Marx and Marxisms: New Horizons

THEORIES OF ALIENATION

FROM ROUSSEAU TO THE PRESENT

Christoph Henning

ROUTLEDGE

‘Alienation is a complex philosophical concept – and a manifest social reality. Christoph Henning’s eye-opening book strikingly succeeds in illuminating the one through the other. I can enthusiastically recommend it to anyone interested in social theory and philosophy’.

– **Hartmut Rosa**, *Director of the Max Weber Centre, University of Erfurt, and Professor of Sociology at the University of Jena*

‘Alienation is not only a problem of the capitalist organisation of work and production. Today, alienation also defines the societal relationship to politics and nature. Christoph Henning’s book therefore comes at the right time. It shows us how topical this central concept of social philosophy still is – and how important it is to rediscover its critical potential’.

– **Stefan Lessenich**, *Director of the Institute for Social Research, University of Frankfurt*

‘Alienation is not dead. In order to understand the deep crisis of today’s crisis of capitalism, it is necessary to comprehend the concept of alienation. This book offers what you all need to know’.

– **Kohei Saito**, *Prof. at Osaka University, Japan*

‘Just when you thought that nothing new could be said about alienation, Christoph Henning shows us how enduring and relevant a concept it is. His book is scholarly but with a profound relevance for the present. In an age of creeping AI and new generations dissociated by screens, Henning’s exploration of the concept of alienation reminds us to keep what is human squarely in view’.

– **Michael J. Thompson**, *Professor of Political Theory, William Paterson University, New Jersey*

‘A brilliant introduction to theories of alienation reaching back as far as the 18th century. Henning applies the concept persuasively and effortlessly to some of the most pertinent questions of current politics, popular culture, ecology or consumerism’.

– **Eva Maria Ziege**, *Professor of Political Sociology, University of Bayreuth*

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

Theories of Alienation

Theories of alienation had a long history, burgeoned since the 1960s, yet almost disappeared in recent decades – but in his book, Christoph Henning brings these theories back on the agenda, to better account for contemporary social pathologies. Feelings of estrangement, of not feeling at home in the world, in one's own body or surroundings, are widespread in contemporary societies. They go hand in hand with loneliness, with a burnout, with depression or with anger and hatred. But where do they come from, what do they signify?

Henning tracks theories of alienation from three different traditions: first, a conservative approach from Rousseau to Hartmut Rosa explains alienation with change and is based on nostalgia; second, a liberal approach from Simmel to Rahel Jaeggi relies on individual autonomy and explains it as a loss of control; and third, an Aristotelian approach from Humboldt to Marx or British idealism, based on theories of flourishing, relies on a perfectionist anthropology and critical social theory. In doing so, Henning vividly reconstructs these traditions with contemporary examples and excursions into the movies. *Theories of Alienation: From Rousseau to the Present* shines important new light on this important field of contemporary social philosophy and is very approachable to the general reader.

Christoph Henning is Chair for Philosophy and Humanism at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and an associated fellow at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt, Germany. He has published widely on social, political and economic philosophy, on Marxism, and the history of critical theory.

Marx and Marxisms: New Horizons
Edited by Marcello Musto

The peer-reviewed series *Marx and Marxisms: New Horizons* will comprise rigorous scholarly books, accessible to general readers, offering innovative and critical works in the field of Marx studies and Marxism. The series will publish monographs, edited collections, and translations of volumes already issued in other languages, by both prestigious and emerging international experts, in the fields of political theory, history of political thought, sociology, political philosophy, and heterodox economics. The books in this series will provide original investigations within the Marxist tradition, push the boundaries of accepted interpretations and existing literatures, bring different concepts and thinkers into new relationships, and inspire significant conversations for today. They will come from a wide range of academic disciplines, subject matters, political perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and geographical areas, producing an eclectic and informative collection that will appeal to a diverse and international audience.

Allende and Popular Unity
The Road to Democratic Socialism
Paula Vidal Molina and Ximena U. Odekerken

The New Reformism and the Revival of Karl Kautsky
The Renegade's Revenge
Douglas Greene

Theories of Alienation
From Rousseau to the Present
Christoph Henning

The Making of a Marxist Philosopher
A Memoir
Sean Sayers

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com/Marx-and-Marxisms/book-series/MM

Theories of Alienation

From Rousseau to the Present

Christoph Henning
Translated by Sylvie A. Martlew

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2025
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Henning, Christoph, 1973– author. | Martlew, Sylvie A., translator.
Title: Theories of alienation : from Rousseau to the present / Christoph Henning ; translated by Sylvie A. Martlew.
Other titles: Theorien der entfremdung zur einführung.
English Description: New York, NY : Routledge, [2025] | Series: Marx and Marxisms: new horizons | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024015980 (print) | LCCN 2024015981 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032761312 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032813608 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003499381 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Alienation (Social psychology)
Classification: LCC HM1131 .H4615 2025 (print) | LCC HM1131 (ebook) | DDC 302.5/4401—dc23/eng/20240527
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024015980
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024015981

ISBN: 978-1-032-76131-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-81360-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-49938-1 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003499381

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

1 Introduction

Speaking of alienation

What do we mean when we speak of alienation? To begin exploring this question, allow me to start with a few experiences from the world of modern employment. In an interview with a team of Swiss sociologists, a pharmaceutical worker describes her experiences of restructuring as follows:

> 'Things are being produced very poorly. Quantity is all that matters. Quality – not so much. They still talk about it, but they don't practise it any more. That's my impression, anyway'. *[Interviewer:] Yes. Could you elaborate a little? What does this mean in concrete terms?* 'Faster, faster, faster. You just don't – how can I put this? You just have to bottle it all in a single day, no matter how. They don't care that there will be a lot of rejects, defective goods, at the end of the day. They can live with that. As long as it all gets done'.
>
> (Schultheis 2010, 165; on the issue of acceleration, see chapter 10)

The changes of the past decades have led to a situation in which this individual no longer identifies fully with her work, which – as she stated previously – has also become increasingly physically taxing. It was observations such as this which once prompted Karl Marx to decry the alienation of workers from their labour and its products (see Chapter 6).

Example number two: A temporary firefighter from the United States reports:

> 'I don't want to do anything that would risk a regular job. There are plenty of other guys that would take that job, including the other temp guys. . . . I'm just not going to risk it. Shut up and put up with it I guess'.
>
> (Halbesleben/Clark 2010, 538f.)

Subcontracted and temporary work has surged over the past decades. Even though those involved in it have every reason to complain, they are under such enormous pressure that they never voice their dissatisfaction. According to Halbesleben/Clark, they have little say in their work and barely maintain any social contacts. 'The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003499381-1

in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home' (Marx, MECW 4, 274). Although certain authors claim that the criticism of alienation only applied to the dark factory halls of the nineteenth century (see Chapter 7), these experiences remain widespread – even in places where, to quote Hochschild (1997), *work becomes home and home becomes work*.

A nanny recently interviewed by Arlie Hochschild, for instance, reports that 'her' family (her employer), in whose house she spends more than ten hours every day, remunerates her well but barely pays her any attention. She carries out a social activity that specifically fails to provide her with any fulfilling social contacts:

> I'm invisible to them. I'll be in a room bustling about and they won't be aware I'm there. I'm sensitive to moods, and if I sense tension, I disappear. Mostly, though, I'm in the room and they don't see me. Neither do their guests.
>
> (Hochschild 2012, 159)

My fourth example illustrates that this phenomenon is not limited to 'exceptions' such as temporary workers or nannies. A study from Turkey has shown that even well-paid bankers often feel alienated:

> The results of the research proved that the white-collar employees experience a medium-level alienation, which is a significantly high level for a sector in which highly-educated people work and are paid well when compared to the market. The primarily triggering factors of the result are the banks' level of being mechanical, work routine, work simplicity and the human relations in the workplace.
>
> (Cetin et al. 2009, 125)

Such experiences are far from isolated aspects of certain forms of work, which could be avoided if absolutely necessary. They have an impact on the worker's entire identity and, as such, on the social relationships of a society as a whole. Teresa Brennan has coined the term 'bioderegulation' to describe the effect of 'unbounded' types of work, which blur the boundary between life and work, and the politics of deregulation on mental and physical health. The acceleration of production processes leads to an excessive exploitation not only of nature but also of human nature; this is exacerbated by the continuous dismantling of rest and protection zones (free time and spaces and social-security services).[1]

Research into such experiences of alienation abounds: a study from the Niger Delta explores the impact of resilience on the extent to which experiences of alienation cause symptoms of stress and, as such, impact well-being (Ifeagwazi 2015); a doctoral thesis from India focuses on the specific alienation experiences of Indian call centre workers (Nair/Vohra 2012); a Russian sociologist has applied the Middleton scale, an American research instrument from the 1960s which correlates characteristics of social deprivation with experiences of

alienation, on the current situation in Russia and Kazakhstan (Lytkina 2015); and a German author has described her experiences as a wage slave for Amazon in a schizoid manner (splitting the 'working self' off the 'narrating self'; Geißler 2014). The omnipresence of such reports has brought the topic back into the media spotlight, too:

> Again, there is an increasingly widespread sense of alienation these days – be that alienation at work, in love or in life itself. We are, once more, allowed to talk about the social conditions required for a satisfying life.
>
> (Weber 2010)

All these examples underscore three things. *Firstly*, the topic of alienation is far from outdated. It is, in fact, of growing importance – no matter how much dyed-in-the-wool theorists may scoff at this (on critiques of alienation critique, see Chapters 4, 7 and 9). *Secondly*, experiences of alienation are not a region-specific phenomenon limited to greying metropolitan elites: they are an increasingly global problem that transcends social classes. And, *thirdly*, the topic of alienation is no longer the exclusive domain of philosophers. Nonetheless, the basic terminology and concepts you will encounter in this context and this book comes from a certain arsenal of philosophical texts (such as the works of Rousseau, Hegel and Marx). Before we delve deep into the depths of these ramified studies, then, let us arm ourselves with a general definition of alienation in the philosophical sense.

A heuristic model of alienation

To gain an in-depth grasp of alienation, we must understand two separate dimensions of the phenomenon. Only the combination of these dimensions fully encapsulates the specific, modern experience which the theory of alienation seeks to describe and, usually, change. The first dimension is generalisable, representing underlying anthropological aspects which we can just as well find in other cultures and other periods. The second dimension is historically specific, explicitly characterising the modern world it aims to critique. The first dimension forms the 'anthropology of expression'; the second, more specific dimension is a theory of modern society referring to the former. On their own, these dimensions cannot adequately explain what could possibly be so problematic about alienation. Examples of such a trivialisation of alienation can refer to either dimension if the respective other is missing.[2] Let us have a closer look.

The anthropology of expression is best explained through the prefix 'ex'.[3] Expression brings something that was 'inside' to the outside, albeit possibly in a different form. This semantics of the internal and external is central to the theory of alienation. Marx speaks of 'externalisation' and of things becoming 'external' to us (MECW 3, 274); a century later, David Riesman (1950) describes the 'other-directed', in other words, externally directed, character. Clearly, the

experience of being 'outside oneself' is relevant to the discussion – but not just because of this externality. Externalisation alone, moving from the inside to the outside, does not yet constitute alienation. In most cases, it is followed by a process of appropriation: a re-internalisation. If both occur in the right way, this indicates successful development. The subject which has externalised itself and then reappropriated its externalisation is not the same it was before. It develops and self-cultivates during the ongoing process of self-externalisation and re-internalisation of the externalised (on Humboldt, see Chapter 3). Simple examples can illustrate this concept well, such as a *feeling*, a *poem* and a *gift*.

When somebody experiences an emotion, they can express this feeling: for instance, through a facial (such as a smile) or a verbal expression (e.g. 'I am so happy'). This externalised expression does not exist detached from the person who has expressed it: they can reappropriate their expression. One might say, then, that I can only recognise my own *feeling* by externalising it; that my expression gives form to an unspecific sensation, allowing me to categorise it as a specific feeling. Perhaps, someone else 'mirrors' my jollity back to me. Mirrored and, as such, shared joy is a good way of imagining the reclamation of one's own, expressed joy.

A similar process occurs when I write a *poem* for somebody. In this case, it is even clearer that the expressed material is 'external' – it is no longer 'inside' my head or heart but instead *on* a sheet of paper *in front of* me – but still retains or represents something that is internal to me. As such, it is not truly 'external' to me. I am not indifferent to it. How does reappropriation work here? I might rediscover this poem by chance, years later. This allows me to relate to a stage of my life that I would otherwise not be able to access with quite the same intensity. The past once again becomes a part of my 'internal' life, and this precise effect is an important aspect of writing about oneself.

Of course, I can also get a reaction to my poem from the person for whom I wrote it. If this person is happy to receive the poem and expresses their joy, this will constitute a successful interaction from which I 'get something back' again. Or perhaps, the reaction is not quite as approving, and I am made to understand that I had better give chocolates in future. What I get back is not identical to that which I initially expressed nor is the expressed identical with what I initially felt. Nonetheless, this process can be captured as a cyclical model in which subjects externalise something and re-internalise it in a changed form.[4] While passing through this cycle, the subjects reflect on themselves (through the lens of meaningful objects and other people) and develop – in other words, they 'self-cultivate' or 'perfect' themselves.

To reveal the connection between the experience of alienation and the political economy, which emerges in the works of Rousseau and steadily gains in importance over time, let us consider the final example, a *gift*. Imagine I am devoting an evening to cooking for someone and inviting a few additional guests. My

activity creates an experience of sociability which 'contains' me in two ways: firstly, it exhibits my specific ability (whether I am a good cook); secondly, it expresses my affection for the person (externalised in a legible and edible form). I must sacrifice my time and prepare a meal that suits the recipient's taste, which reveals a certain attention to this person. The aspect of reappropriation is clear in this example: it primarily takes place through the shared meal. It would be 'strange' if I weren't allowed to join. But I do not only get my pasta back by eating it: through the shared evening, the lasting connection with the other diners and the potential of a reciprocal invitation, that which I have externalised comes back to me. My externalisation contributes something to the world; at the same time, something changes for me.

The above illustrates two things. *Firstly*, the notion of considering human practices as instances of expression is not problematic in and of itself. Externalising oneself in this manner not only is inevitable but can also be downright pleasant – because of the creative activity itself as well as the returned results. (This idea incorporates the concept of 'ecstasy', literally 'standing outside oneself', the sensation of being 'exuberant', 'beside oneself' or in a state of 'flow'.) *Secondly*, it is not a specifically modern phenomenon. Rather, entire cultures can be understood through it. The 'Gods of Greece', to borrow Schiller's words, may be thought of as a catalogue of emotions in which the entire range of human feelings (a god of wrath, a goddess of love, etc.) was spread out 'before' humankind. By reappropriating this self-reflection through religious practice, then, humans were able to maintain relationships with themselves, albeit subconsciously (an idea of Feuerbach's, see Chapter 5.) The Marxist philosopher Agnes Heller develops an axiom of values from this notion: 'The highest value lies in the ability of individuals to appropriate the abundance of the species' (Heller 1972, 9). 'The abundance of the species' refers to the objectification and, simultaneously, development of human abilities.

If this externalisation is not a problem in and of itself, when and how does alienation occur? Alienation occurs when one's relationship with the goals which one has set oneself is no longer intact, when that which is really a part of the identitary or cultural cycle can no longer be recognised as part of one's self and, consequently, can no longer be appropriated in any material or meaningful way. 'Alienation is a failure to apprehend, and a halting of, the movement of appropriation' (Jaeggi 2014, 1), it is a 'disturbed relation of appropriation' (151; see chapter 9).[5] Only in this case does the temporary condition of being outside oneself become a permanent state. The external *remains* external, thus becoming something alien. Of course, this externality can grow and achieve outstanding qualities – the problem does not lie with the quality of the externalised as much as it does with the lack of appropriation thereof. In Georg Simmel's words, this criticism applies to 'subjective' rather than 'objective' culture as such (see Chapter 7, also Chapter 2).

A variety of factors can cause such a disturbance, such a halting in an alienated state: it may be brought upon by violence from a third party, by a lack of understanding on the part of the individual or by practical constraints.[6] For now, it is important to note that the process of alienation is connected with a failure to reappropriate something one has made – a disturbed backflow. Just a few decades ago, this diagnosis of humans' alienation from themselves and their environment was one of the most widely discussed topics both in social philosophy and among the wider public. Even vastly different intellectual movements and culture producers appeared to agree that there was a certain 'uneasiness' (Sigmund Freud), a sense of not being at home in the anonymous, mechanised world of late modernity.

The world of film visualises many such feelings of uneasiness: people learn that they are really someone or something other than they thought they were, that they are 'actually' clones, robots or computer programmes or that what they had experienced as reality up to that point had been an elaborate simulation operated by a large machine (e.g. the 'Matrix' or the CIA).[7] Their existence prior to this discovery becomes little more than a sham with which they can no longer fully identify, while tensions develop between their actual existence and the world. In less culture-critical versions, the 'heroes' (normally, losers and ugly ducklings) suddenly find that they are 'actually' superheroes or gods. But this, too, turns their existing reality into an alien situation in which the heroes are forced to play mere roles. Such stories subtly express a tendency towards alienation by showing that the detached idealisation of modern life, which also exists in the second realities of the digital world, not only fails to overcome but, indeed, exacerbates alienation from real human life.

Reasons for the inflation in alienation diagnoses

As mentioned earlier, the fields of psychology, literary studies, philosophy and, above all, sociology produced an immense volume of research into alienation until about 1980. Relevant anthologies from the 1970s can fill metres and metres of shelves. As early as 1959, the US sociologist Melvin Seeman observed: 'The problem of alienation is a pervasive theme in the classics of sociology, and the concept has a prominent place in contemporary work' (Seeman 1959, 360f.). In the 1970s, this trend had already sparked concerns that the term of alienation was being used indiscriminately to describe any problem (Bronfenbrenner 1973). This may well be a reason behind the intermittent lull in interest in the topic. As we have seen, however, examples of human self-alienation have been making a return to the public consciousness lately. There has been an increase in depression and burn-out phenomena (see Chapter 9), even suicides, which seem to be connected with new forms of work and upbringing (especially drastic in Japan and China). The global financial crisis has resulted in 'alienation' of humans from their elites and institutions and in the continued abuse and pollution of

natural resources (just think of the ever-increasing size of modern cars), despite the seemingly universal awareness of the environmental and climate crisis. The time has come, then, to reclaim this term philosophically. First of all, we must understand why it was once used to such an inflationary extent. One should have learned from one's past failures by the time the game begins anew (Yuill 2011). How might this inflation have come about?

Those speaking of alienation wish to state that something which was not 'alien' before has become 'alien' to humans. How can such a diagnosis become universal? Can anything 'own' be perceived as alien? There are four reasons why such a generalisation may occur. It may, *firstly*, refer to a specific social phenomenon that has become universal. In this context, Adorno spoke of a 'universal delusional context of reification' (Adorno GS 7, 252) and a 'total social delusion' (Adorno GS 4, 235, see chapter 8). If capitalism causes all-pervading alienation, as Marxist theory believes to be the case (chapter 6), this may be due to the fact that the capitalist 'land grab' seamlessly engulfs all aspects of society today (health, pensions, transportation, upbringing, education, culture, etc.). This is a bold hypothesis. It is also flawed inasmuch as one could not be *aware* of all-encompassing alienation – if it were known, it would not be all-encompassing. Nonetheless, some authors speak of the 'totalitarian rule' of new capitalism (Rosa 2012, 284).

Secondly, the term of alienation may summarise something that is universal because it is a part of human nature. This would also make it irrevocable, which means that this position must be perceived as a critique of the first. The second hypothesis portrays a phenomenon which appears to be predominantly historical and, as such, insurmountable as natural (Chapter 7). From this perspective, it is unsurprising that alienation occurs everywhere; it may, in fact, be immune to criticism for this very reason. The pedagogue Jürgen Hüllen argues: 'The existing human always lags behind his own idea of a true human; the term "human" implies an anthropological difference' (1982, 9). Hüllen, therefore, detects alienation in works as early as Plato and the Bible, so the concept loses its historical and social–theoretical index. We will encounter a related position when discussing Hegel, who believes that alienation constitutes a necessary cognitive process on the path to education and self-awareness (Chapter 4).

Thirdly, we might, as a critical reaction to the first and the second interpretation, point out that the semantic scope of the term 'alienation' is too vast to capture anything specific. If it merely refers to the possibility of something becoming alien, virtually anything can become alien to anyone and vice versa – this alone does not make for a theory. All we need to define such a relation is two poles, and the distance from one pole to the other is called 'alienation'. If a philosophy consists exclusively of the world and God, for example, I can either exist in the world and be alienated from God or exist in God and be alienated from the world (as in Meister Eckhart, see Nicolaus 1995, 19f.). A similar scenario can be constructed with sensuality and reason, subject and object and

any other conceivable philosophical dualism. Those who prefer a more profane example may imagine a person torn between two lovers. The problem with this excessively broad interpretation is as follows: it does not allow for a point of *non-alienation* – except that very brief moment of indifference in the middle of the two poles. Diderot, for example, speaks of this 'happy moment' (Thomä 2013, 192). But if brief moments of indecision and transition were the only conceivable instances of non-alienation, the theory of alienation would lose its secure footing in a strong opposite of alienation. Such a broad term would encompass all sorts of ideas: it could describe the sale of an object as well as a sin, a post-natal problem between mother and child as well as an 'outlaw' who has become estranged from their own community through deviant behaviour.

Because of this breadth of meaning, the former omnipresence of the word can also be interpreted in a *fourth* way, from a discourse-analytical perspective. At the heyday of alienation theory, issues in global politics imbued the discussion with a significance that few other philosophical topics have enjoyed. This does not mean that the described subject was 'universal'; it means that historical reasons favoured the philosophical *broadening* of the topic. Why was this the case? Although philosophers already deliberated over alienation in the eighteenth century (before the noun had even been coined), it was Marx who elevated it to a major topic – or, rather, the posthumous publication of his *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844, in which he develops his theory of alienation, in 1932 (Musto 2021). At the time, Marxian communism had already become a global force and, through Stalin, revealed its repressive and violent side to the world. This prompted many progressive intellectuals sympathetic to Marx ideas to turn away from this form of government (their own had become alien to them) and towards other aspects of his theory. The homeless thinkers were looking for guidance – alienation theory offered refuge.

But even within Marxism, this theory was controversial: while one school of thought, which included Louis Althusser's influential works, argued that the later Marx had departed from his anthropological origins (and, as such, the subject of alienation), others such as the 'Freudo-Marxist' Erich Fromm and the 'Weber Marxist' Georg Lukács believed that Marx's later works on political economy had still been motivated by his earlier approaches. This theoretical diversity followed a transparent logic: the topic of alienation excellently represented the predominant, contrasting world views of the time. It gave a philosophical expression to the systematic opposition of communism versus the bourgeoisie, so one could criticise the bourgeois world in the name of alienation, as Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School did. Alternatively, one could take a stance against communism by arguing either that alienation, being rooted in human nature, is irrevocable or that, albeit a specifically modern phenomenon, it is not limited to economics (as a frequent misunderstanding of Marx's theory claimed) but equally present in politics and administration. Max Weber (1918) already elaborated that the aspects of the capitalist economy which Marx had

criticised (the 'separation of the labourer from the means of labour') were present in all kinds of modern institutions (Weber cites universities and the army). The bourgeois state may well have found a better solution to this problem than the communist one!

This topic could be extended back to Hegel: either, one would highlight Marx's dependency on Hegel and argue that Marx had essentially been a bourgeois thinker (and socialism had been based on an error) or one would refer to Hegel's criticism of capitalism and argue that Hegel himself had, in essence, been an early proponent of socialism (cf. Henning 2014: 327ff.). As a result, the topic of alienation was not the exclusive domain of Marxist writers – be they loyal to the system or 'Western Marxist' dissidents – but even attracted inveterate conservatives, such as Ernst Nolte (1952), Günter Rohrmoser (1961) and Arnold Gehlen (1952).

After all, the concept allowed even the dissident left to cite Marx when airing their grievances about real socialism: alienation facilitated a form of internal criticism of socialism that appears in Herbert Marcuse's work from the 1930s and 1940s just as much as in Eastern European practical philosophy from the 1970s. On the other hand, it enabled the more radical ultra-Marxists to distance themselves from this exact criticism, which they perceived as too soft and to 'humanist'. The latter stance, paradigmatically exemplified by Louis Althusser, constituted a radical bid to 'outdo' Marxism and can still be seen in the works of Michel Foucault. Anyone who studies the discussion about alienation, then, will inevitably be dealing with a sizeable chunk of contemporary history.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall – and the preceding weariness on this side of the Iron Curtain – the topic of alienation lost its global political sounding board. The long crisis of Marxism has also tempered the debate about alienation theory.[8] Since the 1980s, postmodernist anti-essentialism has even cast philosophical doubt on the possible opposites of alienation (such as authenticity, autonomy and self-realisation). Anyone seeking to attract the attention of their peers nowadays is better advised to write about speculative materialism, postcolonialism and intersectionality. Of course, this says nothing about the subject itself. Whether or not experiences of alienation still exist does not depend on how trendy the topic currently is. The question can only be answered empirically.[9] Within empiricism, however, there is a problem needing to be solved.

A problem: do you need to know that you are alienated in order to be alienated?

Can we speak of alienation if those affected do not personally describe their experience as one of alienation? This age-old dispute goes back to the relationship between a thing and talking *about* this thing: Does the existence of alienative experiences depend on the existence of a discourse about alienation? And what would it mean for these experiences if their interpretation as alienation

were, in theory, no longer 'chic'? Can they still be objectively identified as alienation or would this be nothing but condescending paternalism of which newer, benevolent 'critical theories' ought to steer clear?

It is a difficult question, as both possible answers are problematic: old-guard Marxists may say that one does not need to be aware of one's alienation to be considered alienated ('The propertied class . . . feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement', MECW 4, 36). If we follow Adorno and assume that the 'delusional context' is universal, this means that one *cannot* know about one's own alienation – otherwise, one would only be *partially* alienated. From this point of view, making a diagnosis of alienation dependent on the affected individual's awareness of their condition is futile, as this would overlook most of the relevant phenomena. To exaggerate slightly, this tradition only deems 'alienated' those who have sold their birthright for a pottage of lentils (e.g. in Fromm 1941). They read the wrong newspapers, listen to the wrong music (thoughtless 'trash' pre-manufactured for them by the 'culture industry', Adorno GS 3, 141), quite possibly vote for the wrong politicians as a result and, on the whole, affirm the catastrophic conditions of society. They do this despite being unhappy about it all. Because they do not understand their situation (they lack the 'insight into the possibility and the ability to shape our conditions of life'; Jaeggi 2018, 385), these people can only find pre-reflective ways of relieving their frustration: they become 'authoritarian personalities', engage in violence or drown their sorrows. If their situation escalates, they find a scapegoat at which to direct their anger; they turn into nationalists and chauvinists. Were a diagnosis to depend on their 'awakening' (as Walter Benjamin put it) and acceptance of their diagnosis, it would no longer be possible to criticise any of it. Indeed, their alienation is expressed by the very fact that they *do not* do this (e.g. the fact that so many German workers in the Weimar Republic voted for nationalism).

From this point of view, then, 'alienation' must be diagnosed from the perspective of an observer; it is necessary to 'break with the . . . self-understanding of the agents' (Celikates 2018, 12). To the young Marx, the proletariat represented the 'total loss of humanity': it is a class that 'has a universal character by its universal suffering', because 'no *particular wrong* but *wrong generally* is perpetrated against it' (MECW 3, 186). Universal suffering and a total loss of humanity – this might mean that those affected would have to be liberated from the outside, which Leninist parties of a new type practised by merely 'imputing' (Lukács 1923, 73, see chapter 8) class consciousness to the proletariat. Such condescending opinions of work have a long philosophical tradition. Believing that work culturally degrades humans, Aristotle excluded workers from the citizenry, and David Hume concluded as early as the eighteenth century: 'poverty and hard labour debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession' (Hume 1742: I.XXI.3; see Adam Smith in chapter 6).

From this observer perspective, a judgment – albeit a well-intentioned one – is passed on people without giving them a say in the matter. An earlier critic expressed this as follows: 'Many assertions of "alienation" are simply and accurately described as contentions that members of some "problem" groups are at odds with the spokesman's value orientation' (Lee 1972, 123; Zima 2014, 3). This would be paternalistic. Now, some forms of paternalism are *justifiable* (for instance, in child-rearing or medicine). Paternalism must be criticised especially when it cannot be justified – for instance, when it is based on a metaphysical assumption that not everyone shares. Any statements about the 'true nature' of humans, critics argue, are precisely such metaphysical claims: in reality, we do not have epistemic access to such dimensions (Jaeggi 2014, 25ff.).

Later critical theory concludes that we must no longer confront people with *contextual* diagnoses which they may not endorse. The more abstract 'criticism of a new type' (Jaeggi 2018, 241) only seeks to establish forms of life in which humans can articulate such criticism themselves. But does that not imply that people who do not do so live 'unreasonably'? The claim might be as follows: 'although people must do it themselves, we first need to *enable* them to do so'. Would that not be just as patronising as Lenin's theory of the party, whose pitfalls one seeks to escape (and which gives rise to the 'new type')? This approach transfers the problem to a higher level of abstraction without solving it: instead of a contextual empirical criticism of social conditions, it merely points out (and does so almost transcendentally) necessary lifestyle conditions of any possible criticism, leaving everything else to those affected.

If we only identify alienation in cases where people *know* that they are alienated, the diagnosis of alienation is no longer paternalistic, as it can be recognised and criticised from the inside. It is, essentially, in the word itself: alien-ation means that something becomes alien to you. But to become alien to me in the first place, this thing cannot always have been alien to me; rather, I must still know 'the other' (Anders 1956, 128). Anyone who knows how things may be can recognise that something is not right in our current age. Before Lenin, Marxism believed in the 'historical initiative' (MECW 6, 515) of the oppressed ('no class can free him but his own' Brecht wrote). While this does not sound quite as other-directed, it has a different flaw: in this version, the theory loses its elucidating character and, as such, its meaning. If the theory can only be articulated when the others already know that it applies, it is no longer needed. What seeks to avoid theoretical paternalism ultimately affects the theory itself. The predictable reaction from the first stream would be that one loses sight of all the phenomena of alienation for which one *cannot* always presuppose total human self-transparency.

This gives us the unpleasant choice between two not particularly attractive options: either speak on behalf of others, paternalistically, or trust in the nature of others, thus narrowing the scope of the subject and making the theory superfluous. In this context, it is interesting to note that Gayatri Spivak finds

herself trapped in the same conundrum in her famous essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*: rather than applying Western theoretical language on non-Western contexts, postcolonial studies specifically intended to mark the other conditions in their otherness. Some Western devotees of the field concluded that they were no longer allowed to speak on behalf of these others (which made their own theories, such as that of alienation, superfluous) but ought to let them speak for themselves. Spivak disagrees with this: in her view, simply burdening subalterns with the responsibility of looking after themselves politically and intellectually neglects their actual situation of oppression, exploitation and marginalisation. The effect of the post-structuralistically inspired self-abandonment of critical vocabulary on the part of Western intellectuals, she argues, is an inappropriately naïve way of looking at complex, global situations. Ironically, it leads to desolidarisation in the name of post-colonialism.[10]

It seems prudent, then, to find a third way of grasping alienation that avoids both extremes. One does not need a clear *awareness* of being alienated in order to be called 'alienated'. But we should not haphazardly apply the term to everyone, regardless of whether those affected agree or not. The middle position states that those affected must, at least, be *affected*: they must suffer from something for the diagnosis to be sound. Marx, too, presupposed a state of suffering when he wrote that the alienated worker 'does not feel content but unhappy' in his work (MECW 3, 274; see the 'universal suffering' above). In a situation of diffuse discontent, the theory of alienation is a *proposed interpretation*, which may be able to explain the suffering theoretically while, at the practical level, channelling the individual's distaste for it.[11] We cannot consider every type of suffering a candidate for alienation; the diagnosis ought to apply only to those incarnations of suffering that can reasonably be connected with societal factors.[12] Without any actual suffering, however, the theory lacks concrete evidence. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have expressed this quite elegantly (more on them in chapter 9):

> The formulation of a critique presupposes a bad experience prompting protest. . . . Without this prior emotional – almost sentimental – reaction, no critique can take off. On the other hand, it is a long way from the spectacle of suffering to articulated critique; critique requires a theoretical fulcrum and an argumentative rhetoric to give voice to individual suffering and translate it into terms that refer to the common good.
>
> (Boltanski/Chiapello 2005, 36)

This reliance on socially induced suffering as an indicator of alienation should, hopefully, dispel any accusations of *paternalism*. The theory does not wish to patronise anyone; rather, it offers a well-meaning interpretation that seeks to help the affected help themselves. (There is no need to ascend to ever higher levels of abstraction, either. Instead, we identify the problem at the level where it actually exists: the concrete.) We will see that such suffering and the intention

of theoretical help facilitating practical self-help are indeed paramount in most cases. This brings us, then, to our historical overview outlining the most important stages of thinking about alienation, from Rousseau up until the present day. We will begin with the predecessors of the actual theory.

Historical backgrounds

The term 'alienation' only acquired a systematic philosophical meaning in the eighteenth century (Chapter 2). As most languages commonly use the term 'alien', it comes as no surprise that the corresponding process, 'alienate', and the state of 'alienation' had already occurred in earlier philosophical, theological and political works. While the various incarnations of the lexeme are not truly connected at this stage (much like the derivations of a word such as 'proximity' – approximate, proximal, etc. – do not constitute a philosophical subject in its own right), we must know its different associative spaces in order to understand the later debates, as they will continue to play a role. Structured thematically rather than chronologically, we can delineate several motifs.

The *first* category, externalisation or disposal in the sense of selling, goes back to Aristotle: 'By "disposing of it" I mean giving it away or selling it' (*Rhetoric* 1361A 22). To this day, 'disposal' is a common term in business. Metaphorically speaking, something moves from the inside (for instance, the warehouse) to the outside (the customers), to an alien place. Two observations can be made here: firstly, this spatial relationship between the inside and the outside has been part of the philosophical vocabulary since Rousseau and Marx – when something 'becomes external' to us (when we no longer have an 'internal' connection to it: e.g. a ritual that seems shallow to us), it has, in this sense, become alienated. Consequently, there is an obvious connection between the act of selling something (or being sold) and the process of alienation; economic theory still recognised this in twentieth century (Titmuss 1970). This notion becomes particularly virulent when the process of 'being externalised' is applied to *rights*, as is already the case in Hugo Grotius' state theory. It begs the question of whether there ought to be *inalienable rights* (Hegel 1821, § 29).

And it leads us to the *second* associative space, that is, that which is alien: the alienness attached to the sold product, indeed, the concept of trading itself, can be extended to the subject, that is, the trader. Often, this person will find themselves in an alien place for the purpose of conducting their business, or they come from an alien place. 'In the whole history of business, the stranger appears everywhere as a dealer' (Simmel 1908, 765). 'In Aristotle, *allotrios* refers to those excluded from the commerce and law of the polis; in the Vulgate, it describes those excluded from the community of the people of Israel' (Ritz 1972, 510; from Aristotle, *Politics* 1268a 40, and *Ephesians* 2.12; cf. Schacht 1994, 38). This constitutes a deliberate exclusion of people who could just as well have been included. Take, for example, Job, whose family expels him for

his illness: 'My relatives have failed me, . . . My breath is strange to my wife, and I am a stench to the children of my own mother' (Job 19:14 and 19:17, ESV). In an even more religious context, this social exclusion was applied to sectarians and heretics who had gone astray from what those excluding them believed to be the 'true' teachings: 'They [the heathens] are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God' (Ephesians 4:18, ESV). Illustrating such rhetoric further, Ritz (1972, 511) cites Athanasius and Augustine, while Trebess (2001, 7) refers to Luther and Calvin's accusations of alienation levelled at their respective opponents within Christendom. Erich Fromm (1955, 108ff.) identifies this strategy in situations as early as those of the prophets, who claimed that their contemporaries had strayed from their own origins.

Alienation as estrangement from the true doctrine, that is, that which others perceive as 'normal', can, *thirdly*, be understood in a secular sense: as mental confusion, *alienatio mentalis* (Ritz 1972, 511f., cites Origines and Thomas Aquinas to illustrate this), a concept later developed in the medical field by, for example, Philippe Pinel (1745–1826). Alternatively, the reverse interpretation may be applied, and this becomes relevant when we turn to the 'positive' theories of alienation from anthropology and sociology: here, that from which one becomes alienated in such a process is itself the alien, the ungodly.

In this *fourth* sense, then, alienation refers to the liberation of humans or, rather, their soul from their 'confinement within the deceptive life of humans in this world, separated from salvation', as goes the gnostic development of a notion that later returns as an 'ecstatic dissolution of the physical senses' in the context of mysticism (Ritz 1972, 511). Ritz refers to the first *German-language* use of the corresponding term (*Entfremdung*) in Meister Eckhart: 'To be hearing the voice of God within me, I must be estranged from all that which is mine, and the strange must be right for me' ('Eyâ, sol ich nu daz sprechen gotes in mir vernemen, sô muoz ich alse gar entfremdet sin von allem dem, daz min ist, recht als mir daz fremde ist'[13]).

This constitutes a revaluation of alienation: it is interpreted as positive because that in which humans believe to be at home is not *truly* home. This interpretation, however, also infuses the term with a dualism whose two poles inevitably repel each other. To understand the alienation debates of the twentieth century, most of which also involved a negotiation of Marxism, it is important to know that Karl Marx himself has been accused of Gnostic thought (e.g. by Eric Voegelin, Jacob Taubes and Hans-Dieter Kittsteiner). These parallels were drawn on a foundation of alienation: much like the Gnostics sought to escape this world (therefore, refusing to hold it in any esteem), Marxism, too, assumededly developed a cloud-cuckoo-land by attempting critically to tear down everything that is bourgeois and traditional (see Chapter 6). This must, however, be understood as a failed re-theologisation of secular topics: after all, Marx did not aim to escape the mortal world but to overcome experiences of alienation within it.

We will encounter many such historical, pre-systematic uses of the word in the following chapters. Let us, then, turn to the relevant discussion in the eighteenth century.

Notes

1 'In sum: in the increasing time given to work, there is an attempt to keep pace with the accelerating speed of production. But, just as that pace outstrips the ability of nature to reproduce or sustain itself, so too does it press human beings to their limits' (Brennan 2003, 22). Marx spoke of alienation from the 'species' (Chapter 6). On acceleration, also see Rosa (2013, 124ff., see Chapter 10).

2 Plessner, for instance, articulates an anthropological model but does not fully take the situation of modern capitalism into account. On the other hand, Simmel's 'positive' theory of alienation is based on capitalist models of exchange, but he fails to pay attention to the preceding production (i.e., the externalisation). More on this in Chapter 7.

3 'Expressivism' has been elaborated in some detail by Charles Taylor (*Hegel* 1975, 28ff.) and, more recently, authors such as Matthias Jung, but it has rarely been connected to alienation.

4 Wilhelm Dilthey spoke of experience (*Erleben*), expression (*Ausdruck*) and understanding (*Verstehen*).

5 On the concept of 'appropriation', I recommend the relevant entry in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* (volume 1, ed.: Karlheinz Barck et al., Stuttgart 2000). There is a tension between the economic and the aesthetic meaning, which is also stressed by Rosa (2019).

6 Candidates for such practical constraints are, for instance, the excessive complexity of differentiated modernity, isolation of humans in large cities and by modern media, all-encompassing bureaucratisation, the capitalist forms of distributing money and trade and the pressures of wage labour, the industrially pre-manufactured patterns of consumption that have detached us from our authentic needs, and the all-too-liberal culture which questions traditional relations without being able to produce new ones.

7 For example, Claude Faraldo's *Themroc* (1973), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *World on a Wire* (1973), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), Jonathan Mostow's *Surrogates* (2009) and Joseph Kosinski's *Oblivion* (2013). The following sections will refer to individual films for clarification.

8 Still, the International Sociological Association has a Research Committee on Alienation Theory and Research to this day. See: www.isa-sociology.org/rc36.htm.

9 Yuill (2011, 109) emphasises that 'just because scholarly interest in a particular social process diminishes does not mean that the objective existence and experience of that process also comes to an end'. Rather, 'alienative conditions are possibly more prevalent today than they were in the 1960s and 1970s' (105; see chapter 8).

10 'According to Foucault and Deleuze . . . the oppressed . . . *can speak and know their conditions*' (Spivak 1988, 78). But: 'Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the *international* division of labour, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other' (84). 'The subaltern cannot speak. There is not virtue in a global laundry list with "woman" as a pious item' (104). Today, these very 'subalterns' have published very exciting literature themselves (e.g., in Dasan et al. 2012). On alienation in the Indian context, see Chapter 10.

11 'However, we should not think that the individual has explicitly to experience a sense of alienation to be alienated. While the individual's subjective perception plays a part, alienation is not solely dependent on her or his subjective perception' (Rae 2010, 28).
12 'With its potential to articulate how human suffering and self-estrangement emerge out of particular relationships between people, their social structures and nature, alienation theory provided sociologists with a useful tool on a variety of levels' (Yuill 2011, 103).
13 Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, Pfeiffer (ed.) 1857, 257, cited in Ritz (1972, 512). On Meister Eckhart and gnosis, also see Nicolaus (1995, 20), Hüllen (1982, 25ff.) and Rotenstreich (1989, 3ff).