentions of all the actors in the play, began by alienating certain strata of the population from the world. [...] World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.' [32]

Evidence of her scant familiarity with Marx's mature work is the fact that, in conceding that Marx 'was not altogether unaware of the implications of world alienation in capitalist economy', she referred only to a few lines in his very early journalistic piece, 'The Debates on the Wood Theft Laws' (1842), not to the dozens of much more important pages in *Capital* and the preparatory manuscripts leading up to it. Her surprising conclusion was: 'such occasional considerations play[ed] a minor role in his work, which remained firmly rooted in the modern age's extreme subjectivism'. [33] Where and how Marx prioritized 'self-alienation' in his analysis of capitalist society remains a mystery that Arendt never elucidated in her writings.

In the 1960s, the theory of alienation in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* became the major bone of contention in the wider interpretation of Marx's work. It was argued that a sharp distinction should be drawn between an 'early Marx' and a 'mature Marx' – an arbitrary and artificial opposition favoured both by those who preferred the early philosophical work and those for whom the only real Marx was the Marx of *Capital* (among them Louis Althusser and the Russian scholars). Whereas the former considered the theory of alienation in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to be the most significant part of Marx's social critique, the latter often exhibited a veritable 'phobia of alienation' and tried at first to downplay its relevance [34]; or, when this strategy was no longer possible, the whole theme of alienation was written off as 'a youthful peccadillo, a residue of Hegelianism' [35] that Marx later abandoned. Scholars in the first camp retorted that the 1844 manuscripts were written by a man of twenty-six just embarking on his major studies; but those in the second camp still refused to accept the importance of Marx's theory of alienation, even when the publication of new texts made it clear that he never lost interest in it and that it occupied an important position in the main stages of his life's work.

To argue, as so many did, that the theory of alienation in the 1844 Manuscripts was the central theme of Marx's thought was so obviously wrong that it demonstrated no more than ignorance of his work. [36] On the other hand, when Marx again became the most frequently discussed and quoted author in world philosophical literature because of his newly published pages on alienation, the silence from the Soviet Union on this

whole topic, and on the controversies associated with it, provided a striking example of the instrumental use made of his writings in that country. For the existence of alienation in the Soviet Union and its satellites was dismissed out of hand, and any texts relating to the question were treated with suspicion. As Henri Lefebvre put it, 'in Soviet society, *alienation could and must no longer be an issue*. By order from above, for reasons of State, the concept had to disappear.'^[37] Therefore, until the 1970s, very few authors in the 'socialist camp' paid any attention to the works in question.

A number of well-known Western authors also played down the complexity of the phenomenon. Lucien Goldmann, for instance, thought it possible to overcome alienation in the social-economic conditions of the time, and in his *Recherches dialectiques* (1959) argued that it would disappear, or recede, under the mere impact of planning. 'Reification,' he wrote, 'is in fact a phenomenon closely bound up with the absence of planning and with production for the market'; Soviet socialism in the East and Keynesian policies in the West were resulting 'in the first case in the elimination of reification, and in the second case in its progressive weakening'.^[38] History has demonstrated the faultiness of his predictions.

V. The irresistible fascination of the theory of alienation

In the 1960s a real vogue began for theories of alienation, and hundreds of books and articles were published on it around the world. It was 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, even personal isolation, apathy, social or ethnic marginalization, and environmental pollution.

The concept of alienation seemed to express the spirit of the age to perfection, and indeed, in its critique of capitalist society, it became a meeting ground for anti-Soviet philosophical Marxism and the most democratic and progressive currents in the Catholic world. However, the popularity of the concept, and its indiscriminate application, created a profound terminological ambiguity.^[39] Within the space of a few years, alienation thus became an empty formula ranging right across the spectrum of human unhappiness – so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified.^[40]

With Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, which became soon after its first publication in 1967 a veritable manifesto for the generation of students in revolt against the system, alienation theory linked up with the critique of immaterial production. Building on the theses of Horkheimer and Adorno, according to which the manufacturing of consent

to the social order had spread to the leisure industry, Debord argued that the sphere of non-labour could no longer be considered separate from productive activity:

'Whereas during the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation "political economy considers the proletarian only as a *worker*", who only needs to be allotted the indispensable minimum for maintaining his labour power, and never considers him "in his leisure and humanity", this ruling-class perspective is revised as soon as commodity abundance reaches a level that requires an additional collaboration from him. Once his workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organization and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. At this point the *humanism of the commodity* takes charge of the worker's "leisure and humanity" simply because political economy now can and must dominate those spheres.'[\[41\]](#)

For Debord, then, whereas the domination of the economy over social life initially took the form of a 'degradation of *being* into *having*', in the 'present stage' there had been a 'general shift from *having* to *appearing*'.[\[42\]](#) This idea led him to place the world of spectacle at the centre of his analysis: 'The spectacle's social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation',[\[43\]](#) the phenomenon through which 'the fetishism of the commodity ... attains its ultimate fulfilment'.[\[44\]](#) In these circumstances, alienation asserted itself to such a degree that it actually became an exciting experience for individuals, a new opium of the people that led them to consume and 'identify with the dominant images', [\[45\]](#) taking them ever further from their own desires and real existence:

'the spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in *totally* colonizing social life.... Modern economic production extends its dictatorship both extensively and intensively. [...] With the "second industrial revolution", alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production.'[\[46\]](#)

In the wake of Debord, Jean Baudrillard has also used the concept of alienation to interpret critically the social changes that have appeared with mature capitalism. In *The Consumer Society* (1970), distancing himself from the Marxist focus on the centrality of production, he identified consumption as the primary factor in modern society. The 'age of consumption', in which advertising and opinion polls create spurious needs and mass consensus, was also 'the age of radical alienation'.

'Commodity logic has become generalized and today governs not only labour processes and material products, but the whole of culture,

sexuality, and human relations, including even fantasies and individual drives.... Everything is spectacularized or, in other words, evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models.’[47]

Baudrillard’s political conclusions, however, were rather confused and pessimistic. Faced with social ferment on a mass scale, he thought ‘the rebels of May 1968’ had fallen into the trap of ‘reifying objects and consumption excessively by according them diabolic value’; and he criticized ‘all the disquisitions on “alienation”, and all the derisive force of pop and anti-art’ as a mere ‘indictment [that] is part of the game: it is the critical mirage, the anti-fable which rounds off the fable’.[48] Now a long way from Marxism, for which the working class is the social reference point for changing the world, he ended his book with a messianic appeal, as generic as it was ephemeral: ‘We shall await the violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations which will come, just as unforeseeably and as certainly as May 1968, to wreck this white Mass.’ [49]

VI. Alienation theory in North American sociology

In the 1950s, the concept of alienation also entered the vocabulary of North American sociology, but the approach to the subject there was quite different from the one prevailing in Europe at the time. Mainstream sociology treated alienation as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations, [50] and the search for solutions centred on the capacity of individuals to adjust to the existing order, not on collective practices to change society.[51]

Here, too, there was a long period of uncertainty before a clear and shared definition took shape. Some authors considered alienation to be a positive phenomenon, a means of expressing creativity, which was inherent in the human condition in general.[52] Another common view was that it sprang from the fissure between individual and society;[53] Seymour Melman, for instance, traced alienation to the split between the formulation and execution of decisions, and considered that it affected workers and managers alike.[54] In ‘A Measure of Alienation’ (1957), which inaugurated a debate on the concept in the *American Sociological Review*, Gwynn Nettler used an opinion survey as a way of trying to establish a definition. But, in sharp contrast to the rigorous labour-movement tradition of investigations into working conditions, his questionnaire seemed to draw its inspiration more from the McCarthyite canons of the time than from those of scientific research.[55] For in effect he identified alienation with a rejection of the conservative principles of American society: ‘consistent maintenance of unpopular and averse attitudes toward familism, the mass media and mass taste, current events, popular education, conventional religion and the telic view of life, nationalism, and the voting process’. [56]

The conceptual narrowness of the American sociological panorama changed after the publication of Melvin Seeman's short article 'On the Meaning of Alienation' (1959), which soon became an obligatory reference for all scholars in the field. His list of the five main types of alienation – powerlessness, meaninglessness (that is, the inability to understand the events in which one is inserted), normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement [57] – showed that he too approached the phenomenon in a primarily subjective perspective. Robert Blauner, in his book *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), similarly defined alienation as 'a quality of personal experience which results from specific kinds of social arrangements' [58], even if his copious research led him to trace its causes to 'employment in the large-scale organizations and impersonal bureaucracies that pervade all industrial societies'. [59]

American sociology, then, generally saw alienation as a problem linked to the system of industrial production, whether capitalist or socialist, and mainly affecting human consciousness. [60] This major shift of approach ultimately downgraded, or even excluded, analysis of the historical-social factors that determine alienation, producing a kind of hyper-psychologization that treated it not as a social problem but as a pathological symptom of individuals, curable at the individual level. [61] 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. In the same way, the critical dimension that the concept had had in philosophy (even for authors who thought it a horizon that could never be transcended) now gave way to an illusory neutrality. [62]

Another effect of this metamorphosis was the theoretical impoverishment of the concept. From a complex phenomenon related to man's work activity and social and intellectual existence, alienation became a partial category divided up in accordance with academic research specializations. [63] American sociologists argued that this methodological choice enabled them to free the study of alienation from any political connotations and to confer on it scientific objectivity. But, in reality, this a-political 'turn' had evident ideological implications, since support for the dominant values and social order lay hidden behind the banner of de-ideologization and value-neutrality.

So, the difference between Marxist and American sociological conceptions of alienation was not that the former were political and the latter scientific. Rather, Marxist theorists were bearers of values opposed to the hegemonic ones in American society, whereas the US sociologists upheld the values of the existing social order, skillfully dressed up as eternal values of the human species. [64] In the American academic context, 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. [65]

VII. Alienation in *Capital* and the preparatory manuscripts

Marx's own writings played an important role for those seeking to counter this situation. The initial focus on the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* tended to shift after the publication of new texts, making it possible to reconstruct the development of his thought more accurately.

In the second half of the 1840s, Marx no longer made frequent use of the term 'alienation'; the main exceptions were his first book, *The Holy Family* (1845), jointly authored with Engels, where it appears in some polemics against Bruno and Edgar Bauer, and one passage in *The German Ideology* (1845-6), also written with Engels. Once he had abandoned the idea of publishing *The German Ideology*, he returned to the theory of alienation in *Wage Labour and Capital*, a collection of articles based on lectures he gave to the German Workers' League in Brussels in 1847, but the term itself does not appear in them, because it would have had too abstract a ring for his intended audience. In these texts, he wrote that wage labour does not enter into the worker's 'own life activity' but represents a 'sacrifice of his life'. Labour-power is a commodity that the worker is forced to sell 'in order to live', and 'the product of his activity [is] not the object of his activity': [66]

'the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc. – does he consider this twelve hours' weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where these activities cease, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours' labour, on the other hand, have no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc. but as *earnings*, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed. If the silkworm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker.' [67]

Until the late 1850s there were no more references to the theory of alienation in Marx's work. Following the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, he was forced to go into exile in London; once there, he concentrated all his energies on the study of political economy and, apart from a few short works with a historical theme, [68] did not publish another book. When he began to write about economics again, however, in the *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (better known as the *Grundrisse*), he more than once used the term 'alienation'. This text recalled in many respects the analyses of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, although nearly a decade of studies in the British Library had allowed him to make them considerably more profound:

'The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here 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.' [69]

The account of alienation in the *Grundrisse*, then, is enriched by a greater understanding of economic categories and by more rigorous social analysis. The link it establishes between alienation and exchange-value is an important aspect of this. And, in one of the most dazzling passages on this phenomenon of modern society, Marx links alienation to the opposition between capital and 'living labour-power':

'The objective conditions of living labour appear as *separated, independent* values opposite living labour capacity as subjective being.... The objective conditions of living labour capacity are presupposed as having an existence independent of it, as the objectivity of a subject distinct from living labour capacity and standing independently over against it; the reproduction and *realization*, i.e. the expansion of these *objective conditions*, is therefore at the same time their own reproduction and new production as the wealth of an alien subject indifferently and independently standing over against labour capacity. What is reproduced and produced anew is not only the *presence* of these objective conditions of living labour, but also their presence as independent values, i.e. values belonging to an alien subject, confronting this living labour capacity. The objective conditions of labour attain a subjective existence *vis-à-vis* living labour capacity – capital turns into capitalist.' [70]

The *Grundrisse* was not the only text of Marx's maturity to feature an account of alienation. Five years after it was composed, the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' – also known as '*Capital, Volume One: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished*' (1863-4) – 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 man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer.' [71] In capitalist society, by virtue of 'the transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital', [72] 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'. [73] In reality, he argued:

'Capital is not a thing, any more than money is a thing. In capital, as in money, certain specific social relations of production between people appear as relations of things to people, or else certain social relations appear as the natural properties of things in society. Without a class dependent on wages, the moment individuals confront each other as free persons, there can be no production of surplus-value; without the production of surplus-value there can be no capitalist production, and hence no capital and no capitalist! Capital and wage-labour (it is thus we designate the labour of the worker who sells his own labour-power) only express two aspects of the self-same relationship. Money cannot become capital unless it is exchanged for labour-power, a commodity sold by the worker himself. Conversely, work can only be wage-labour when its *own* material conditions confront it as autonomous powers, alien property, value existing for itself and maintaining itself, in short as capital. If capital in its material aspects, i.e. in the use-values in which it has its being, must depend for its existence on the material conditions of labour, these material conditions must equally, on the formal side, confront labour *as alien, autonomous powers*, as value – objectified labour – which treats living labour as a mere means whereby to maintain and increase itself.'

[74]

In the capitalist mode of production, human labour becomes an instrument of the valorization process of capital, which, 'by incorporating living labour-power into the material constituents of capital,... becomes an animated monster and ... starts to act "as if consumed by love".'

[75]

This mechanism keeps expanding in scale, until co-operation in the production process, scientific discoveries and the deployment of machinery – all of them social processes belonging to the collective – become forces of capital that appear as its natural properties, confronting the workers in the shape of the capitalist order:

'The productive forces ... developed [by] social labour ... appear as the *productive forces of capitalism*. [...] Collective unity in co-operation, combination in the division of labour, the use of the forces of nature and the sciences, of the products of labour, as machinery – all these confront the individual workers as something *alien, objective, ready-made*, existing without their intervention, and frequently even hostile to them. They all appear quite simply as the prevailing forms of the instruments of labour. As objects they are independent of the workers whom they dominate. Though the workshop is to a degree the product of the workers' combination, its entire intelligence and will seem to be incorporated in the capitalist or his understrappers, and the workers find themselves confronted by the *functions* of the capital that lives in the capitalist.'

[76]

Through this process capital becomes something 'highly mysterious'. 'The conditions of labour pile up in front of the worker as social forces, and they assume a capitalized form.'

[77]

Beginning in the 1960s, the diffusion of '*Capital, Volume One: Book 1, Chapter VI, unpublished*' and, above all, of the *Grundrisse* paved the way for a conception of alienation different from the one then hegemonic in sociology and psychology. It was a conception geared to the overcoming of alienation 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-Philosophical 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 movement that exploded in the world during those years. Alienation left the books of philosophers and the lecture halls of universities, took to the streets and the space of workers' struggles, and became a critique of bourgeois society in general.

VIII. Commodity fetishism and de-alienation

One of Marx's best accounts of alienation is contained in the famous section of *Capital* on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', where he shows that, in capitalist society, people are dominated by the products they have created. Here, the relations among them appear not 'as direct social relations between persons..., but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things': [78]

'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists ... in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. [...] It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.' [79]

Two elements in this definition mark a clear dividing line between Marx's conception of alienation and the one held by most of the other authors we have been discussing. First, Marx conceives of fetishism not as an

individual problem but as a social phenomenon, not as an affair of the mind but as a real power, a particular form of domination, which establishes itself in market economy as a result of the transformation of objects into subjects. For this reason, his analysis of alienation does not confine itself to the disquiet of individual women and men, but extends to the social processes and productive activities underlying it. Second, for Marx fetishism manifests itself in a precise historical reality of production, the reality of wage labour; it is not part of the relation between people and things as such, but rather of the relation between man and a particular kind of objectivity: the commodity form.

In bourgeois society, human qualities and relations turn into qualities and relations among things. This theory of what Lukács would call reification illustrated alienation from the point of view of human relations, while the concept of fetishism treated it in relation to commodities. *Pace* those who deny that a theory of alienation is present in Marx's mature work, we should stress that commodity fetishism did not replace alienation but was only one aspect of it.[80]

The theoretical advance from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital* and its related materials does not, however, consist only in the greater precision of his account of alienation. There is also a reformulation of the measures that Marx considers necessary for it to be overcome. Whereas in 1844 he had argued that human beings would eliminate alienation by abolishing private production and the division of labour, the path to a society free of alienation was much more complicated in *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts. Marx held that capitalism was a system in which the workers were subject to capital and the conditions it imposed. Nevertheless, it had created the foundations for a more advanced society, and by generalizing its benefits humanity would be able to progress along the faster road of social development that it had opened up. According to Marx, a system that produced an enormous accumulation of wealth for the few and deprivation and exploitation for the general mass of workers must be replaced with 'an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force'.[81] This type of production would differ from wage labour because it would place its determining factors under collective governance, take on an immediately general character and convert labour into a truly social activity. This was a conception of society at the opposite pole from Hobbes's "war of all against all"; and its creation did not require a merely political process, but would necessarily involve transformation of the sphere of production. But such a change in the labour process had its limits:

'Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a

rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.’[82]

This post-capitalist system of production, together with scientific-technological progress and a consequent reduction of the working day, creates the possibility for a new social formation in which the coercive, alienated labour imposed by capital and subject to its laws is gradually replaced with conscious, creative activity beyond the yoke of necessity, and in which complete social relations take the place of random, undifferentiated exchange dictated by the laws of commodities and money.[83] It is no longer the realm of freedom for capital but the realm of genuine human freedom.

[1] *Histoire et conscience de classe*, trans. Kostas Axelos and Jacqueline Bois, Paris: Minuit, 1960.

[2] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, xxiv.

[3] Isaak Illich Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1972, 5.

[4] Ibid., 28 (trans. mod.).

[5] Ibid., 59.

[6] In fact, Marx had already used the concept of alienation before he wrote the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In one text he published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (February 1844) he wrote: 'It is [...] the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.' Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, London: Penguin, 1992, 244-5.

[7] In Marx's writings one finds the term *Entfremdung* ('estrangement') as well as *Entäusserung*. These had different meanings in Hegel, but Marx uses them synonymously. See Marcella D'Abbieiro, *Alienazione in Hegel*.

Usi e significati di Entäusserung, Entfremdung Veräusserung, Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1970, 25-7.

[8] Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)', in *Early Writings*, 324.

[9] Ibid., 327.

[10] Ibid., 330. For an account of Marx's four-part typology of alienation, see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971, 136-52.

[11] Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)', 333.

[12] Karl Marx, 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*', in *Early writings*, 278.

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, San Francisco: Harper, 1962, 220-1. In the 1967 preface to his republished *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács observed that in Heidegger alienation became a politically innocuous concept that 'sublimated a critique of society into a purely philosophical problem' (Lukács, xxiv). Heidegger also tried to distort the meaning of Marx's concept of alienation: in his *Letter on 'Humanism'* (1946), he noted approvingly that, 'by experiencing alienation, [Marx] attains an essential dimension of history' (Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, 1993, 243) – a misleading formulation which has no basis in Marx's writings.

[14] Herbert Marcuse, 'On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor in Economics', *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973), 25.

[15] Ibid., 16-17.

[16] Ibid., 25.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 14-15.

[19] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, 45.

[20] Ibid., 46-7. Georges Friedmann was of the same view, arguing in *The Anatomy of Work* (New York: Glencoe Press, 1964) that the overcoming of alienation was possible only after liberation from work.

[21] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 156.

[22] Ibid., 155.

[23] Ibid., 198.

[24] Ibid., 155. Cf. the evocation of a 'libidinal rationality which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilized freedom' (199). On the relationship between technology and progress, see Kostas Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Techné in the Thought of Karl Marx*, Austin/London: University of Texas Press, 1976.

[25] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Seabury Press, 1972, 121.

[26] See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: Norton, 1962, 62.

[27] Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, New York: Fawcett, 1965, 111.

[28] Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961, 56-7. This failure to understand the specific character of alienated labour recurs in his writings on alienation in the 1960s. In an essay published in 1965 he wrote: 'One has to examine the phenomenon of alienation in its relation to narcissism, depression, fanaticism, and idolatry to understand it fully.' 'The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx's Theory', in Erich Fromm, ed., *Socialist Humanism*, New York: Doubleday, 1965, 221.

[29] See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

[30] Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, New York/London: Basic Books, 1969, 88.

[31] Cf. István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, London: Merlin Press, 1970, 241 ff.

[32] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 253-4.

[33] Ibid., 254.

[34] The directors of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Berlin even managed to exclude the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* from

the numbered volumes of the canonical *Marx-Engels Werke*, relegating them to a supplementary volume with a smaller print run.

[35] Adam Schaff, *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980, 100.

[36] Cf. Daniel Bell, 'The Rediscovery of Alienation: Some notes along the quest for the historical Marx', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVI, 24 (November 1959), 933-52, which concludes: 'while one may be sympathetic to the idea of alienation, it is only further myth-making to read this concept back as the central theme of Marx', 935.

[37] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, London: Verso, 1991, 53.

[38] Lucien Goldmann, *Recherches dialectiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1959, 101.

[39] Thus Richard Schacht (*Alienation*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) noted that 'there is almost no aspect of contemporary life which has not been discussed in terms of "alienation"' (lix); while Peter C. Ludz ('Alienation as a Concept in the Social Sciences', reprinted in Felix Geyer and David Schweitzer, eds., *Theories of Alienation*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976) remarked that 'the popularity of the concept serves to increase existing terminological ambiguity' (3).

[40] Cf. David Schweitzer, 'Alienation, De-alienation, and Change: A critical overview of current perspectives in philosophy and the social sciences', in Giora Shoham, ed., *Alienation and Anomie Revisited*, Tel Aviv: Ramot, 1982, for whom 'the very meaning of alienation is often diluted to the point of virtual meaninglessness' (57).

[41] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Canberra: Hobgoblin 2002, 13.

[42] Ibid., 9.

[43] Ibid., 11.

[44] Ibid., 12.

[45] Ibid., 11.

[46] Ibid., 13.

[47] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London: Sage, 1998, 191.

[48] Ibid., 195-6.

[49] Ibid., 196.

[50] See for example John Clark, 'Measuring alienation within a social system', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 24, n. 6 (December 1959), 849-52.

[51] See Schweitzer, 'Alienation, De-alienation, and Change' (note 40), 36-7.

[52] A good example of this position is Walter Kaufman's 'The Inevitability of Alienation', his introduction to Schacht's previously quoted volume, *Alienation*. For Kaufman, 'life without estrangement is scarcely worth living; what matters is to increase men's capacity to cope with alienation' (lvi).

[53] Schacht, *Alienation*, 155.

[54] Seymour Melman, *Decision-making and Productivity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958, 18, 165-6.

[55] Among the questions that Nettler put to a sample considered susceptible to 'alien orientation' were: 'Do you enjoy TV? What do you think of the new model of American automobiles? Do you read *Reader's Digest*? ... Do you like to participate in church activities? Do national spectator-sports (football, baseball) interest you?' ('A measure of alienation', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 22, no. 6 (December 1957), 675). He concluded that negative answers were evidence of alienation: 'there seems little doubt that this scale measures a dimension of estrangement from our society.'

[56] Ibid., 674. To prove his point, Nettler noted that 'to the question, "Would you just as soon live under another form of government as under our present one?" all responded with some indication of possibility and none with rejection' (674). He even went so far as to claim 'that alienation is related to creativity. It is hypothesized that creative scientists and artists ... are alienated individuals ... that alienation is related to altruism [and] that their estrangement leads to criminal behavior' (676-7).

[57] Melvin Seeman, 'On the Meaning of Alienation', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 24, no. 6 (December 1959), 783-91. In 1972 he added a sixth type to the list: 'cultural estrangement'. (See Melvin Seeman, 'Alienation and Engagement', in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse, eds., *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, New York: Russell Sage, 1972, 467-527.)

[58] Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, 15.

[59] Ibid., 3.

[60] Cf. Walter R. Heinz, 'Changes in the Methodology of Alienation Research', in Felix Geyer and Walter R. Heinz, *Alienation, Society and the Individual*, New Brunswick/London: Transaction, 1992, 217.

[61] See Felix Geyer and David Schweitzer, 'Introduction', in idem, eds., *Theories of Alienation* (note 39), xxi-xxii, and Felix Geyer, 'A General Systems Approach to Psychiatric and Sociological De-alienation', in Giora Shoham, ed. (note 40), 141.

[62] See Geyer and Schweitzer, 'Introduction', xx-xxi.

[63] David Schweitzer, 'Fetishization of Alienation: Unpacking a Problem of Science, Knowledge, and Reified Practices in the Workplace', in Felix Geyer, ed., *Alienation, Ethnicity, and Postmodernism*, Westport, Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 1996, 23.

[64] Cf. John Horton, 'The Dehumanization of Anomie and Alienation: a problem in the ideology of sociology', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. XV, no. 4 (1964), 283-300, and David Schweitzer, 'Fetishization of Alienation', 23.

[65] See Horton, 'Dehumanization'. This thesis is proudly championed by Irving Louis Horowitz in 'The Strange Career of Alienation: how a concept is transformed without permission of its founders', in Felix Geyer, ed. (note 63), 17-19. According to Horowitz, 'alienation is now part of the tradition in the social sciences rather than social protest. This change came about with a broadening realization that terms like *being alienated* are no more and no less value-laden than *being integrated*.' The concept of alienation thus 'became enveloped with notions of the human condition – ... a positive rather than a negative force. Rather than view alienation as framed by "estrangement" from a human being's essential nature as a result of a cruel set of industrial-capitalist demands, alienation becomes an inalienable right, a source of creative energy for some and an expression of personal eccentricity for others' (18).

[66] Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital', in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 9, New York: International Publishers, 1977, 202.

[67] Ibid., 203.

[68] *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* , *Revelations concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne and Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*.

[69] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin, 1993, 157. In another passage on alienation (158), we read: 'Rob the thing of this social power and you must give it to persons to exercise over persons.'

[70] Ibid., 461-2.

[71] Karl Marx, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', in idem, *Capital, Volume 1*, London: Penguin, 1976, 990.

[72] Ibid., 1058.

[73] Ibid., 1054.

[74] Ibid., 1005-6 (emphasis in the original).

[75] Ibid., 1007.

[76] Ibid., 1054 (emphasis in the original)

[77] Ibid., 1056.

[78] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 166.

[79] Ibid., 164-5.

[80] Cf. Schaff, *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon*, 81.

[81] *Capital, Volume 1* , 171.

[82] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, London: Penguin, 1981, 959.

[83] For reasons of space, a consideration of the unfinished and partly contradictory nature of Marx's sketch of a non-alienated society will have to be left to a future study.