

Marx's Concept of Alienation: With a Brief Assessment

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Since the collapse of Euro-Communism in 1989, the ideas of Marx have largely been discarded as little more than historical relics. There is a good reason for the neglect. The governments that Marxism spawns are among the most brutal in history. Equally condemnable for a philosopher who bases his theory on a science of historical development, most of Marx's key predictions turn out to be incorrect. What then is left of Marx's principles? This paper argues that Marx is best understood as a critic of the injustice of industrial societies. Marx's essential critical concept is alienation. The paper presents the first complete analysis of Marx's treatment of alienation and offers a brief assessment of how this concept applies to our time.

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1. To Marx or not to Marx

“‘Alienation’ has become a prominent... theme in current appraisals of man's situation... These appraisals... refer to the early writings of Marx in which ‘alienation’... is a central concept,” writes Easton (1961, 193). Murchland goes further, claiming that, “alienation is central to contemporary speculation about man and his place in the world” (1971, 3). According to Horowitz, Marx “opened... the Pandora's box... of alienation” (1966, 234). During the early 21st century's economic turmoil, people on the left, right, and center seemed alienated from political processes and societal forces.

Scholars have become alienated from Marx. “Marxism as a political ideology is dead,” writes Adamson before the remarkable disintegration of Euro-communism (1985, 1). Carver writes: “The collapse of the Soviet Empire... had profound consequences in the world of ideas... Marx is no longer... the theorist of the proletarian revolution” (Carver 1998, 1; Barbour 2012). Carver declares that because of the horrendous regimes established on Marx's ideas, neither his analysis nor his prescriptions are relevant. Only a postmodern interpretation of Marx can make sense of a theory that has failed in practice.

Deconstruction's godfather, Derrida, bemoans the loss of radical Marxist spirit. He castigates the triumphalism of Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). How can we have “the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of... liberal democracy,” he wonders, when “never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and... economic oppression affected as many human beings?” Derrida differentiates between the spirit of Marx and Marxism, which “incorporated in the apparatus of the party.” He explains that “the... totalitarian inheritance of Marx's thought is... a reaction of panic-ridden fear,” which “was... struggling against ghosts” (1994, 68; 85; 104-105).

Derrida blames “ghosts,” or anxiety, for the rise of fascism, Stalinism, McCarthyism, and the Cold War.

Although ghosts—fear of opponents—are surely a powerful motive, such a poetic explanation is unlikely to restore Marx's principles.

Avineri's more straightforward vindication focuses on liberation, equality, and community that Marx deemed essential goals. For Avineri, Marx is a philosophic humanist. Avineri dismisses *Capital* as crude materialism and contends that its mechanistic tone derives from Engels' oversimplification (1968, 258).

However, if Engels was saying something wrong about Marx's ideas, why, during their forty-year collaboration, did Marx not correct him? If Marx's closest confidant could not rightly understand his mentor, perhaps Marx wrote too incautiously. Perhaps, Marx inspired the anti-capitalist movement by demonstrating that science made its triumph inevitable.

Kellner expresses another common defense among Marxists. "There are important discontinuities" between Marx's principles and the behavior of "Soviet leaders." Since Soviet leaders were not true adherents, Marx should not be blamed for their misdeeds (Kellner 1995). This justification is open to dispute. It is not only Soviet Communism that spawns oppressive governments. Wherever people attempt to put Marx's ideals into practice, despotic governments follow. The relationship between a strict effort to institutionalize Marx's principles and tyranny is incontestable (Pontuso 2004). Kellner's claim that Russians are responsible for the failure to build true Marxism comes close to racism. Communism produces totalitarianism in cultures quite different from that of Russia and each other. China becomes less tyrannical when it distances itself from Marx and adopts a modified market economy. Everywhere communism fails, governments have become more liberal. Evidence suggests, therefore, that something in Marxism generates centralized, bureaucratic, and repressive regimes (Havel 1991).

Defenders of Marxism declare that socialist countries, such as Sweden, refute the claim that Marx's principles lead to totalitarianism. Social democracies are not tyrannical and have created high living standards. Yet, Angresano shows that successful welfare states exhibit a healthy dose of pragmatism along with a commitment to social justice (2007). Political party rivalry, tolerance for opposition, and competitive elections have counterbalanced adherence to idealistic doctrines. Successful social democracy might be measured by whether they deviate from Marx's principles.

Some scholars seem so intent on defending Marx that they fail to acknowledge his influence over Communist practices. Kellner argues that Communist leaders misunderstand Marx. Even if this were true, why did Marx's ideas lead many leaders—some with exceptional intellect—to misunderstand Marx? A defense of Marx must explain why people from around the world establish tyrannies instead of true Marxism.

Derrida has a point. Marxists have become so defensive that they too are affected by "ghosts." They fail to distinguish between the parts of Marx that lead to terrible governments and the ideas of Marx that have relevance today. The purpose of my analysis of alienation is to move in that narrow channel between his supporters and critics in order to reveal what is still pertinent.

2. The Alienation Debate

Marx has been counted out before. After the revelations of Stalin's abuses, Western Marxists suffered a crisis of confidence. But, Dunayevskaya, Fromm, and Marcuse made valiant efforts to restore Marx's prestige by drawing attention to the humanism of his early writings, a shift that also became mired in controversy (Dunayevskaya 1958; Fromm 1961; Marcuse 1970; Anderson 2012). Is the real Marx the early humanist or late mechanistic writer? Was there a break between Marx's early musings and his later rigorous formulations? Is the

early or the later Marx more relevant to our present situation?

Marx's humanism turns on how he interprets alienation (Brugger 1984; Neal 1967; DiQuattro 1978; Hammen 1972). As Clark puts it, the "puzzle" of Marx's thought can be "dissolved by a... reconsideration of what Marx had to say about alienation" (Clarke 1971, 367). Marx's view that industrial societies make people disoriented and powerless influences many 20th century's writers, artists, and philosophers (Petrović 1963).

Roberts and Stephenson argue that Marx abandons the inner sense of confusion so prevalent in modern art, absurd theater, and existential philosophy. They explain that while Marx makes reference to "the plight of the individual worker... his work treats alienation as the product of an objective phenomenon... market economic organization" (Roberts 1970, 348).

In *Briefwechsel*—"a depository of the hopes, fears, and preoccupations of Marx and Engels," Hammen finds that those who "look for proof" that Marx's "notion" of alienation "persisted to the end" in the correspondence "will find little confirmation... *Briefwechsel*... does not mention alienation" (1972, 84).

Catephores explains that Marx "virtually abandoned" the "term alienation... after 1845" (1972, 126).

Schacht and Fulton place the concept of alienation in its historical context, claiming that Marx's contribution to the concept is neither unique nor unambiguous. Alienation is not central to understanding Marx (Fulton 1960; Schacht 1970).

Althusser argues that Marx discards the concept of alienation. "There is an unequivocal 'epistemological break' in Marx's work." Althusser claims that this rupture is necessary because scientific "knowledge" demands "the philosophic (theoretical) myth of man be reduced to ashes" (Althusser 1969, 33; 229).

Wartofsky states that the transition in Marx's thought is not a fracture but a clarification. He explains that "Marx's science" is "his mature accomplishment" and his "early theory of alienation... sets out the problem... not yet understood" (1983, 724). Tucker agrees and insists that Marx never fully abandons the concept of alienation (1969, 20; 182).

Walliman criticizes all the scholarship on Marx, claiming that it fails to distinguish between alienation (*Entäusserung*) and estrangement (*Entfremdung*). Alienation, Walliman argues, is an internal sense of dislocation. Although Marx recognizes this phenomenon, he does not rest his theory on it. Instead, Marx focuses on the estrangement that people actually experience in capitalist societies. According to Walliman, capitalism separates people from their nature. Walliman's interpretation of Marx "depends on (Marx's) definition of human nature" (1981, 11). However, Marx abandons the concept of a fixed, trans-historical human nature in favor of a science of historical development.

Marx argues that it is difficult to know what human nature is since human behavior is variable as seen in distinct cultures and different historical eras. Scientific knowledge is definite; the laws of science are the same in all cultures and for all time. Marx hopes to bring the certainty of science to human affairs. He explains that, "Natural science will... incorporate into itself the science of man, just as the science of man will incorporate into itself natural science: There will be one science" (1959).

Marx begins with the most fundamental human activity to provide for physical needs. "Life involves above all eating and drinking, shelter, clothing... This is the first historical act... which must be fulfilled... today as... thousands of years ago" (1924b). From this premise, Marx postulates that the way in which people gain their livelihood affects everything they do. People are what they produce and the way they produce it. He reasons: "The way in which a man produces his food... his mode of production... is... a definite way of expressing... life... What they are... coincides with what they produce and how they produce" (1924b).

People are conditioned by circumstances; their opinions are shaped by those conditions. Marx writes that people's "personality are... determined by... class relationships... A nobleman... will always remain a nobleman and a commoner always a commoner" (1924b). If the way people orient themselves to life is determined by class origins, then antagonisms cannot be ameliorated. People can never transcend the influence of their class. Since human motivation lies in the structure of society, the only possible way to resolve differences between people is to abolish those things (classes) that make them different. It is as if people meeting a member of a different class were encountering an alien being. The class structure makes their experiences utterly dissimilar from one another. People from different classes cannot compromise because they do not share common ground on which to cooperate.

Since there is no fixed human nature, there can be no way to assess human behavior using metaphysical or moral criteria. There is no good and bad. Marx explains that "communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness... rather communists do not preach morality at all" (1924b).

The alienation debate shows that even Marx's most serious students cannot agree with the meaning of the term. Some think the essence of Marx is his early stress on the injustice of the capitalist system. Others maintain that he abandons traditional standards, stops preaching morality, and adopts a science of human behavior.

3. Alienation as Criticism

Cohen makes a valiant effort to defend Marx's historical materialism by interpreting past events in light of Marx's theory. Cohen's lack of success indicates the problem with historical interpretation. Humans almost always attempt to make sense of events (Cohen 1979). We organize phenomena into categories to understand them. It is never clear whether the theories explain the events or, as postmodernists suggest, whether our minds fit phenomena into theories. Whatever its merit in explaining the transition from feudal to capitalist society, Cohen's materialist theory completely misses the trajectory of socialism. He has to re-write his defense of Marx after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Marx makes the same mistake as Cohen. His hope of scientifically explicating the future is an abysmal failure. It may have been the key factor in making Communist governments so rigid and ineffective. It seems that Communist rulers become disconnected from their societies because they are confident that history would justify their actions. They also excuse their behavior by the ideals of equality, liberation, and community they hope to implement.

Marx's predictions that economic conflicts cannot be ameliorated have been proven incorrect. Since human beings can understand each other's problems, it is possible to reach political compromises that alleviate suffering and injustice. Although the welfare state hardly lives up to the perfect justice we can create in our minds, it is a hallmark of most advanced industrial nations and the best example of the ability of people to reach political accommodation (Pinker 2011).

What is left of Marx's principles? The early writings express his dismay with the injustice of industrial societies. Marx is prescient in foretelling how large industrial and governmental organizations rob human beings of their ability to control their own destinies. We are alienated because forces beyond our control dictate much of our lives. Marx is the most profound as a social critic, not as an economic scientist. He is the best when he is taken in the exactly opposite way that he wants to be understood.

Many scholars have written about alienation, but as Schacht writes in a review of Ollman's book on the

topic: "One can hardly fail to be disappointed, therefore, by the sketchiness and brevity of Ollman's actual discussion of what Marx has to say about 'alienation'" (Schacht 1974, 268). Although there is a great deal of insight in Ollman's work, he fails to fully classify the types of alienation. What Schacht says of Ollman is true of every treatment of alienation. No author has systematically and fully defined and assessed Marx's concept.

Tucker's interpretation comes closest to providing a framework for understanding Marx. Although the scientific Marx wants to abandon the idea of human nature, he never does. Marx has a natural aversion to injustice that spurs him to action. Although he does not always use the term alienation, he articulates a sense of indignation when social and economic conditions constrain the flowering of humanity.

The postmodernists are right. To grasp Marx's view of alienated man, we cannot read him literally. Marx is best understood as a critic of capitalist society; he clarifies the things that make people feel estranged from their culture, work, and existence. Marx's opposition to capitalism grows out of his awareness that the system is unjust and therefore alienates people who perceive that unfairness. The following sections explore many forms of alienation that Marx identifies. In order to understand Marx's criticism of free market economics, we must understand the ways he uses the concept of alienation.

4. Forms of Alienation

4.1. Forced Labor

The first form of alienation is not unique to capitalism, but is shared by all modes of production. Marx argues that people are forced to labor to satisfy their bodily needs. Insofar as workers are compelled to labor to obtain necessities, they are not free to do as they please. Workers come to despise work because it is forced on them by nature. Marx explains that "labor is external to the worker... He does not affirm himself but denies himself. He feels at home when he is not working and when he is working, he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but... forced labor" (Marx 1959).

This form of alienation is still with us, as anyone can attest who looks at the clock, hoping the end of the workday is near. Human beings have bodily needs that require labor to fulfill. Every sort of work has aspects that feel routine, tedious, and uncomfortable. We all feel more relaxed on vacation. Even with the most advanced technology, it is doubtful that the tedium associated with work can be eliminated.

4.2. Objectified Labor

The second form of alienation is not unique to capitalism, but is intensified under that system. Workers do not reap the benefits of their labor; capitalists do. Workers labor, but owners enjoy the fruits of their labor. Marx states that for the worker, "the product of his labor, his labor objectified, is for him an alien, hostile... an activity performed in the service... of another man" (Marx 1959).

Capitalist owners are an anonymous force that demands labor in order to turn a profit. According to labor theory, profit is surplus value created by labor done that is greater than the time required to produce a value equal to workers' subsistence. Owners expropriate a portion of the sweat and toil of those who work. Marx declares that "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (Marx 1924a).

The global economy that has shifted production to labor-rich poor nations is based on this kind of exploitation. While free market economics has increased national wealth in such countries as China and India creating in huge fortunes for some, countless workers do not share in the new wealth.

While few people in the West now protest against companies that actually produce things, there is antagonism aimed at the “One Percent,” the rich people who seem to enjoy all life’s advantages without breaking a sweat. Marx’s outrage at those who acquire great fortunes by merely speculating on stocks, commodities, and currencies, is shared by many people. People who work long hours just to pay their bills feel alienated by any economic arrangement that produces such inequities.

Although Marx’s indignation at inequality is understandable, his prescriptions for establishing an egalitarian society have been catastrophic. Differences in wealth are both natural and conventional. Some people earn their wealth through talent and hard work; others inherit it. While governments can equalize wealth by limiting family fortunes, those policies also undercut incentives for the talented and industrious. People want to distinguish themselves either by earning more wealth or obtaining greater honors. Without incentives, the industrious, innovative, and talented do not work as hard. Productivity decreases and the economy suffers. The once rich are poorer, but the poor are no better off. There is a popular saying among the population of the inefficient economies the Communist bloc: They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work—hardly the ethic Marx hopes to establish in post-capitalist societies.

Marx’s idealism also seems to have ill effects. Communist leaders expect that people would become selfless and not seek to enrich themselves. When this does not occur, some rulers, such as Mao, try to create the new socialist man (Chen 1969). The consequences of attempting to transform human nature are visible in the economic scarcity, social dislocation, and political brutality of the Great Cultural Revolution (Dikotter 2010).

4.3. Personal Relationships and Wealth

Under capitalism, all human relations are reduced to market calculations, and people are judged by their accumulation of wealth, not by their inner worth. Marx writes “That which... money can buy... that (I) am... Money’s properties are my... properties... I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly” (Marx 1959).

This form of alienation is obviously still with us. We are annoyed by the power that wealth gives. An anti-elitist sentiment is everywhere apparent. Every campaign finance law enacted in the United States aims at limiting the influence of money in politics. Parties on the left and right assail special interests. Our popular culture ridicules both those who inherit wealth and the crassness of the nouveau riche. Despite the continuing opposition to concentration of wealth, great fortunes have been amassed, just as Marx predicts.

4.4. Money as the Object of Life

In a market economy, money becomes the object of all desire. People make a monomaniacal effort to acquire as much as possible. By gaining more money, however, they squander the capacity to lead genuinely fulfilling lives. To make money, people spend their time acquiring instead of living. They mistake the preconditions of a good life for the purpose of life (Marx 1969b). Oddly, people enjoy life only when they cease trying to secure the means of a pleasurable existence. Marx explains that “the less you eat, drink, and buy books... the greater becomes your treasure... Everything which the political economist takes from you in life and in humanity, he replaces for you in money and in wealth” (Marx 1959).

Much of current popular culture deals with the tension between family and career. As hundreds of websites dedicated to the topic indicate, there is a conflict between the demands work and living a good life. A sign of how problematic the conflict remains is that the theme has been repeated so often over such a long time.

4.5. *Division of Labor*

The industrial age gives rise to the division of labor. Free market competition makes assembly line techniques a key element of industrial capitalism, since every business must keep costs to a minimum to compete. Efficiency requires that jobs be completed as quickly as possible. Work is reduced to an artless physical act. Marx explains that as machines take over task the “special skill of the laborer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production” (Marx 1849).

Instead of human beings using technology to control the natural environment, the assembly line dominates the life of the worker. The worker “becomes an appendage of the machine,” Marx proclaims, “and it is only the most simple... monotonous... and easily acquired knack, that is required of him” (Marx 1969a).

The mindless repetition of the assembly line is perhaps the most famous of the forms of alienation made visible by the iconic artistry of Charlie Chaplin's movies. Anyone who ever worked at such tasks, as I have, knows exactly what Marx means by alienation.

In the West, the tedious routine of assembly lines has been mitigated by technology. In developing countries, where most of the world's consumer goods are made, the drudgery of assembly lines still governs the greater part of people's labor.

4.6. *Subsistence Wages*

As the result of large-scale industries and technological innovations, Marx argues, the character of work loses any relation to the skill of the workers. Owners do not have to pay for the artistry if tasks are reduced to rote. Since almost anyone can complete these tasks, there is a great pool of available workers. Because of the laws of supply and demand, owners need pay only a minimum wage, the barest subsistence to keep workers alive and laboring. The need for cheap labor compels owners to expand the labor pool to the employment of women and children. Marx explains that the “more simple... the task... the (lower) wages sink” until they are “restricted, almost entirely to the means of subsistence” (Marx 1849).

The problem of low wages and monotonous, unrewarding work is still with us. Dead-end, low paying jobs have moved from the factories to the service and fast-food industry. Child labor is barred in Europe, most of the Americas but parts of Asia and Africa continue to grapple with the issue.

Women in many places still suffer oppressive conditions. Much of that subjugation is not the result of free market economics, but is a consequence of patriarchal social customs. In the West, work itself is not considered degrading for women. However, MacKinnon argues that the relationship of women to the power structure in a competitive market is often degrading. Women in the upper and middle classes have made great strides, but those without the opportunity for education find themselves in unsatisfying tedious jobs (MacKinnon 1982).

4.7. *Creative Labor*

Workers have no control over what is produced; labor becomes only a means to satisfy bodily needs, not a creative act. Workers receive no joy or sense of achievement from their exertions. Their creative lives are stifled. We might contrast building one's own house or tending one's garden with working in a factory. For the first, there are not enough hours in the day; for the other, time passes interminably. Once craftsmen have some control over what they produce, they could shape their creations with their hands and imagination. But, industry both demands and produces standardization, since “manufacture... abolished the handicraft” (Marx 1924a). Workers lose all of their personal sense of creativity; they have no sense of ownership.

Post-industrial societies have overcome much of the alienation of the factory worker. Yet the desire to pursue an interesting profession has increased with the increase in wealth. Whether advanced societies can continue to create jobs that are both lucrative and satisfying is unclear (Florida 2010). Moreover, as Murray's statistics convey, large segments of the working class feel little obligation to their employers and even less sense of responsibility toward their social environment (Murray 2012).

4.8. Alien Society

Workers are alienated because they are living in a society whose laws, institutions, customs, principles, and even religion do not accurately reflect their situation. Marx explains that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society... ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships" (Marx 1924b). For example, imagine workers living in a society that believes in the free market, including the freedom to sell their toil for whatever price the market will bear. Workers enjoy the same freedom to invest, invent, and start a business as the rich do. However, they cannot actually pursue these entrepreneurial activities. They are forced to work long hours to feed themselves and their families. Perhaps they work in a factory where the toil is physically demanding and even dangerous. They cannot save enough money to start a business because wages are too low. They are too exhausted at the end of the work day to conceive of a new invention. They do not have the education or social connections to invest, even if they had the money to do so.

What good is freedom to workers? What good are the laws? How do natural rights advance their lives or help better their condition? If they live in poverty, ignorance, and squalor, they are blamed for having no initiative or talent. While natural rights claim to liberate all humans, in capitalist societies, rights create an "accumulation of wealth at one pole... (and) accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole" (Marx 1924a). While post-industrial societies are less oppressive than Marx predicted, the sensation of otherness, estrangement, and homelessness that he identifies with the rise of modernity is still with us.

History has shown that classical economists such as Adam Smith are correct. In the long run, free-markets produce the most wealth for the most people. Communist command economies failed. Even social welfare states have trouble paying their bills without a strong private sector. Yet, we do not judge things only by the long term. When a factory lies off all workers, retirees lose their pensions because of corporate restructuring, therefore, people are trapped in low-paying jobs, and we recognize the unfairness. When people suffer from circumstances beyond their control, we want those wrongs rectified. Our natural sense of justice makes us distrustful of anonymous market forces whatever their future benefit. The point is captured by Oscar Niemeyer, who explains that his renowned architect is inspired by "an awareness of what is important: life, friends, and attempting to make this unjust world a better place in which to live" (Basulto 2012).

4.9. Bureaucratic Rule

Hegel believes that the Enlightenment's egalitarian ideals would eventually lead all nations to adopt some form of democracy—or, a mixed regime—with a strong popular element. Under such governments, every individual would be recognized as equal before the law. The state would protect human rights. All citizens would vote and thereby have a hand in guiding their own destinies. Furthermore, ruling institutions would become rational.

His noted follower, Weber best explains what Hegel means. Weber argues that in order for people to be treated fairly, the arbitrary or charismatic leaders of previous ages have to be replaced by bureaucracies. Bureaucratic organizations do not depend on the whim of those who direct them. Rather, they act in accordance with a fixed set of rules; keep records to hold employees responsible; and maintain an institutional memory so that past actions can become the basis for future choices. Bureaucracy is just in two ways: Its staff is hired on the basis of some skill, not because of personal connections, and all those who come before the bureaucracy are treated the same; all are recognized equally.

Marx rejects Hegel's claim that the liberal state would bring an end to arbitrary rule and injustice. Marx maintains that bureaucracy is an instrument of state power, not an independent incorruptible institution. Marx foresees that bureaucrats would have an interest of their own. "Bureaucracy (is) the being of the state," he explains, "the bureaucracy is the secret, the mystery, preserved... by... an ossified and formalistic behavior... As far as the individual bureaucrat is concerned, the end of the state becomes his private end... the building of a career" (Marx 1970).

Marx predicts that large, distant, anonymous governmental structures would control more of our lives. He argues that the bureaucratization of politics would alienate us. Polls indicate that people feel less trust or sense of efficacy now than they do when governments do less but are more local (Putnam 2000).

4.10. Economic Crises

Capitalism causes periodic economic crises. Owners are driven by competitors to produce goods more quickly and efficiently. They are also compelled to pay low wages to keep production costs down. There is not sufficient purchasing power to absorb all that is produced. Capitalism creates "competition of a new intensity, and drives (businesses) into the headlong rush of overproduction, with its... corresponding slump" (Marx 1849). Marx explains that "periodical crises" put "the entire bourgeois society on... trial, each time more threateningly... (Because of) the epidemic of over-production... society suddenly finds itself put back into... momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off... every means of subsistence... There is too much civilization, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce" (Marx 1969a).

People are alienated after an economic upheaval. There are available goods, but people have no money to buy them, factories sit idle, and workers cannot find jobs. Engels writes that "Commerce is at a stand-still... markets are glutted, products accumulate, as... they are unsalable... factories are closed... workers are in want... because they have produced too much" (Engels 1970).

Crises become global because capitalists need to exploit world markets to sell goods. Marx believes that globalization would not bring stability; instead, it would create widespread calamities. "Industrial earthquakes... become more frequent and... violent... in the same measure in which the mass of products grows, and... in the same measure does the world market shrink ever more" (Marx 1849).

The economic crisis of 2008 is not caused by overproduction of manufactured goods. Yet the housing bubble shows exactly the kind of over-exuberance that capitalist speculation creates. In the post-industrial age, not manufacture, but overinvestment in unsecured financial instruments nearly causes a worldwide collapse of the kind Marx predicts.

It is impossible to predict whether Smith's defense of the free market will be true for all times. Will capitalism continue to produce a better living standard for most people as it seems to have done in the past?

Will it fall prey to dislocating upheavals—such as the Great Depression or the 2008 crash—that eventually will result in its doom? On these questions the jury is still out, yet we can say that the free market system has been able to adapt to crises thus far and has lasted quite a bit longer than Marx predicts.

4.11. Religion as Social Narcotic

Marx famously argues that religion alienates people from living a full life. Religion makes workers supinely accept their inferior position; it is “the opium of the people.” According to Marx, “religious suffering is... the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions” (1849).

Throughout the ages, religion softened people’s outrage at oppression, inequality, and injustice. Marx claims that once people realize there is no God, they will see that inequality is not ordained by a divine plan, but is of human origin. Once people understand that suffering is not redemptive, they can remedy the human condition. God does nothing to solve real problems; God only diminishes humans. Marx expects that religion will be overthrown as the revolution to break the bonds of oppression takes place. Further, he declares that humans can be free only if they overthrow the concept of a superior being: “the root is man himself... (liberation) begins from the... abolition of religion... It ends...with the categorical imperative to overthrow... conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being” (Marx 1970).

Atheism is one of the most controversial of Marx’s pronouncements. There is a disagreement over whether religious conviction makes people happier and therefore less alienated (Lewis 2006). While some argue that the loss of religion is the source of the crisis of modernity and that “only a god can save us,” others maintain that post-religious societies tend to be more peaceful, tolerant, and humane (Heidegger 1976). Whether the loss of religion makes people more peaceful is debatable. The two greatest tyrannies in the 20th Century—Nazism and Stalinist Communism—were brutally atheistic (Heims 2000; Murphy 1999). It is unclear whether concern for the welfare of others that is the core of Biblical teaching has influenced the modern human rights movement, which is the most important element in the decline of violence among Western nations (Stearns 2012).

4.12. Technological Innovation and Social Confusion

Marx argues that capitalism creates social, political, and psychological confusion because it constantly changes the mode of production. People are alienated because they are unendingly required to alter the kind of work they do, what they learn, and how they behave in order to keep up with forever-shifting technological innovations. Moreover, social institutions cannot adapt quickly enough to manage new inventions, making the regulations of society ill equipped to maintain stability. Marx explains:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production... Uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois... All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices... are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated. (Marx 1969a)

Marx seems to be only partly correct about the effect of technological change. The 21st century society seems to have adapted well to the digital revolution. Young people especially have adapted to new forms of communication.

On the other hand, capital markets are unprepared for shifts in financial instruments, such as credit default swaps. These novel mechanisms of exchange promise to do away with risk, but because they are not

transparent—only a few people understand them—buyers could not beware. Huge corporations go bankrupt, and the world's financial systems teeter. Regulations which mean to ameliorate the ill effects of speculation, recklessness, and dishonesty are under attack from software innovations designed to steer around them.

4.13. Commodity Fetishism

Marx maintains that people are unknowingly alienated by what he calls commodity fetishism. Industry continually creates new products and makes what was once a novelty into a necessity. As Marx claims, "Industry speculates on the refinement of needs, but it speculates just as much on their crudeness, but on their artificially produced crudeness, whose true enjoyment, therefore, is self-stupefaction... (and) illusory" (Marx 1959).

The truth of Marx's analysis is visible in consumer societies that induce people to seek the newest gadget and latest fashion. Instead of focusing on what is necessary, many seek to keep up with popular culture icons. Although young people have embraced new forms of communication, as noted above, it is a matter of concern whether they have become so engrossed in cyber-communication that they fail to experience authentic interactions. Marx might be surprised by the allure of cyber-life; he would be appalled by virtual reality.

Marx might argue that our age is not fully conscious of the harmful effects of commodity fetishism. Yet we might observe that even while living in the most prosperous society in history, many people feel unfulfilled and estranged. While they can certainly shop until they drop, material possessions do not satisfy them. Many people require mood-elevating drugs to overcome their sense of alienation.

4.14. Unfulfilled Species Beings

The final form of alienation is the least understood even by Marxist scholars, yet the most important for appreciating the concept. It is best presented by reference to the moral principles of Kant. According to Kant, there is a distinction between the phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are what we experience; noumena we can only think. The phenomenal world is governed by scientific laws which humans ignore at their peril. In the noumenal world, people are free because there is no compulsion, only will. Yet, noumena are ruled by logic. It is characteristic of rational creatures to apply these categories when making choices. Therefore, in the noumenal world, humans are free, but at the same time, guided by the laws of logic.

How can humans know what is moral? How can they know that an action is not tainted by some hidden interest? How can we know that our experiences have not tainted our judgment? Kant argues that the only way to be moral is to base our actions on the categorical imperative. It holds that a moral action must be free from calculation of reward or gain. To be moral, people must abandon practical considerations based on need, desire, or perception; they must be directed solely by good will. He writes that "Nothing can possibly be conceived... which can be called good... except a good will" (Kant 2004).

How can we recognize which actions are moral? Kant claims that this is a simple task, understood by every rational being; wrongdoing is easily recognized because our minds make universal categories from particular examples. We are aware almost immediately when we are treated differently from someone else. We are especially attuned to hypocrisy. Scandals involving clergy who deliver sermons on righteousness but engage in trysts with parishioners are universally condemned.

From the ability of the humans to recognize hypocrisy and apply valuations, Kant posits the categorical imperative: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal

law” (Kant 2004). Moral acts must apply equally to everyone. Since people never treat themselves as a means, the categorical imperative requires that a moral act must treat others not as means, but an end in themselves. In this realm of ends, Kant says, human beings gain dignity. They freely choose to go beyond their bodily nature and accord other rational beings value.

Marx rejects most of Kant's reasoning, but accepts one key element. For Marx, there are no noumena; material is all that exists. Marx argues that people gain a certain dignity when they act universally and are alienated when they do not. Instead of basing the moral imperative on each thinking in terms of all, Marx claims that a practical categorical imperative demands that each work for all.

An animal... produces what it... needs... one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces in freedom... in degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labor makes man's species life a means to his physical existence (Marx 1959).

People are estranged from their humanity when they work only for themselves; they act like mere animals. Since even the richest people in a free market system work are self-interested, capitalists are too alienated by that economic system. “In tearing away from man the object of his production... estranged labor tears from him his species-life” (Marx 1959).

Marx's vision of a global community in which all members work in a common venture is both the most idealistic yet impractical of his prescriptions. Globalization has given all people a universal perspective—most people on earth really do want the same future: peace, security, personal autonomy, dignity, and prosperity. It is not clear that the human race will attain such harmony. Deep cultural, religious, and national divisions preclude a global society for the foreseeable future. People are more attached to what is closest to them. As Hamilton states, “We love our families, more than we love our neighbors: We love our neighbors, more than our countrymen in general. The human affections, like solar heat, lose their intensity, as they depart the center” (Hamilton 1961-1979, 102). This love of one's own is more than narrow-mindedness. It counteracts selfishness and can be the source of civic responsibility. Caring for one's own, however, excludes outsiders, since human affections cannot be stretched infinitely.

Here to Marx, the critic glimpses an important human aspiration. A global community may not be possible, but the idea of living in a world that is just and humane for all is a goal that many people seek. Insofar as that goal is unobtainable, some people will be alienated.

5. Conclusion

Alienation is one of the central experiences of the contemporary world. Marx recognizes that industrial development, economies of scale, mass production, technological innovation, bureaucratic regulation, and even consumerism—all intended to improve wellbeing—lead people to feel vulnerable and unfairly treated. Marx does more than analyze the evils of capitalism. He does not want to understand the world, but he wants to change it. How can the forces of commerce be brought to heel? How should capitalist society be changed? Marx comes to believe that a new science of human action could show how capitalism might be tamed and what kind of social arrangement might grow from its ruins.

In Marx jettisoning the metaphysical principle of justice—central to the concept of alienation—in favor of the scientific approach, he tempts communist leaders to implement strict rules of social interaction. Whether they apply Marxism correctly or not, they believe their actions are justified by the laws of historical development.

Science is predictive. Its laws are true for the past, present, and future. If a science of historical development were to be discovered, it would be possible to transform the human condition and establish a social system that resolves life's existential uncertainty, a project that could provide meaning and guidance to Marx's adherents. Marx wants to conquer chance—to make individuals free from contingency, anxiety, and material shortages. He hopes to put people in full control of their destiny.

Perhaps, Marx's confidence in foretelling the future leads his followers astray. They believe that Marxism resolves the ambiguity of existence. To overcompensate for the uncertainty that surrounds every choice, they establish closed, tightly organized, and oppressive regimes. Communist leaders assert their power over other people to make them obey, over nature to make it bountiful, and over being to make it orderly. As Havel comments, communist totalitarian governments are orderly—like a “morgue or a grave” (Havel 1991, 72). As postmodernists have pointed out, predicting the fate of the human race is impossible because the beginning, end, and purpose of life are not fully comprehensible.

Because Marx's scientific principles are a failure, a reexamination of his criticism of contemporary life is in order. To restore Marx as a serious thinker, it is necessary to liberate his ideas from uncritical supporters and dismissive critics. While not a perfect analysis of the ills of the post-industrial world, Marx's concept of alienation captures the anxiety and confusion of modern times. Marx's forecasts sometimes go awry. Yet his criticism of capitalism—now termed globalization—is still relevant for those who recognize the injustices of the free market.

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