

Revitalizing the Subjective: A Critique of Marxist Theories of Alienation

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July 2023

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
of Master of Arts

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Abstract

Alienation names the separate but intertwining issues that occur when someone is sensing a loss of power in their life or having difficulty creating meaningful connections with social institutions, other people, or with themselves. Objective alienation occurs when the institutions that make the social world create some fundamental disjuncture between people and an ideal whole. Subjective alienation occurs when people feel or experience this. Within the Marxist tradition, alienation characterizes the estrangement of people from their own nature due to the division of labour in capitalist systems. This thesis aims to answer the question as to why, since alienation is a felt phenomenon, have attempts to theorize it within the Marxist tradition so consistently sidelined the affective aspects in favour of identifying alienation's objective structure. I argue that discussions of alienation have tended towards the objective due to the prioritization of proving that the early Marx's writings, where his theory of alienation is most explicitly articulated, are rigorous and scientific. This need to locate Marx's theories of alienation in a scientific realm primarily emerges from a paradigm shift brought about by Louis Althusser. In short, Althusser argued that Marx's early works were humanist, and that Marx realized this fact, shifting to a more methodical analysis in his later works. I argue that, in response, many scholars purport that Marx's early writings contain well-thought out, scientifically rigorous, analyses of capitalism. This thesis argues that there needs to be space for a humanist, unscientific theory of alienation in Marxist theory that is attuned to the felt dimensions of the concept.

Résumé

L'aliénation nomme les problèmes distincts mais interdépendants qui surviennent lorsqu'une personne ressent une perte de pouvoir dans sa vie ou éprouve des difficultés à créer des liens importants avec les institutions sociales, d'autres personnes ou elle-même. L'aliénation objective se produit lorsque les institutions qui constituent le monde social créent une disjonction fondamentale entre les personnes et un idéal complet. L'aliénation subjective se produit lorsque les personnes ressentent une telle disjonction. Dans la tradition marxiste, l'aliénation caractérise la séparation des personnes de leur propre nature en raison de la division du travail dans les systèmes capitalistes. Tenant compte de cet aspect ressenti de l'aliénation, ce mémoire vise à déterminer pour quelles raisons les tentatives de théoriser l'aliénation dans la tradition marxiste ont si souvent mis de côté les aspects affectifs en faveur d'identifier la structure objective de l'aliénation. Je soutiendrai la thèse à l'effet que les discussions sur l'aliénation ont tendu vers l'objectif en raison de la priorité accordée à prouver que les premiers écrits de Marx, où sa théorie de l'aliénation est le plus explicitement articulée, sont rigoureux et scientifiques. Ce besoin de situer les théories de Marx sur l'aliénation dans un domaine scientifique découle principalement d'un changement de paradigme opéré par Louis Althusser. En bref, Althusser soutient que les premiers travaux de Marx étaient humanistes et que Marx s'est rendu compte de ce fait en passant à une analyse plus méthodique dans ses derniers travaux. J'arguerai qu'en réponse, de nombreux chercheurs prétendent que les premiers écrits de Marx contiennent des analyses bien pensées et scientifiquement rigoureuses du capitalisme. Ce mémoire soutiendrai qu'il doit y avoir un espace pour une théorie humaniste et non scientifique de l'aliénation qui soit en accord avec les dimensions ressenties du concept.

Acknowledgments

To begin, I am immensely grateful for the superb political theorists I have encountered throughout my education. Professor Nacol's graduate seminar at the University of Toronto pushed me to once and for all admit that I am a political theorist at heart, and she gave me the confidence to believe I could pursue theory at a graduate level. Moreover, I am deeply indebted to all the professors at McGill who have taught me more than I could have hoped to know. Thank you to Professor Roberts and Professor Winter for your insightful feedback on this thesis. Thank you, Professor Levy, for your unparalleled dedication to creating an inclusive community of scholars, both in the classroom and through the Research Group on Constitutional Studies. RGCS has been one of the most intellectually fulfilling, and not to mention fun, parts of my time at McGill.

Professor Roberts is, without a doubt, the best supervisor I could have asked for. He is generous with his time, his knowledge, his feedback, and his enthusiasm. This thesis would never have been written without his insights and his support. He has made me a better theorist and a better leftist, and I am immensely grateful for that.

My friends have kept me sane (or, as sane as possible) throughout this process. To mention everyone by name would push this acknowledgments section into a dangerously lengthy territory. So, to everyone I have come to know here at McGill & in Montreal, thank you for your friendship and for your company.

I must especially thank my dearest friends at McGill; Aleks, Andrew, Elyssa, Grey, Kevin, Luc, and Maya. The fact that there are people in this world as kind, generous, and intelligent as all of you never ceases to amaze me. The most fulfilling part of this master's degree

was, without a doubt, befriending each of you. I am indescribably grateful that this program brought you into my life.

An immense thank you must also be extended to my friends from the University of Toronto; Advay, Ben, George, Gianni, Kevin, Luca, Navin, and Thomas. The days we spent in Robarts studying together (and the days we spent in Robarts not studying together) are some of my fondest memories. There are no others I would rather watch countless hours of, very bad, TV & movies with. Thank you to Thomas, in particular, whose certainty and determination rubbed off on me in our dingy basement apartment. Your encouragement helped me make it to, and through, this degree.

Thank you to my parents for founding my inquisitiveness and for giving me the freedom to pursue whatever I wanted (going from fashion design to political science might have given them a bit of whiplash, but they were only ever encouraging nonetheless). Every evening that we sat discussing history and politics around the dinner table filled me with a curiosity and love of the social world that has carried me through life. Thank you especially to my biggest supporter, my mom, from whom I inherited many of my personality traits and convictions. She has always been there to provide me an often-needed reminder that things do work out and I need not always be so dramatic. The stories she told of her working conditions has been the real-world tether that inspired this thesis.

Lastly, thank you to my partner, Luca. You have seen me through so much and are unwavering in your support. My degree, and my life, would have been unfathomable without you by my side.

Revitalizing the Subjective: A Critique of Marxist Theories of Alienation

Introduction

Alienation names the separate but intertwining issues that occur when someone is sensing a loss of power in their life or having difficulty creating meaningful connections with social institutions, other people, or with themselves.¹ Because of its conceptual breadth, alienation is discussed in many different philosophical traditions.² Within the Marxist tradition, alienation characterizes the estrangement of people from their own nature due to the division of labour in the capitalist mode of production. The study of alienation under capitalism has been front-and-centre in critical theory, and therefore subject to criticism from both within the Marxist tradition and beyond it.³ Most obviously, a theory which aims to diagnose a form of separation from a naturally or historically understood whole presupposes defining what such a whole would consist of. This attempt to determine what is objectively good for humans can quickly become prescriptive and paternalistic insofar as it claims to know what one's own life free from alienation would look like. These are the problems which mire the debate on alienation within the Marxist and critical theory traditions.

Alienation can be divided into separate but intertwining dimensions; the objective and the subjective, and if both are present, the complete.⁴ While not all scholars conceptualize alienation explicitly within these three groupings, it is important to define these categories as I argue that the

¹ Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith (New York: Colombia University Press, 2014), 3.

² For example, while a Marxist discussion of alienation focuses on the relationship of people to the means of production, Kierkegaard focuses on the ethical dimensions of human existence. Namely, how one appropriates themselves in the world, i.e., existing as a “singular being” in a world of conformism (Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 9).

³ This is seen in the philosophical tradition of Rawlsian liberalism which rejects the concept of an objective good life, and in post-structuralist philosophy's decentering of the subject who would experience alienation (Jaeggi, 28).

⁴ Michael O. Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 119.

objective discussion of alienation is prioritized in Marxist theory. Roughly speaking, objective alienation occurs when the institutions that characterize the social world create some fundamental disjuncture between people and an ideal whole. Objective alienation occurs when the social world is not a home. For Hegel, objective alienation is a problem in and of itself because people have a psychological and social need to inhabit a world which is their home.⁵ Contrastingly, an existentialist approach to alienation views its objective form as an inevitable part of human existence that cannot be transcended.⁶

People can experience subjective alienation in two instances: when the social world is not a home and they recognize this fact, or when the social world is a home but they fail to grasp it.⁷ While there are extreme accounts that view people to either be experiencing pure subjective alienation,⁸ or pure objective alienation,⁹ most scholars, including Marx, argue that both are occurring in certain social & historical conditions. Marx writes that:

the possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation. But the former feels satisfied and affirmed in this self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign of *its own power*, and possesses in it the *appearance* of a human existence. The latter, however, feels destroyed in this alienation, seeing its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence.¹⁰

While Marx identifies capitalist labour to be objectively alienating for all, insofar as it separates the worker from their own production, he also identifies the subjective experience of alienation as crucial. To be alienated is experientially different for the exploiter and for the exploited.

⁵ Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, 120.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Sarah Richmond (1943; repr., London: Routledge Press, 2018), 481.

⁷ Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, 121.

⁸ This is what Hegel argues, which will be elaborated on further in the third section of the thesis.

⁹ The Frankfurt school articulates this position, as characteristically seen in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. This will be discussed in the third section of the thesis.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, "Alienation and Social Classes (from The Holy Family)" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 133.

Importantly, the difference between the existential-phenomenological approach to alienation and a Marxist approach is that the existentialists do not see any possibility in overcoming alienation, while the Marxists do. Therefore, for Marxist scholars, the critique of alienation is fundamentally embedded in a political project against the inherently alienating capitalist mode of production. While the idea of an unalienated life may be overly optimistic, it is the goal that Marxists have in mind when they discuss this phenomenon. For this reason, while there are many different philosophical traditions discussing alienation, it is especially important for Marxists. Within the history of Marxist theories of alienation, I argue that the existence of subjective alienation has been under-theorized and overlooked in favor of its objective counterpart. Felt alienation is either seen as given, and therefore not worth focusing on, as non-existent, or as unnecessary for alienation to exist.

The research problem this thesis proposes is as follows: since alienation is a felt phenomenon – at least potentially – why have attempts to theorize it within the Marxist tradition so consistently sidelined the affective aspects in favour of identifying alienation's objective structure? I argue that discussions of alienation have tended towards the objective due to the prioritization of proving that the early Marx's writings, where his theory of alienation is most explicitly articulated, are rigorous and scientific. This need to locate Marx's theories of alienation in a scientific realm primarily emerges from a philosophical paradigm shift brought about by the French philosopher Louis Althusser. In short, Althusser argued that Marx's early works were humanist,¹¹ and that Marx realized this fact, shifting to a more methodical analysis in his later

¹¹ Humanism is the school of thought which emphasizes the human being as the centre for moral, ethical, and philosophical inquiry. Marxist-humanism investigates the question of what human nature consists of for the sake of conceiving a social world emancipated from capitalist domination. Philosophical criticism, for the Marxist-humanists, begins with the belief that the human being is not free under the capitalist system of production.

writings.¹² In response, many scholars purport that Marx's early work contains well-thought out and important analyses of capitalism, which in and of themselves have a scientific orientation. Moreover, they argue that alienation under capitalist systems is a crucial insight from Marx's writings that carries through in his later work. There is a valorization of the scientific status of the early Marx by many post-Althusserian humanist Marxists. This persists throughout many of the writings on alienation, albeit articulated more or less explicitly in different works. This thesis argues that there needs to be space for a humanist, unscientific theory of alienation, which, following E.P. Thompson, focuses "not on the *concept* of man but on empirically observable *real men*".¹³

While my argument advocates for the importance of studying subjective alienation, I am *not* advancing a theory of felt alienation. This thesis will offer a historical account of alienation in the Marxist tradition to demonstrate that subjective alienation has not been appropriately theorized and provide a diagnosis as to why this has occurred. I aim to bring to the forefront of the discussion, what I argue to be, a deficit in the theorization of felt alienation. A theory of subjective alienation which adequately addresses the considerable problems that accompany the concept is beyond the scope of this thesis.¹⁴ Instead, the goal of this historical theoretical account is to make obvious this lack, not to supply what is lacking.

I argue that this is of the utmost importance in Marxist theory because alienation is often expressed by workers. Of course, there are many wage labourers who do not feel alienated at all. This is the problem of pure objective alienation wherein the conditions of labour are inherently

¹² Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (1965; repr., New York: Verso, 2005), 13.

¹³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Press, 1966), 7. Of course, this is gendered language, but the same is the case with the notion of people.

¹⁴ For example, there is a psychological dimension to theorizing felt alienation that I am unable to adequately address but is necessary in any theory which aims to define what it means to be subjectively alienated.

alienating, but people are unable to recognize it.¹⁵ I am not proposing a theory of how to mobilize those who do not feel alienated, though, of course, this is a crucial dimension of political organizing. Instead, I point to previous instances of worker mobilization that harnessed feelings of affective alienation to ground my argument that subjective alienation does matter. My discussion of subjective alienation below draws on the accounts from labour historians that point to the felt aspects of exploitation that were critical in union drives and labour campaigns. However, I acknowledge that these instances express a variety of moods that may not be *necessarily* linked to alienation. The point of examining these varying descriptions is to say that there can often be an emotional response to labouring in exploitative capitalist conditions. Whether that can be called alienation or should be understood as the emotional correlates of exploitation, or surplus domination, is an important discussion to be had. However, within the Marxist tradition, the terminology of subjective alienation is best suited to capture these affects and is therefore the target of my thesis.

The structure of my thesis is as follows. In section one, *Subjective Alienation*, I begin with a brief discussion of various instances that demonstrate the connection between felt alienation and working-class mobilization. I rely primarily on accounts offered by labour historians to show that previous unionization efforts have been attuned to and utilized the dissatisfaction people felt to organize. This vignette will serve as a tether for my theoretical argument. My motivation in revitalizing the subjective dimension of alienation is that I believe it has something to say about anti-capitalist organizing. Namely, alienation identifies something politically crucial: capital's control and domination of workers is far reaching, but how they feel in these conditions is the hardest to target and dispel.

¹⁵ This is argued in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, which I will discuss further in section four.

Section two, *the Althusserian Break*, will begin my account of the history of Marxist theories of alienation. However, this history will not be offered in chronological order. Instead, I start with a breakdown of Althusser's argument about Marx's epistemological break, as well as Althusser's critique of humanist Marxists, to contextualize my discussion of alienation.

In section three, *Alienation Before Althusser*, I begin by briefly outlining Rousseau and Hegel's theories of alienation to ground Marx's discussion of it. I outline the dimensions of Marx's argument about alienation, particularly the interrelation between the subjective and objective. I will then show how this continues through Western Marxism in the thought of Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School, particularly Herbert Marcuse. While early iterations of alienation have numerous theoretical problems, they are guided by the interrelation of the objectively alienating structures of capitalism and the experiences of it. In different ways, Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School theorists do not lose sight of alienation's potential capacity to ignite social change.

In section four, *Alienation After Althusser*, I discuss how alienation is treated following Althusser's intervention. In this section I will highlight the scientific humanism of those who discuss alienation after Althusser. The tendency towards the objective is primarily a response to Althusser's idea that the early Marx is not scientific. This will be demonstrated through an overview of the primary philosophical and sociological books that discuss alienation in the twentieth century. Moreover, while the twenty-first century discussion of alienation focuses on the subjective, I show that it is still enmeshed in the post-Althusserian paradigm. In trying to avoid the problems Althusser identifies, alienation is rendered virtually apolitical.

In section five, *Towards Reviving the Subjective*, I will conclude by arguing for the importance of recentering the agent and the subjective dimension of alienation. I will follow E.P.

Thompson in arguing that theoretical concepts only matter insofar as they are articulated in the lives of people, and that agents do have the capacity to change the situations that oppress them. I will also turn towards affect theorists to demonstrate useful methodological tools that could be integrated into a Marxist theoretical discussion of alienation. This section will demonstrate the way popular theories on objective alienation have neglected the fruitful relationship between how people feel about their oppression and emancipatory politics.

1. Subjective Alienation

I aspire to reinvigorate the importance of subjectively felt alienation due to its historically and ethnographically documented ability to provoke political change. I discuss this primarily in relation to both historical and contemporary unionization campaigns. While, of course, unionization is not the same as revolutionary change, the fight of workers in common against capital and management is the most salient response people have taken against the systems which oppress them, without picking up arms. Union organizing has always been a struggle against interlocking systems of oppression, and while it is not the solution to capitalist domination, it is a way that workers make tangible gains.

Contemporary union drives provide first-hand accounts of the power of alienation as a mobilizing affect. There are increasing levels of dissatisfaction with working conditions. Working lower class jobs inspires an “us vs. them” mentality which has been the founding basis for many unionization campaigns.¹⁶ People recognize their exploitation in opposition to those who exploit them. Recently, Amazon’s abysmal working conditions and union suppression reached a boiling point, and organizers won the first successful unionization campaign at a

¹⁶ Michael D. Yates, *Work, Work, Work: Labor, Alienation, and Class Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 26.

warehouse in the United States.¹⁷ The organizers were motivated to fight after a small walkout had more executives in attendance to shut it down than people there to protest. Seeing the lengths to which management will go to suppress even the most tepid of protest elicited solidarity amongst workers that catalyzed the organizers to fight even harder. While there were subsequent failures to the Amazon unionization campaigns, this does not discredit the real change that emerged from these efforts.

Another contemporary example can be found in Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed*, which details her time working minimum wage jobs trying to make a living and the feelings of dissatisfaction that she and her coworkers experienced. Here, she discusses the many difficulties that low wage workers have and works towards debunking the myth that low-wage work is synonymous with low-skill. Instead, she highlights that all these jobs are physically and emotionally taxing, and that those who are part of the upper classes live solely off the benefit of working-class exploitation. While she does not discuss political mobilization explicitly, the afterword, which highlights the overwhelmingly positive reception of the book, points to how people felt recognized by a discussion of the misery of working lower class jobs.¹⁸ This instance of mutual recognition demonstrates that workers are often very aware of the unfair conditions of exploitation they are employed under.

Looking back to labour history, the unionization campaigns of the twentieth century demonstrate how collective sentiments encourage people to rally together against a common enemy. For example, the steelworker strike of 1959 was mobilized because of the feelings of humiliation and exhaustion experienced by workers.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Industrial Workers of the

¹⁷ Jodi Kantor & Karen Weise, "How Two Best Friends Beat Amazon." *The New York Times*. April 2nd, 2022.

¹⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 226.

¹⁹ Gabe Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 61.

World (IWW) union emerged “from the most miserable workers for the most miserable workers”.²⁰ The workers’ movement at the time had immense disdain for the conditions they were subjected to. This became even more acute with the Great Depression, which dispelled any hope that was vested in welfare capitalism²¹ by workers who expressed open dissatisfaction with their working conditions and the poverty they were in.²² Where corporate paternalism was supposed to mitigate employee discontent, the profit motive won out, therefore demonstrating to workers that their employers do not really care about their well-being. Instead, workers began to realize their employers merely instrumentalized them.

Lastly, I will note that a feeling of camaraderie emerges in workers who fight against capital, even if those movements fail. For instance, after the Seattle General Strike of 1919, despite unsuccessful negotiations:

the workers of Seattle did not go back to work with the feeling that they had been beaten. They went smiling, like men who had gained something worth gaining, like men who had done a big job and done it well... glad to have worked shoulder to shoulder with their fellow unionists.²³

Instead of finding competition in other workers, people were able to find solidarity in the common struggle against capitalism, even in failure.

These very select examples of worker struggles demonstrate the power of the emotions that underpin them. Moreover, they demonstrate that while capital may succeed in crushing the tangible change workers gain, the feeling of alienation persists to reinvigorate the common spirit

²⁰ David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 57.

²¹ Welfare capitalism is distinct from the welfare state, which was the aim of much labour organizing in the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas the welfare state consists of provisions from the government, welfare capitalism refers to businesses providing welfare services to their employees in the workplace. It was used as a technique to discourage unionization.

²² Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 104.

²³ Jim Mochoruk, Rhonda L. Hinthner, and James Naylor, *For a Better World: The Winnipeg General Strike and the Workers’ Revolt* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2022), 251.

of the oppressed. Ultimately, these brief notes highlight what is politically crucial about subjective alienation, mobilizing workers often relies upon feelings of alienation - which might be found, elicited, or provoked - whether they are occurrently present or not. As this empirical account has been established, I will now move on to a discussion of the philosophical nature of the concept of alienation.

2. The Althusserian Break

Althusser reconceptualized Marx's argument primarily through two books: *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. He was responding to those who argued that Marx's early writings contained the key to understanding Marx's philosophy and how it can apply to political action. Against this, Althusser argues that there is an early, ideological, Marx, who experiences an epistemological break in 1845 and reorients his focus to the scientific, thus pioneering the new theory of historical materialism.²⁴ Althusser states:

by rejecting the essence of man as his theoretical basis, Marx rejected the whole of this organic system of postulates. He drove the philosophical categories of the subject, of empiricism, of the ideal essence, etc., from all the domains in which they had been supreme ... for Marx's materialism excludes the empiricism of the subject (and its inverse: the transcendental subject) and the idealism of the concept (and its inverse: the empiricism of the concept).²⁵

Althusser's issue with those who based their theory on the early Marx was that it reduced Marxism to empiricism.²⁶ Empiricist Marxists were arguing that objective knowledge, about human nature or the economy, can be derived from a subject's understanding of the world.²⁷ This

²⁴ Althusser, *For Marx*, 33-34.

²⁵ Althusser, 228.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster & David Fernbach. (1965; repr., New York: Verso, 2015), 35.

²⁷ This is characteristic of Lukács' theory of standpoint epistemology and his notion that the proletariat, as they exist, are in a unique position to understand systems of capitalist exploitation.

is ideological insofar as there is no subject who is not historically mediated and therefore not a product of the social institutions of the time.

Althusser is arguing against both the Orthodox Marxists of the Soviet Union as well as the Marxist humanists.²⁸ The problems of Stalin's reductionist and dogmatic interpretation of Marx became unavoidably obvious after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, when Althusser made this critique.²⁹ However, the issues Althusser takes with humanist interpretations of Marx are less obvious, especially in light of the fact that the problems of vanguardism, economism, and dogmatism the Soviet Union and orthodox Marxism faced, can be countered with a humanist understanding of Marx that gives primacy to the subject.³⁰ Yet, for Althusser, the problem is that both these strands of Marxism are empiricist. Orthodox Marxists believe an understanding of history and socio-political transformation can be derived straightforwardly from the economy, and humanist Marxists believe that theories of freedom can emerge directly from a subject's understanding of capitalist exploitation. Moreover, both interpretations of Marx, while seemingly disparate, suffer from the same teleological bent which, according to Althusser, is a misrepresentation.

Against these interpretations, Althusser argues that Marx developed the science of historical materialism. Althusser identifies the writings of the early Marx as the remnants of Hegelianism and Feuerbachian ideologies,³¹ and in Marx's epistemological break, he fully rejects

²⁸ William S. Lewis "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge': Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology" *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no 3 (2005): 457.

²⁹ Lewis, "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge'", 457.

³⁰ Lewis, 457.

³¹ For Feuerbach, people attribute human qualities to God and subsequently worship him for those qualities. Therefore, they are alienating their humanness to a higher power which stops them from realizing their own potential and worldly importance, or their species-being. [Ludwig Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, (1841; repr., New York: Prometheus Books, 1989)]. Marx is greatly informed by Feuerbach's discussion of alienation but argues that the religious alienation Feuerbach identifies can only occur because of the inherent contradictions in the material world [Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 144].

the influence of both those authors as well as classical political economy in order to found his science.³² Althusser's interpretation of Marx's science stands in opposition to bourgeois ideology.³³ In this regard, no historical, and therefore ideological, subject derives knowledge empirically; rather, knowledge emerges as an abstraction from political economy.

Althusser makes this argument by looking at the internal logic of Marx's later works. Scientific Marxism can be free from ideology as it is not done by abstracting away from a subject's position, which is always tied to the dominant ideas of the time. Instead, conclusions are reached by beginning with concepts, which may themselves be ideological, and transforming them into scientific knowledge through theoretical examination.³⁴ This means that one does not have to look to practices external to the construction of the argument for it to be held true. Althusser's finds this science in the later works of Marx, *Capital* and *The Grundrisse*,³⁵ as Marx transforms the ideological analysis of political economy into the scientific method of historical materialism. All this is to say that Althusser holds that social theories, like mathematics, can be tested with a logic that is internally coherent in its construction.³⁶ Historical materialism as a practice gives rise to formal categories which can be analyzed to understand the way the mode of production functions.

After Althusser's intervention in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, he shifts his position slightly to weaken the strong ideology/science distinction, but he still maintains a scientist predilection in his later work, namely in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs).³⁷ Here, Althusser argues that the ISAs interpellate people as subjects under the ruling state

³² Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 13.

³³ Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1995), 31.

³⁴ Althusser, *For Marx*, 185.

³⁵ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 48-49. However, other scholars have identified the continuation of theories of alienation in the later works as well, an important argument against Althusser's conception of the strong epistemological break. This will be explored in the third section.

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 2007), 137.

³⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 140.

ideology.³⁸ We are all always ‘steeped’ in ideology. For this reason, people have accused Althusser’s theory of being functionalist.³⁹ It reduces people to being the bearers of capitalist relations with little autonomy or control over their situations. Institutions like the school and the church function, for Althusser, to prime subjects to possess the ‘correct’ form of consciousness that is needed to assume the proper role in the system of production.⁴⁰

In this regard, Althusser’s theory of ideology can be seen as circumventing the issues that he disagrees with in theories of alienation. It avoids the humanist problematic insofar as ideology does not operate as a false reflection of the world or something which separates people from better social relations. It is merely what supports and advances (or maintains) the system of economic relations at the time. As Eagleton describes:

[Ideology] is an indispensable medium for the production of human subjects. Among the various modes of production in any society, there is one whose task is the production of forms of subjectivity themselves; and this is quite as material and historically variable as the production of chocolate bars or automobiles. Ideology is not primarily a matter of ‘ideas’: it is a structure which imposes itself upon us without necessarily having to pass through consciousness at all.⁴¹

Ideology is a fact of life that will exist in perpetuity. It is a theory which does not presuppose a resolution or return. Instead, it identifies that there needs to be the existence of a superstructure which legitimates and justifies the way things are.

In sum, within the humanist tradition, there is a presupposed Hegelian resolution to conditions of unfreedom, or the alienated life. Althusser rejects these foundations and argues Marx

³⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2012), 104.

³⁹ For a harsh critique, see E.P. Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory*, and my discussion of it in the fifth section. For a most sympathetic critique, see the writings of Nicos Poulantzas, a student of Althusser’s, who was influenced by his work. While Althusser remains a large theoretical influence, in Poulantzas’ book *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (New York: Verso, 1977), he argues that Althusser’s theories reduce the role of class struggle due to his abstract and formalist theorization.

⁴⁰ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 148.

⁴¹ Eagleton, 148.

did as well. Althusser's theoretical break was transformative for Marxist theory insofar as it pioneered the now commonplace questioning of Hegelianism, historicism, and empiricism.⁴² However, in doing so, Althusser also "produced a discourse which was rigorously theoretical at the expense of almost anything else".⁴³ This paradigm shift elicits two strong and contrasting responses. The first is a rejection of Althusser's decentering of the subject with an invigorated discussion of agency. The second is a reconstruction of the theories of the early Marx with a focus on their theoretical rigour. The latter I argue has underpinned the discussion of alienation, the former I use to make my argument on the continued importance of theorizing subjective alienation.

Finally, it is important to note that Althusser's notion of science is idiosyncratic and difficult to grasp. I acknowledge here that Althusser's criticism of alienation is oriented towards the concept of objective alienation. While Althusser also criticizes the subjective dimension of alienation elsewhere, this is not the target of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Moreover, Althusser revised his own ideas and arguments later in life, reducing the assertiveness of his earlier writings. Crucially, this does not affect the argument I advance. Indeed, Althusser could whole-heartedly reject everything he ever wrote, and the consequences of his writings would still be the same. What matters is that Althusser produced an irrevocable shift in the discussion of humanist Marxism. Therefore, those who reconstruct Marx's theory of alienation as objective are not engaging in the same science as Althusser. As I will demonstrate, science for many post-Althusserian defenders of alienation is found in the exposition of Marx's precision in his early writings. Subsequent authors are engaging primarily in a reconstruction of the objectivism of the early Marx, against the

⁴² Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 114.

⁴³ Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, 115-116.

bogeyman of Althusser and his followers, to demonstrate that Marx thought through these necessary humanist concepts to understand capitalist exploitation.

3 - Alienation Before Althusser

In this section, I outline what theories of alienation consisted of before Althusser's intervention. I aim to demonstrate that, despite the numerous flaws in early Marxist theories of alienation, these theories are uniquely attuned to the interrelation between the proletariat's experience and the objectively alienating systems of capitalism. The Marxist theorists of alienation here write in a manner which prioritizes the emancipatory potential of overcoming alienation. I will begin with a discussion of Rousseau and Hegel to show how Enlightenment thinkers influenced the writings of Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School.

3.1 - Alienation prior to Marx

Most discussions of the philosophical history of alienation begin with Rousseau. He is the first thinker who diagnoses the key elements of alienation as conceived in the modern sense of the concept, despite not using the term in the way it is used contemporarily.⁴⁴ Throughout all of Rousseau's work, the theme of alienation persists, and his analysis of the social condition forms a new understanding of the concept of estrangement.⁴⁵ From Rousseau, the problem of alienation became a philosophical theme worth studying in its own right, and it was very important for Hegel and subsequently Marx.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 6-7.

⁴⁵ Bronislaw Baczko, *Rousseau: Solitude et Communauté*, trans. Claire Brendhel-Lamhout. (1970; repr., Paris: Mouton & Co, 1970) 13.

⁴⁶ Baczko, *Rousseau: Solitude et Communauté*, 13.

For Rousseau, the construction of society causes alienation. Rousseau discusses this in *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, using the metaphor of the statue of Glaucus. He states:

Like the statue of Glaucus, which time, sea, and storms has so disfigured that it is less resembled of a God than a ferocious Beast, the human soul, the human soul altered in the lap of society by a thousand forever recurring causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and errors, by the changes that have taken place in the constitutions of Bodies, and by the continual impact of the passions, has, so to speak, changed in appearance, to the point of being unrecognizable.⁴⁷

Rousseau is here arguing that people living in the social world become contorted into beings disconnected from their original nature. Within society, hierarchy emerges as a driving force from *amour-propre*, or approval gained from others.⁴⁸ Rousseau's theory of human nature sees that respect that is not also accompanied by esteem is insufficiently fulfilling.⁴⁹ Therefore, this creates a form of alienation in people from the pre-social human ideal. People are rendered open to forms of social domination, as one is no longer self-reliant and instead at the mercy of others for both status and self-possession.⁵⁰ Alienation is derived from a loss of autonomy that people possess in the state of nature.

Rousseau puts forward his solution to this alienated sociality in *The Social Contract*. Rousseau's theory of governance is aimed at addressing the very serious social ills caused by *amour-propre*.⁵¹ In his formulation of political society there is "the total alienation of each associate with all of his rights to the whole community."⁵² Giving oneself entirely to the general will ensures that political decisions are made in the best interest of the whole population.⁵³ In the

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men" in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. & ed. Donald A. Cress (1755; repr., Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011) 39.

⁴⁸ Rainer Forst "Noumenal Alienation" *Kantian Review* 22, no. 4 (2017): 526.

⁴⁹ Frederick Neuhausser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69.

⁵⁰ Forst, "Noumenal Alienation", 527.

⁵¹ Neuhausser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 69.

⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On the Social Contract" in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. & ed. Donald A. Cress (1762; repr., Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 148.

⁵³ Rousseau, "On the Social Contract", 166-167.

complete submission to social institutions, true equality emerges as the political association becomes something greater than the sum of its parts.

While *The Discourses on the Origin of the Inequality of Man* outlines the impact of socialization as producing a negative alienation, *The Social Contract* inverts this conception to visualize an ideal of political association which fosters the unalienated life of the populace.⁵⁴ As Jaeggi notes, this idea inspired Hegel's conception of the social character of freedom.⁵⁵

The mitigation of alienation through social institutions is key for Hegel's thought. Hegel categorizes alienation into the subjective, the objective, and the complete. Hegel argues that people of his time were experiencing pure subjective alienation, because, for him, the construction of modern liberal society contains true individuality and freedom.⁵⁶ Marx's critique of Hegel is not that Hegel depicts the modern state of his time as it is, but instead that he presents the liberal state as universal. This ensures that Hegel does not see the historical origin of the state and he is therefore unable to criticize the structural problems inherent within it.⁵⁷ This is why alienation, for Hegel, can only be subjectively experienced. People may feel as though the state is not a home, but Hegel's own taxonomy is fully in support of the state as it is.

Marx takes issue with Hegel's purely subjective conception of alienation.⁵⁸ Marx argues that, since Hegel is focused on subjective alienation, he thinks it only occurs in forms of thought. Therefore, it is abstract and not tethered to anything material.⁵⁹ According to Marx, for Hegel,

the *estrangement*, which therefore forms the real interest of this alienation and of the transcendence of this alienation, is the opposition of *in itself* and *for itself*, of *consciousness* and *self-consciousness*, of *object* and *subject* - that is to say it is the

⁵⁴ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 7.

⁵⁵ Jaeggi, 8.

⁵⁶ Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 63.

⁵⁷ Galvano della Volpe, *Rousseau and Marx*, trans. John Fraser (1964; repr., London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1978), 164-165.

⁵⁸ Karl Marx. "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 110.

⁵⁹ Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts", 110.

opposition, within thought itself, between abstract thinking and sensuous reality or real sensuousness.⁶⁰

As the progression to rationality continues, alienation will cease with absolute knowledge.⁶¹ By this, Hegel means that people will realize that they are the producers of the social substance and will therefore understand that there is no reason to feel alienated. Hegel's philosophical project is oriented towards finding how one can derive a happy consciousness and feel at home in the world. He believes that absolute knowing will reconcile people with each other, with God, and with the world around them.⁶²

Marx inverts the relationship of ideas and the material, and instead argues that alienation needs to be based in the material realm in order to have any real meaning. Therefore, alienation will not be done away with by a progression towards greater knowledge. It is, instead, fundamentally built into the mode of production. Ultimately, Marx believes

that the root of all human alienation is not the objectification of consciousness, as he thought it was for Hegel, nor the projection of man's nature in a religious beyond as Feuerbach maintained, but a social-economic situation which is based upon private property and division of labour.⁶³

For Marx, then, alienation is a material problem inherent in the capitalist mode of production.

3.2 - Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx's own theory of alienation, which he develops in the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" is composed of four types. On Marx's account, human beings, under capitalism, are

⁶⁰ Marx, 110-111.

⁶¹ George W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (1807; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 479.

⁶² Peter Kalkavage, *The Logic of Desire: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007) 140.

⁶³ Louis Dupré, "Hegel's Conception of Alienation and Marx's Reinterpretation of it" *Hegel-Studien*, no. 7 (1972): 217.

alienated from the product of one's labour; from the act of production itself; from one's 'species-being' (or species life or character); and, finally, from one another.⁶⁴

Alienation from one's product occurs because labour, which used to be performed to make a product with use-value, is now being deployed only to create commodities with exchange-value.⁶⁵ The essence of human production is to make items people will use for themselves, and that people value because these items perform some function. Yet, instead, under capitalism, people make products to be sold on the market. The utility of commodities is therefore dictated by the profit it is able to produce for the owners of capital. Therefore, what is being made is wholly determined by what produces more value for the capitalist class. In this sense, the worker does not experience fulfillment when he produces a commodity.

In the capitalist mode of production, the worker is also alienated from the act of production as their own labour is turned against them.⁶⁶ They do not choose to work freely but are instead coerced to do so out of a need to survive.⁶⁷ The worker, therefore,

does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.⁶⁸

Coerced labour changes one's relation to production, it is not done for oneself, nor can any fulfillment be derived from it. It takes place fully for the capitalist, and therefore the worker is alienated from the act of production.

⁶⁴ Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts", 74-76.

⁶⁵ Marx, 70.

⁶⁶ Marx, 75.

⁶⁷ Marx, 74.

⁶⁸ Marx, 74

The notion of alienation from one's species-being is the most complex form of alienation that Marx describes. According to Marx, to be alienated from one's species-being occurs when man:

duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production therefore, exchanged labour tears from him his *species life*, his real species objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.⁶⁹

As Erich Fromm argues “what Marx means by ‘species-character’ is the essence of man; it is that which is universally human, and which is realized in the process of history by man through his productive activity.”⁷⁰

To labour is to transform an aspect of oneself into something material. Therefore, one is producing themselves as an object in the world and is also consciously aware of this process. There is an inseparable relationship between one's subjective or personal recognition of their position in relation to production and the object of themselves which they produce in the world. In relating themselves to the objective world, the world is also made real subjectively.⁷¹ This complex symbiosis defines the essence of human nature for Marx. Crucially, what creates an alienated person is that in the capitalist mode of production, the capitalist maintains control over this relationship of objectification and thus removes this essence of humanity from the possession of the worker. Therefore, instead of production for the fulfillment of one's own needs, or the needs of society, people are producing themselves in the world *for* capital.

The consequence is that through these three forms, people experience alienation from one another. One is commodified and only sees others “in accordance with the standard and the position

⁶⁹ Marx, 76-77.

⁷⁰ Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (1966; repr., London: Continuum, 2003), 29.

⁷¹ Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, 28.

with which he finds himself as a worker.”⁷² Relations amongst people become mediated through capitalism. Consequently, a worker will view another worker as their competition for better jobs or wages. While the worker’s true enemy is the capitalist class, fostering this competitive nature is an advantageous and necessary distortion for capitalist systems of production. If there is no solidarity amongst workers there can be no action taken by them against the capitalist class.

Within these forms of alienation, what is key is that it is not god nor nature taking away the product of man’s labour, but another man.⁷³ Therefore, if for the worker,

the product of his labour, his labour *objectified*, is for him *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him, then his position towards it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is *alien*, hostile, powerful, and independent of him.⁷⁴

Objective alienation is embedded in the structure of capitalism itself. Marx’s preoccupation with objective alienation does not emerge from a disregard of the importance of subjective alienation, “but rather of a conviction that such feelings exist – at least, exist on an extensive scale – only in societies scarred by objective alienation.”⁷⁵

Moreover, for Marx it is not only the worker who is alienated under capitalism. Marx argues that every person under capitalism is affected by this distortion of human nature and experience alienation from it.⁷⁶ Both the capitalist and the proletariat are products of the same world, but they form oppositional sides to this whole. What Marx demonstrates is the importance of both the relationship one has to the system of production and the felt dimension of alienation. The proletariat and the bourgeoisie experience alienation in the objective sense due to the nature

⁷² Marx, “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts”, 77.

⁷³ This is the distortion that Feuerbach points to.

⁷⁴ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 78.

⁷⁵ David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing. Ideas in Context*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 69.

⁷⁶ Karl Marx, “The Holy Family” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 133.

of capitalist production, but only the worker experiences the negatively felt dimension of alienation. Exploitation is not a mere feeling, but it is something that is done to the worker *and* felt by them. In spite of Marx's priority of the experience of alienation on the part of the working class, his materialist theory of alienation is oriented towards the emancipation of *all* people from "the chains of economic determination, of restituting him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature."⁷⁷ Marx believed that overcoming alienation would lead to flourishing for all people, regardless of their situation within the capitalist mode of production.

Lastly, it is important to note that many scholars argue that Marx's discussion of alienation, while most prominent in his earlier writings, is not solely located in the early "humanist" forms of Marxism. Indeed, they argue that the concept is revisited, albeit less specifically, in Marx's later works such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.⁷⁸ For example, George Comninel argues that in *Capital*,

Marx recognized in the specifically capitalist relationship of wage labour the ultimate expression of human alienation, and he understood it to be central to the historical evolution of human societies in a way that took Hegelian idealism and turned it right side up.⁷⁹

Therefore, to say that there is a rejection of the concept of alienation in Marx's later writings is to reject the way that Marx's critique of political economy in *Capital* is also oriented towards human emancipation. Moreover, it is highlighted by many scholars that, in *The Grundrisse*, Marx revives an explicit discussion of the concept of alienation.⁸⁰ While many in agreement

⁷⁷ Fromm, *Marx's Theory of Human Nature*, 2.

⁷⁸ Richard Schacht, *The Future of Alienation* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx*.

⁷⁹ George Comninel, *Alienation and Emancipation in the Work of Karl Marx* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 247.

⁸⁰ Emil Øversveen "Capitalism and alienation: Towards a Marxist theory of alienation for the 21st century." *European Journal of Social Theory*, 25 no. 3 (2022); Terrell Carver "Marx's conception of alienation in the

with Althusser's argument about Marx's epistemological break would say that the concept of alienation is relegated to his early writings, there is fruitful scholarship which points to the continuity of the concept throughout Marx's writings. This is to say that it is by no means an accepted fact that Marx found his early humanist theories of alienation to be fallacious. Indeed, while Marx defines alienation most explicitly in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, it is the concept, not the term, which is important to Marx, and it reappears throughout his writings.⁸¹

From Marx on, theories of alienation take up a place of great importance in the continuation of his thought through Western Marxism. Indeed, the problem Marx identifies in the relationship between the objectively alienating structure of capitalist labour, and the felt experiences of alienation, forms one of the primary tensions in Marxist theory. As Harvey argues:

it is fair to say that the duality of worker as 'object for capital' and as 'living creative subject' has never been adequately resolved in Marxist theory. Indeed, it has been the cause of an immense and continuing friction within the Marxist tradition.⁸²

This tension, especially in how it relates to alienation, is explored in the work of Lukács and the Frankfurt School.

3.3 - Alienation in Lukács

Georg Lukács is known to be the founder of Western Marxism. His work, particularly in *History and Class Consciousness*, is strongly oriented towards alienation and the sister concept of reification. Reification can be most simply summarized as when social relationships amongst

Grundrisse" in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Zacharias Zoubir; "'Alienation' and critique in Marx's manuscripts of 1857–58 ('Grundrisse')" *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 25 no. 5 (2018).

⁸¹ Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx*, 68.

⁸² David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*. (1982; repr., New York: Verso, 2018), 114.

people become seen with “non-human facticity.”⁸³ Social institutions created by people are seen as existing beyond the social relations that made them and are therefore viewed as fact or as unchangeable.⁸⁴ In this regard, people are alienated from the social conditions within which they exist. Lukács grounds his conception of reification and the subsequent alienation people experience in bourgeois society in Marx’s discussion of the commodity form in *Capital*.⁸⁵

Lukács argues that the

basis [of the commodity-structure] is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom-objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.⁸⁶

Here, Lukács is extrapolating from Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism in *Capital* to derive the notion of reification.⁸⁷ For Marx, commodity fetishism occurs when people imbue commodities with special properties they do not inherently possess, viewing these goods, which are being traded and exchanged on the market, as having some economic value beyond the work that went into producing them.⁸⁸ They are taking on a social relationship untethered from the basis of real people and viewing its existence as social truth. This form of reification is what Lukács views as happening in the entirety of the capitalist mode of production. For Lukács “if social phenomena cease to be recognizable as the outcome of human projects, it is understandable to perceive them

⁸³ Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966; repr., Harlow: Penguin Books, 1991), 106.

⁸⁴ This concept of reification also has a notably humanist origin. It relies on the notion that people have the power to build and rebuild the social realm and that the world that has become estranged from an ideal form. Of course, this humanist concept is something which Althusser is wary of (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 136).

⁸⁵ Lukács had not read *The Economic and Philosophic* at the time of writing as it was only published after Marx’s death in 1932.

⁸⁶ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (1923; repr., Massachusetts: MIT University Press, 1971), 83.

⁸⁷ Briefly, it is also important to note that, in deriving his theory from *Capital*, Lukács clearly does not view the work of the later Marx to be a turn away from philosophy. Instead, he finds philosophical richness in the later writings by Marx.

⁸⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; repr., London: Penguin Random House, 1992), 165.

as material things, and thus to accept their existence as inevitable.”⁸⁹ Lukács uses this phenomenon to explain why workers, despite the overwhelmingly immiserating conditions they are subjected to, continue to support capitalist relations of production, as they possess a sort of false consciousness.

Lukács argues that this reification and false consciousness can be overcome through the proletariat coming to recognize themselves in their position as the commodity-form that they are. This means the proletariat have a unique perspective on the reified system of capitalist production.⁹⁰ Therefore, the worker who is the foundation and core of these reified relations, is the only one able to overcome them. This is the unique standpoint of the proletariat. Crucially, for Lukács, these manifestations are not only occurring in thought. While the act of reifying is a mental process, its consequences are material as they are what uphold bourgeois society. Therefore, “praxis cannot be divorced from knowledge”, and for Lukács there is an inextricable link between the two.⁹¹ The proletariat are the ones who subject their physical being each day to produce commodities in exchange for very little, while working conditions get worse and the working day gets longer. The standpoint of the proletariat privileges them with an insight into the capitalist mode of production that no other can glean.

The crucial theme of Lukács’ writing in *History and Class Consciousness* is his investment of hope in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat as the unique subject-object of history, that is to say, as the class that is uniquely capable of grasping its position as the demiurge of the social world.⁹² This slippery Hegelian formulation creates unique problems for Lukács.⁹³ Nonetheless

⁸⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, 70.

⁹⁰ Eagleton, 181.

⁹¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 177.

⁹² Lukács, 149.

⁹³ For example, Lukács’ project is reliant on working class consciousness, but he does little to define from what perspective this consciousness is determined, and this claim can quickly become dogmatic (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 183).

the key insight is that he recognizes that oppressed groups need to understand both their own personal position and how that relates to the whole of society they are historically situated within.

As Eagleton demonstrates

Lukács's point is that certain groups and classes need to inscribe their own condition within a wider context if they are to change that condition; and in doing so they will find themselves challenging the consciousness of those who have an interest in blocking this emancipatory knowledge.⁹⁴

Lukács prioritizes the reciprocation between the subjective position of the proletariat and the objective construction of society. For there to be social change and a unified working-class movement, there needs to be a conscious recognition by the oppressed that the way society is constructed is what oppresses them. While I would not go so far as to say that this is all it takes to mobilize people, it is a fundamental point for political movements. In this regard, Lukács is clearly a humanist, and an empiricist, insofar as he believes the proletariat can possess some unique knowledge of the capitalist system. Of course, this is the precise method of theorization that Althusser objects to. Nonetheless, for this reason, I argue that Lukács', albeit flawed, perspective on alienation is an important and still relevant contribution to the scholarship.

3.4 Alienation in Marcuse & the Frankfurt School

Lukács was a strong influence on the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. He both informed their theories and was heavily critiqued by them.⁹⁵ This difference lies primarily in the orientation of their philosophy. Lukács was focused on a metacritique of bourgeois philosophy

⁹⁴ Eagleton, 182.

⁹⁵ While he was influential on all members of the Frankfurt School, he was most fundamental for Adorno and Marcuse, and far less so for Horkheimer. Adorno was more reliant on the concept of reification for his writing than Horkheimer was. Horkheimer's own critical theory does not fit within the classical conception of the trajectory of Western Marxism as neatly [John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011), 424].

and the notion that the subject and the object constitute antinomies that emerge from the construction of society which can be overcome through social change.⁹⁶ The Frankfurt School diverges from this goal of Lukács' writings insofar as its members do not agree with the notion that overcoming social antinomies will construct an emancipated universal rationalism.⁹⁷ Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer in particular reject the unity of theory and practice that is at the forefront of Lukács' project.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Lukács did not place as strong an emphasis on social psychology and technology, which are crucial themes in the writings of the Frankfurt School theorists. Where Lukács invested hope in the proletariat to overcome the social conditions and developed a theory in line with this, the Frankfurt School was focused on diagnosing the failure of resistance and revolution through a critique of new technologies and an analysis of the contemporary population's social-psychological ills. Nonetheless, the notion of reification and alienation from Lukács is crucial for the Frankfurt School's analysis.⁹⁹

While there are many different Frankfurt School theorists and a variety of different arguments advanced by its members on alienation, I will primarily focus on the thought of Adorno & Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. These books most explicitly dealt with the problem of alienation and the closely related concept of *Ideologiekritik*.¹⁰⁰ Of course, this is not to say that they all have the same perspective

⁹⁶ Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School* (New York: Verso, 2014), 186.

⁹⁷ Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 187.

⁹⁸ Marcuse, on the other hand, is more explicit that his goal is to bring practice in line with theory [Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972)].

⁹⁹ Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 189.

¹⁰⁰ *Ideologiekritik* is the radical criticism of society and the dominant ideology which upholds it. Crucially, it is not merely a form of moralizing criticism but instead is in itself a form of knowledge. [Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas & the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 26].

on alienation, however, their similarity of approach is emblematic of the pre-Althusserian Marxist humanism.¹⁰¹

The theorists of the Frankfurt School primarily argued that “pure objective alienation” exists under capitalism. This means that alienation exists in social structures even without corresponding feelings arising.¹⁰² Essentially, this form of alienation is one in which people do not even know that they are alienated.¹⁰³ While this may seem at variance with the argument I advance on the importance of subjective alienation, counterintuitively, I argue that this is a more fruitful approach to alienation scholarship than the one which has been taken by the scientific-humanists I will discuss in the next section. The Frankfurt School’s account of objective alienation is ultimately oriented towards the same philosophical goal as I am, a theory of emancipation embedded in the notion of alienation. The primary difference, however, lies in a disagreement on whether or not alienation is felt and expressed by workers. While the Frankfurt School thinkers view a society of mass complacency, this pessimism is not one of complete resignation. For people to feel their alienation would indicate that they are recognizing the way the social world inhibits change, and therefore help incite action. Of course, the problems of paternalism I discussed above in Lukács’ theory of alienation persist here. However, the Frankfurt School maintains the primacy of an emancipatory undercurrent that is neglected in the latter humanists’ precise theoretical reconstructions of alienation.

¹⁰¹ While I will primarily discuss Marcuse in this section, it would be wrong to take him as simply emblematic of the Frankfurt School’s thoughts on alienation. While the Frankfurt School is grouped together for the similar orientation of their critique, the thinkers vary in their theoretical approaches. This is an argument made by Angela Davis, who notes that Marcuse is more radical in his approach than previous Frankfurt School thinkers [Angela Y. Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies” in *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader* eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb, (New York: Routledge Press, 2004)]. For this reason, I primarily discuss Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. I believe it is the strongest expression of Frankfurt School alienation theory insofar as it is most explicit in its discussion of pure objective alienation.

¹⁰² Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 120.

¹⁰³ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 47.

Furthermore, this cynicism concerning the lack of recognition of felt alienation by workers has elicited many critics. Namely, people argue that the pessimism of the Frankfurt School is a form of political quietism, a passivity that, while acknowledging the problems of the social world, does not see much hope in changing the structure of the system. However, Marcuse defends the position he advances in *One-Dimensional Man* against this, arguing that

to be afraid of being too negative, the understandable wish to be a little more comforting and to find revolutionary forces – these good intentions foster illusions, divert and weaken the opposition, and play into the hands of the Establishment.¹⁰⁴

It would be a disservice to the revolutionary project to write with a fake optimism when, as Marcuse views it, there are fundamental problems with mobilizing the proletariat. Indeed, he points to this tension in his discussion of the fate of the working class. He argues that

The working class still is the “ontological” antagonist of capital, and the potentially revolutionary Subject: but it is a vastly expanded working class, which no longer corresponds directly to the Marxian proletariat.¹⁰⁵

Therefore, while the essence of the proletariat’s oppositional position in relation to capital persists, the shifting social and material conditions have rendered the working class ineffective insofar as they do not engage in tangible forms of resistance. This is the problem the Frankfurt School reckons with. As this demonstrates, while they are pessimistic about the fate of the working class, they still acknowledge the inherent revolutionary potential in the proletariat.

Before discussing Marcuse’s theory of objective alienation, it is important to look at the early work of the Frankfurt School theorists. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and explores the problems of Enlightenment in the context of the rise of fascism. While this book tackles a variety of different themes, the problem of alienation remains

¹⁰⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Six*, eds. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (New York: Routledge Press, 2014), 329.

¹⁰⁵ Marcuse, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, 392.

crucial here. Adorno and Horkheimer's essential argument is that, despite the Enlightenment notion that the progression of reason allows us to understand nature, and subsequently innovate and control it, rationality has instead increased our own subjugation and domination as opposed to providing liberation.¹⁰⁶ This is the foundation of the notion of pure objective alienation.

People *believe* that they are free within the increasingly rational world, but despite this, they are in an objective state of unfreedom. This complacency in the social world can be seen through the widespread enjoyment in industrially produced mass culture, even in spite of its monotony and homogeneity.¹⁰⁷ The idea that we can watch whatever we would like and buy whatever consumer goods we want can be associated with freedom, but, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, in reality we are trapped in this plethora of choice. In this regard, "the more human beings struggle to maintain their artificial hell, the more they are beset by problems engendered by the struggle itself."¹⁰⁸ For Adorno and Horkheimer, people have become so estranged from the possibility of changing their lives for the better that they actively support the worsening material conditions and therefore their oppression.

The themes of alienation outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are pushed further in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*.¹⁰⁹ Here, Marcuse emphasizes the notion of pure objective alienation. He argues:

The concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is

¹⁰⁶ Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, (1944; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 95.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, Julian, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment" in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Douglas Kellner, argues that Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* might be the most concrete development to analyze and confront the consequences of the integration of the working classes and the stabilization of capitalism for the project of radical social change (Kellner, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, 47).

swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms.¹¹⁰

For Marcuse, like Adorno and Horkheimer, the capitalist system is so entirely alienating that people are unable to acknowledge the costs that they incur from living in it, and instead support the social system as it is. Therefore, they exist in a state of false consciousness. Because of this, Marcuse does not see much hope for revolution in the proletariat of ‘advanced industrial societies’.¹¹¹ From Marcuse’s perspective, the binary opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is not entirely gone, but it has certainly diminished. Moreover, with increasing technological innovation, proletarians treat those who dominate them like bureaucrats, rather than class enemies.¹¹² This indicates that people see their domination as routine. Therefore, resistance in the workplace is no longer accompanied by any substantive form of radicalization.¹¹³

However, while Marcuse presents a cynical outlook of the social conditions, he does not believe there is no chance for change. Marcuse sees revolutionary potential in “the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable” as they exist outside of corrupt systems.¹¹⁴ These people are the ones whose mere existence negates capitalist hegemony. While the proletariat in the traditional Marxian sense no longer operate in the way which Marx envisioned, the most estranged people in society have the necessary form of consciousness to oppose the system of capitalist exploitation. However, even within this oppositional group, Marcuse sees dim

¹¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 13.

¹¹¹ Seyla Benhabib, “The Critique of Instrumental Reason” in *Mapping Ideology* ed. Slavoj Zizek (New York: Verso, 2012), 66.

¹¹² Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 35.

¹¹³ Marcuse, 41.

¹¹⁴ Marcuse, 256.

prospects for revolutionary change because capitalist society excels at stabilizing itself by coopting resistance movements.¹¹⁵

Nonetheless, Marcuse is not entirely without hope. He ends the book quoting Walter Benjamin: “it is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.”¹¹⁶ Marcuse’s argument that objective alienation is all-encompassing is not an admission of defeat. He wants people to overcome the false consciousness that he believes they are trapped within. This is the purpose of *ideologiekritik*.¹¹⁷ The identification of objective alienation has a productive goal. Indeed, Marcuse was an admirer of Lukács’ focus on consciousness and “the subjective factors of revolution”.¹¹⁸ In this regard, while Marcuse is critical of the notion that the inherent contradiction in society will mobilize people for revolution, he does believe that there is something to be said for engaging people’s affective experiences under capitalism.¹¹⁹ In other words, he does hope that people would open their eyes and feel that the conditions under capitalism are alienating. While Althusser would vehemently disagree, the Frankfurt School believed that if people can overcome the yoke of ideology, they can overcome capitalist exploitation and therefore undo objective alienation.

To conclude, I must note that the Frankfurt School had a fraught relationship with emancipatory political action. Before Adorno’s death, he (in)famously told an interviewer “I established a theoretical model of thought. How could I have suspected that people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?”¹²⁰ Ironically, despite the pessimism of the Frankfurt School, their writings were hugely motivating in the student movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

¹¹⁵ Marcuse, 257.

¹¹⁶ Marcuse, 257.

¹¹⁷ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory*, 26.

¹¹⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, 17.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, this is what Marcuse calls ‘the Great Refusal’ or when people are “recognizing the mark of social repression” [Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)].

¹²⁰ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Verso, 2016), 1.

Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was rediscovered by students who found their critique of mass American culture to be deeply salient during the Vietnam War.¹²¹ Marcuse was at the intellectual centre of many radical student movements and his "critique of contemporary society was radical in the sense that it penetrated to the roots of current alienation" which caused people to mobilize.¹²² While the Frankfurt School themselves did not have as clear a perspective on the intersection between theory and praxis, it is undeniable that their writings provoked people to try and change oppressive institutions. Writing on the alienation and mass complacency in society was influential at the time and inspired people to mobilize around a collective fight. In this respect, the affinity people felt with the theories expressed in the writings of the Frankfurt School had a more direct relation to political organizing than the later works on alienation.

This section has demonstrated the key arguments presented by pre-Althusserian, unabashedly humanist, theories of alienation. Rousseau and Hegel established the outlines of an idealist theory of alienation which Marx used to found a materialist conception of estrangement under capitalism. From there, alienation has a prominent role in early humanist thinking and is deeply intertwined with the notion of political emancipation. Ultimately, I argue that the most productive aspect of early Marxist alienation theories is the way they prioritized the subject's relationship to capitalist systems of exploitation and what that says about emancipation. Of course, there is a strong difference between Lukács and the Frankfurt School, but these thinkers have similar ideals of political freedom which makes central the role of the subject.

¹²¹ Roberts "The Dialectic of Enlightenment", 58. Roberts also notes that this was an embarrassment to Horkheimer and Adorno. Clearly, the early Frankfurt School's relationship to emancipation is deeply complicated.

¹²² Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1984), 2. Marcuse was far more supportive of student protest movements than Adorno.

4. Alienation After Althusser

After the Althusserian intervention, many social theorists broke with the earlier method of discussing alienation. Humanist Marxism was placed in the defensive corner, and with that, a new strategy of theorizing emerged. Avoiding the problems that were criticized by Althusser produced a new method of discussing alienation that differs greatly from what is found in Lukács and the Frankfurt School. To support this claim, I will first discuss two late twentieth century books that recapitulate Marx's theory of alienation: István Mészáros' *Marx's Theory of Alienation* and Bertell Ollman's *Alienation*. These books, insofar as they are the most prominent writings on alienation after Althusser, are emblematic of a scientific humanism which neglects the subjective dimension of alienation. These books highlight the way in which the subjective discussion of alienation is omitted in favour of explicating its objective structure in capitalist society.

I will also use examples from industrial sociology, namely the works of Robert Blauner, Simon Clarke, and Harry Braverman, to show the discipline's complicated relationship with alienation. First, I will discuss Robert Blauner's highly critiqued (pre-Althusserian) book on alienation which only focuses on its subjective expression. I will then highlight the different responses to it which prioritize objective alienation. The first, from Simon Clarke, offers a theory that is directly anti-Althusserian and uses objective alienation as central to the critique of political economy. The second, offered by Harry Braverman, does not cite or respond to Althusser's critique. Indeed, he omits the discussion of subjective alienation not because it is inutile but because his book has a different target. These different responses show the varying ways objective alienation is treated with Althusser's influence and without it.

Lastly, I will turn to Rahel Jaeggi's book, *Alienation*, which is, in part, responsible for revitalizing the philosophical discussion of alienation in the twenty-first century. I will argue that

while this book does not neglect the subjective dimension of alienation, it responds to the Althusserian paradigm shift as well. Jaeggi's theory of alienation, in avoiding the problems Althusser identifies, provides a theory of alienation that lacks a forceful Marxist political dimension.

Ultimately, this new way of talking about alienation is primarily oriented towards reconstructing an objective account of Marx's theory that is itself immune to criticism for a lack of scientific rigour. As emphasized above, the version of science that the later humanist Marxists are attempting to engage in does not necessarily correspond to Althusser's own definition of science. Instead, they engage in a practice of trying to explicate a new kind of Marxist theorization which can walk the tightrope between humanism and 'scientific Marxism', whatever that may be. Doing so perhaps abates some of the accusations from anti-humanists, however it also relegates the concept of alienation to a purely theoretical realm. Accordingly, the concept of alienation remains isolated from its articulation in the lives of people and its political importance is left behind.

4.1. Mészáros - Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx's Theory of Alienation by István Mészáros is the first major comprehensive discussion of alienation in Marx's writings.¹²³ Mészáros begins his work by arguing that *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* can be poorly interpreted due to the complexity of Marx's theorization.¹²⁴ Nonetheless, he also believes that one can extricate a singular, clear-cut, theory of alienation from his writings.¹²⁵ Moreover, he argues that alienation is at the centre of Marx's whole

¹²³ Mészáros was part of the Budapest School, a group of theorists who were either students of or highly influenced by Lukács.

¹²⁴ István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 11.

¹²⁵ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 233.

philosophy. Mészáros does not entirely ignore the subjective manifestation of alienation, but this is by no means his focus. Instead, his book is oriented towards a reconstruction of Marx's theory of alienation.

First, Mészáros takes issue with how both political economy and speculative philosophy are unable to see how the relationship between private property and labour produces an objective structure of alienation.¹²⁶ Instead, he argues that these thinkers are *only* able to perceive, at best, the subjective elements of this contradiction. In other words, he highlights that most people discussing alienation do so using the Hegelian concept of pure subjective alienation, according to which social circumstances are perceived as alienating even though they are not. Mészáros is focusing on the crucial point made by Marx that the relations of production produce an objectively alienating social structure.

Moreover, Mészáros argues that the humanist aspects of the early Marx do not exist independently of a robust scientific methodology. Mészáros is instead highlighting that Marx synthesizes both the natural sciences and abstract philosophy in order to produce a theory of labour alienation which is at the root of all social conditions.¹²⁷ Therefore, in doing so, Mészáros is not entirely discounting the felt aspects of alienation. The inter-relation of subjectivity and objectivity in Marx's writings is not lost, but subjectivity is eclipsed by an attempt to rearticulate the complex aspects of objective alienation that he argues cannot be reduced to simple humanism.

Importantly, Mészáros does not define himself as a humanist. He emphasizes that he is writing a "human science" which is not to be confused with "the vague and woolly notion of an 'anthropological philosophy' or 'humanist Marxism.'"¹²⁸ In this regard, Mészáros is reconstructing

¹²⁶ Mészáros, 112.

¹²⁷ Mészáros, 16.

¹²⁸ Mészáros, 17.

Marx's theory of alienation with a focus on the meticulous science that Marx is using. This is made further clear in Mészáros emphasis that Marx "categorically rejected the concept of a 'human essence,'" and instead distanced himself from what, Mészáros argues, Marx viewed as an empty philosophical term.¹²⁹ Yet, as Norman Geras insightfully demonstrates, this is an illogical argument that even contradicts many points Mészáros himself makes. Mészáros rejects the idea that Marx has a concept of human nature while still deploying the concept to make his own argument.¹³⁰ Instead of simply existing within the humanist paradigm, Mészáros complicates the argument to distance himself from humanist presuppositions that Althusser argues against, but he is unable to entirely do so.

Furthermore, Mészáros rejects the separation between the early and the late Marx. He disagrees with the opposition between science and ideology that Althusser outlines. He calls this a false dichotomy, and concedes that, while without some of these "ideological" concepts Marx's opus would be more "scientific," but it would nevertheless be an incomplete and inferior discussion.¹³¹ Therefore, while not directly referencing Althusser in this conversation, it is clear that it is in the wake of Althusser's anti-humanist paradigm that Mészáros is reconstructing Marx's theory.

4.2. Ollman - Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society

In a similar vein to Mészáros, Bertell Ollman offers a reconstruction of Marx's theory of alienation that prioritizes its objective structure. To do so, Ollman relies on an account of Marx's

¹²⁹ Mészáros, 13.

¹³⁰ Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (New York: Verso, 1983), 54.

¹³¹ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 23.

philosophy of internal relations.¹³² The philosophical debate about the concept of internal relations is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it must be briefly discussed to highlight Ollman's objective account. Most simply put, the doctrine of internal relations is "the theory that all the relations of a thing, event or 'term' are internal or necessary to it, in the sense that if its relations are altered, the thing, event or term will itself be altered."¹³³ The doctrine of internal relations is attributed to philosophical idealists, such as Hegel, Whitehead, Pierce, Russell and G.E. Moore. Therefore, it is surprising to see it arise in an analysis of Marx, which Ollman acknowledges in the preface to the second edition. Nonetheless, he argues that this reading of Marx is the lynchpin of his own analysis of alienation.¹³⁴ According to Ollman, common sense has it that "a social factor is taken to be logically independent of other social factors to which it is related" and that therefore social relations exist independently and without necessary relations to others. However, on Ollman's interpretation of Marx, social factors have internal relations such that when one social relation is altered, it and every social relation to which it is connected require new concepts.¹³⁵

This view was criticized to the point that Ollman included an appendix in the second edition to respond to those who found his use of the theory of internal relations to be unfounded. The most relevant criticism of Ollman's interpretation argues that to see in Marx's writings a philosophy of internal relations flattens the degrees and differences in the relationships of alienation that people may experience.¹³⁶ This is an important criticism, as, in arguing that this

¹³² Bertell Ollman *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 30.

¹³³ Sean Sayers, "Marxism and the doctrine of internal relations", *Capital and Class*, 39 no. 1 (2015): 25.

¹³⁴ Ollman, *Alienation*, vii.

¹³⁵ Ollman, 15.

¹³⁶ Ollman, 264. While I highlight the criticism regarding alienation, it is also important to note that Ollman was most strongly critiqued on the doctrine of internal relations for its denial of the primacy of the market and the mode of production. Therefore, this interpretation is accused of shifting analysis away from a typical Marxist base-superstructure understanding of social relationships.

philosophy of internal relations is critical in Marx, Ollman is reconstructing a theory of alienation which is highly structuralist. Ollman prioritizes an objective account that looks at the components of a structural whole that alienates workers.¹³⁷ Therefore, while Ollman, like Mészáros, does not deny the existence of felt alienation, he does not treat it as a dimension of alienation worth theorizing in and of itself. Ollman's book is dedicated to expounding a theory of the social ills in capitalism not from the non-human concepts like the mode of production, class, or value but from the starting point of man that the theory of alienation is contingent on.¹³⁸ However, starting with people as the basis of this analysis does not mean people as sensuous, experiencing beings, but instead people as a theoretical component to the structure of internal relations. Therefore, while Ollman founds his analysis on people instead of non-human social structures, people are still components to a structuralist theory.

Secondly, it is crucial to note that while Ollman is offering a structuralist account, he is vehemently rejecting Althusser's approach to structuralism. Instead, Ollman is arguing that Althusser offers an inadequate structural argument of Marx by "confusing structure with complexity."¹³⁹ In focusing on Marx's philosophy of internal relations, which he cites Althusser as not addressing,¹⁴⁰ Ollman is arguing that a structuralist account of Marx is found in Marx's early as well as later writings. Therefore, to relegate the concept of alienation to the early writings and to say that Marx rejects it creates an insufficient structuralist account of Marx in Ollman's view.

¹³⁷ Ollman, 286.

¹³⁸ Ollman, xi.

¹³⁹ Ollman, 286. Here, Ollman is gesturing towards Althusser's critique of the notion of "expressive totality" or the left Hegelian idea that the whole is present in the component structures of society. Therefore, when Ollman is criticizing Althusser, he is also arguing that Althusser does not sufficiently reckon with this concept.

¹⁴⁰ Ollman, 30.

Ultimately, Ollman's reconstruction of Marx's theory of alienation relies on a similar structuralism to Althusser. He uses man as the basis of his theory which provides a structuralist analysis of capitalism as blooming out from alienation. Where the structuralism of Althusser and Ollman differs is in the method of interpretation, Ollman believing that the early Marx and his analysis of human nature can be a crucial starting point for capitalist critique. In this regard, Ollman provides an account of alienation through a scientific humanist method of analysis, which while creating a novel interpretation of the crucial concept of alienation in Marx's writings, also overlooks alienation as experienced in real people. Alienation, as a concept which can be used to analyze capitalism, starts from the *category* of people, not from people's experiences of alienation.

4.3 - Sociological Accounts

It is paramount that I next address alienation as it is discussed in industrial sociology. Alienation plays a peculiar role in sociology especially in relation to Marxist philosophy insofar as it borrows heavily, but is not as directly involved, in the tradition. Therefore, it bears a less linear relationship to the argument I advance about the shift in alienation discussion after the Althusserian break. While it is a divergent account of the concept of alienation, it weaves back in and out of the philosophical debate in a way which would be problematic to not discuss.

I will begin with the advent of alienation in industrial sociology looking at Robert Blauner's influential book *Alienation and Freedom*, published in 1964 before the Althusserian intervention. In this book, Blauner offers a subjective account of alienation as applied to the factory industry of the time. I will follow with a discussion of two subsequent sociologists, Simon Clarke and Harry Braverman, who are critical of Blauner's subjective approach. While they are critical of Blauner

in similar ways, I note the divergent responses to a theory of subjective alienation from Clarke, who is a strong critic of structuralism, and Braverman, who is not responding to Althusser at all in his book. I argue that Clarke's notion of alienation is primarily an objective discussion of how alienation can be used as an abstraction to critique political economy. Clarke still prioritizes the interrelation between the subjective and objective, but he prioritizes making alienation an objective concept. Alternatively, Braverman has a perspective on alienation which is more in line with the Frankfurt School and Marcuse insofar as he is concerned with the problems of ideology and workers' class-consciousness.

First, I will briefly outline the argument advanced in Blauner's book. Blauner is examining alienation in factory workers and attempting to analyze under what conditions modern factory technology and work are more alienating and under what conditions is alienation minimized or counteracted.¹⁴¹ For his account, Blauner analyzes questionnaire responses from a variety of sources, as well as select interviews. From this, he concludes that there are a diversity of factors which increase or decrease feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and estrangement in the factory setting. He argues that technology has the greatest impact on the level of alienation a worker may experience as machines reduce the power that a worker feel they have in their industry.¹⁴² Moreover, he determines that the intensified division of labour is also increasing feelings of alienation in the workplace.¹⁴³ Crucially, the conclusion he reaches about what does and does not have an impact is entirely derived from empirical subjective evidence. Therefore, this book contains very little analysis of the objective structures of capitalist exploitation that elicit these feelings of alienation. This method of sociological theorizing was very

¹⁴¹ Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and his Industry*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

¹⁴² Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom*, 169.

¹⁴³ Blauner, 171.

common and is subsequently critiqued by future industrial sociologists who advocate for making an analysis of objective structures of capitalist exploitation more central.

One of these critics of Blauner is Marxist sociologist Simon Clarke. Clarke argued that in Blauner's book "the evaluation of the subjective experience of the labourer is not a metaphysical but an empirical question, an observation which leads directly into social psychological interpretations of the theory of alienation," and therefore has no material analysis.¹⁴⁴ Without an examination of the objective structures of capitalist domination, alienation amounts to being a mere perceptive phenomenon which has little consequences beyond sentiment.

Clarke's own study of alienation is also primarily focused on the objective dimension of the concept, as his goal is to begin with the notion of alienation to write a critique of modern economics and sociology. Clarke is also a strong critic of structuralism and therefore the Althusserian method of analysis. Nonetheless, while rejecting structuralism, Clarke makes a similar turn to Ollman insofar as he wants to use alienation to criticize political economy.

To begin, Clarke's anti-structuralism is primarily advanced in his book, *The Foundations of Structuralism: A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement*. Here, Clarke is targeting the structuralism of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as well as the (supposed) followers of this school of thought, namely Althusser, Foucault, and Lacan. Clarke's criticism is that structuralism is itself not epistemologically separate from the early forms of philosophical positivism that inform it.¹⁴⁵ His book is primarily a criticism of structuralist methodology insofar as it reduces a complex system of relationships to dehumanized, static structures. Clarke wants to rescue the relationship of the subject and the object, which he argues should not be relegated to a

¹⁴⁴ Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology: From Adam Smith to Max Weber* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1982), 65.

¹⁴⁵ Simon Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism: A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), 3.

dichotomy. Instead, the inter-relation between the two is what is able to produce strong analysis of social systems.¹⁴⁶

Nonetheless, in his book, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, Clarke primarily uses alienation as an objective concept to critique typical understandings of political economy. Clarke follows both Mészáros and Ollman in locating Marx's theory of alienation as the crux of Marx's critique of political economy. He argues that "although Marx's theory of alienated labour has been willfully or unwilfully misinterpreted by almost all the commentators, it is the very foundation not only of his critique of political economy and of Hegel's philosophy, but also of his critique of the presuppositions of liberal social thought in general."¹⁴⁷ Clarke is working to undo commonplace assumptions about the functions of capital in both the fields of liberal political economy and in sociology. Yet, in order to do so, he neglects expanding on a theory of subjective alienation. In his book, he does not pay a necessary amount of attention to the subjective dimension instead falls into a similar pattern of analysis as Ollman. This is not to say he ignores subjective alienation entirely, but he dedicates more time to expounding the theory of objective alienation to make his disciplinary critiques.

Clarke wants to invert the typically perceived structure of reification and its relation to alienation. He argues that alienation

is not the result of a subjective attitude to labour, the expression of a 'reified consciousness', but is an objective characteristic of the social forms of capitalist production and reproduction, of which 'reification' is the subjective expression.¹⁴⁸

In making this argument, Clarke is attempting to rescue alienation from the humanist problem of prescriptiveness. If he successfully argues that reification emerges as a feeling from the objectively

¹⁴⁶ Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism*, 231.

¹⁴⁷ Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, 70.

¹⁴⁸ Clarke, 324.

alienating system of production, then reification is no longer an abdication of responsibility for social instructions but a psychological coping mechanism. Therefore, the feelings of alienation are not primary for Clarke in this book. While he pays attention to the subjective dimensions as manifested in the notion of reification, he is only doing so in a way that justifies the location of alienation as the basis of a critique of political economy.

Braverman is equally critical of Blauner's book and of subjective discussions of alienation in sociology. His theory, developed in *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, is oriented towards an objective analysis of alienation. I argue, however, that it diverges from Clarke's position insofar as it is motivated by similar goals as the Frankfurt School theorists.

While Braverman's analysis in *Labour and Monopoly Capital* is also a response to the problems of humanism, he entirely omits the subjective dimension from his writing. He takes issue with those in the social sciences who view class as only really existing in its subjective manifestations, i.e., in one's own personal identification with a class.¹⁴⁹ If something merely manifests itself in the consciousness of subjects, then it can be coopted by petty bourgeois academics, thus removing the force of the grouping of class. He states:

At least two generations of academic sociology have so elevated this approach into a dogma that only rarely is the need felt to substantiate it. This dogma calls for the delineation of various layers of stratification by means of questionnaires which enable the respondents to choose their own class, thereby relieving sociologists of the obligation.¹⁵⁰

Braverman views those sociologists, like Blauner, who defer to surveys as abdicating their responsibility to say anything novel or authoritative on capitalism.

¹⁴⁹ Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 19.

¹⁵⁰ Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, 19.

Nonetheless, Braverman is following Schmidt in saying that the concept of alienation is itself still useful. The issue is that the term has been turned into “ideological prattle in the mouths of petty-bourgeois authors.”¹⁵¹ Braverman makes clear that “it is not my purpose in these comments to deprecate the importance of the study of the state of consciousness of the working class, since it is only through consciousness that a class becomes an actor on the historic stage.”¹⁵² Without a study of the objective structure of class and domination, the sociological study of industrial relations becomes devoid of an authoritative stance on the structures of capitalist exploitation. Nonetheless, Braverman does not reject the utility of felt alienation and class consciousness as manifested in the working class.

Moreover, it is clear that Braverman is influenced by the Frankfurt School in his understanding of capitalist exploitation. He follows Marcuse in arguing that technological development and the mechanization of labour has supplanted people’s feelings about the irrationality of capitalist systems of production.¹⁵³ He argues that

the attempt to conceive of the worker as a general-purpose machine operated by management is one of many paths taken toward the same goal: the displacement of labor as the subjective element of the labor process and its transformation into an object.¹⁵⁴

Essentially, Braverman is pointing to the all-consuming process of monopoly capital and the techniques of management that have led to the deskilling of work and a decline in the autonomy of workers at the expense of increased managerial control. He is looking at the objective structures which allow this to occur, but he is nonetheless implicitly basing some of his arguments on the humanist notion of an ideal form of labour. In this regard, his discussion of the objective structures

¹⁵¹ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1962, repr., New York: Verso, 2014), 257.

¹⁵² Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, 20.

¹⁵³ Braverman, 118.

¹⁵⁴ Braverman, 124.

is more in line with the style of theorizing of the Frankfurt School. Ultimately, Braverman's preoccupation with the objective structure of capitalism and the rejection of the subjective is done because of the problems of the subjective methods used in sociology, not as a rejection of Althusser.

This section was intended to demonstrate the way the Althusserian paradigm shaped sociological discussions of alienation. Alienation, insofar as it is a socio-psychological phenomenon, has great importance in critical industrial sociology. In outlining Blauner's paradigmatic study, I aimed to demonstrate the problem with a subjective account of alienation that lacks any relation to the objective structures of capitalism that cause alienated labour. Clarke's anti-structuralist account inverts the typical relationship between reification and alienation to make reification the subjective manifestation of alienation. He therefore frees up the concept of alienation to be an objective origin point for a scientific critique of classic political economy and sociology. Alternatively, Braverman, who is not responding to the Althusserian intervention, is more closely in line with the Frankfurt School in his objective account. Braverman aims to remove the pliability of categories like class, alienation, and consciousness, in order to present an analysis of the ever-increasing power of monopoly capital in the lives of the workers. Yet, his account does not dismiss the importance of the subjective in political organizing. Instead, he focuses on exhuming the objective structures of domination in a way that can be understood by the working class.

4.4. Jaeggi - Alienation

In the 21st century, alienation had fallen out of favour in Marxist and critical theory. An insufficient ability to reckon with the problems that humanism entails meant that Marxist theorists began looking elsewhere for concepts to ground theories of emancipation and freedom, such as

republican interpretations of Marx that focus on domination. For example, William Clare Roberts takes issue with the notion that, as many scholars outlined above have argued, alienation is at the heart of Marx's critique of capitalism. As Roberts argues, giving primacy to alienation in discussing Marx is antithetical to a republican project as it prioritizes a theory of self-mastery.¹⁵⁵ Nonetheless, there are scholars that still argue for the importance of alienation in the 21st century. This is seen in contemporary philosophers like Rahel Jaeggi and Rainer Forst.¹⁵⁶ Jaeggi, in particular, is responsible for the revival of the discussion of alienation in recent scholarship with her book, *Alienation*.

Jaeggi's book offers a careful reconstruction since the "Hegelian-Marxist idea of alienation fell out of favor after the post metaphysical rejection of humanism and essentialist views of human nature."¹⁵⁷ Jaeggi is aiming to show that alienation need not rest on essentialism, "as has been standardly charged by thinkers since Althusser in the continental tradition."¹⁵⁸ Jaeggi avoids these problems because she conceptualizes alienation as a relation of domination.¹⁵⁹ She argues that overcoming alienation is not a return to some prior state of being. Instead, she focuses on appropriation, using a formalist approach which does not look at what is being appropriated, but how appropriation is occurring.¹⁶⁰ Alienation then becomes a problem of how one relates to the roles that they are playing, and how to properly appropriate oneself in a role.¹⁶¹

Jaeggi gives much greater space to subjectivity than others who attempt to rescue alienation. Jaeggi uses stories of people's subjectively experienced estrangement to highlight

¹⁵⁵ William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 248-249.

¹⁵⁶ See Forst's "Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination."

¹⁵⁷ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Sean Sayers, "Alienation", *The Philosophical Review*, 125 no. 2, (2016):291.

¹⁵⁹ Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 23.

¹⁶⁰ Jaeggi, 39.

¹⁶¹ Justin Evans "Rahel Jaeggi's Theory of Alienation" *History of the Human Sciences*, 35 no. 2 (2022):132.

moments of powerlessness, a loss of authenticity, internal division, and indifference. The starting point of Jaeggi's analysis is alienation as a "relation of relationlessness."¹⁶² Jaeggi's account prioritizes the felt dimensions of alienation insofar as it examines how people can change their circumstances by changing their relationship to the roles they are alienated within.

However, her account does not contain an analysis of class and history, which is essential to the Marxist conception of alienation. Instead, it is an attempt to construct a notion of alienation which focuses on ideas of the authentic self, as opposed to socioeconomic factors. As Evans argues, without "a structural or social explanation for failures to appropriate properly, there can be no straightforward way to move from seeing alienation as improper appropriation to seeing it as a social problem."¹⁶³ Jaeggi's theory of alienation, while prioritizing the subjective, omits the analysis of class and exploitation. To avoid the problems of paternalism that have marred alienation, Jaeggi turns away from the Marxist analysis of economics and history, and in so doing reduces alienation's emancipatory potential.

Many scholars have followed Jaeggi's conception of alienation and utilized it for their own theoretical endeavors. For example, Catherine Lu, in *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*, follows Jaeggi in defining alienation as a disturbed appropriation of oneself in the world. Therefore, she conceptualizes reconciliation as needing to respond to different forms of alienation that are caused by structural injustice.¹⁶⁴ While Jaeggi's theory offers a compelling case for alienation free from paternalism, a roles-based account lacks a discussion of the need for triggering feelings of alienation to incite political change. This is argued by Alasia Nuti in response to Lu's book. Much like Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*, Nuti argues that part of the problem with

¹⁶² Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 1.

¹⁶³ Evans, "Rahel Jaeggi's Theory of Alienation", 132.

¹⁶⁴ Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 214.

discussions of alienation is that people do accept the conditions which worsen their lives. Therefore, triggering alienation is important for political change, and “whether alienation is wrong or not depends on whether it advances or undermines the difficult and often painful road towards creating a structurally just domestic and international order”.¹⁶⁵ Nuti is highlighting how alienation is not something which need be necessarily rectified by external actors or governments. Instead, she demonstrates that alienation is politically powerful for people and groups own movement towards emancipation.

In my view, Jaeggi’s book has two very strong components, it reconstructs a theory of alienation which is distanced from the problem of paternalism insofar as alienation is an issue of appropriation, not about returning to an assumed whole. Moreover, Jaeggi is attune to the subjective manifestations of alienation and how they relate to the objective structures which cause them. However, Jaeggi’s book lacks an overt critique of capitalist exploitation. Without a political-economic based criticism, alienation as a felt phenomenon becomes more akin to the analysis outlined by Blauner in *Alienation and Freedom*. The interrelation between the potential for subjectively felt alienation and a criticism of the capitalist system of production that is objectively alienating is paramount in a Marxist critical theory. This is why the manifestation of the roles-based account of alienation leaves the politically emancipatory power of the concept behind.

This section has advanced my primary argument about alienation theorizing after the Althusserian intervention. While there is a wide variety of different approaches to alienation, I have aimed to show how, to a great extent, alienation has been theorized in the Marxist and critical theory tradition in response to Althusser’s rejection of humanist Marxism. This shift in the discourse produced by Althusser elicits a form of alienation theorizing markedly different than

¹⁶⁵ Alasia Nuti. “On Structural Injustice, Reconciliation and Alienation” Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 23 no. 4, (2020):536.

pre-Althusserian discussions. While the responses vary, I have aimed to demonstrate that the post-Althusserian humanists attempt to valorize the science in the early Marx through a discussion of the objective structures of alienation. This can be seen in the two major books on Marx and alienation in the twentieth century, from István Mészáros and Bertell Ollman. They both use Marx's theory of alienation and human nature to ground a critique of capitalism, as opposed to discussing how alienation can be important for political change. This trend is also seen in sociological writings on alienation, albeit with a slightly different orientation. Lastly, in the twenty-first century discussion of alienation, Rahel Jaeggi's revival of alienation is not done in a way which valorizes the science of the early-Marx, but, as I have shown, she is responding to the Althusserian paradigm shift, nonetheless. This produces its own set of theoretical issues regarding alienation as it relates to political emancipation.

This section is not intending to say that any of these works do not have important and valuable theoretical insights. On the contrary, these books have kept the discussion of alienation alive and contributed novel and perceptive theories on it. Any academic work will have to make choices in the breadth of the discussion. Hence, the aim of this argument was not to critique the merit of these works on alienation writ large. Instead, it was to demonstrate how, in making these choices in scope, the subjective dimension of alienation was neglected or discussed in a fashion that abandons its relationship to objective alienation. The final section of this thesis will therefore offer a methodological direction to be taken when attempting to write a theory of subjective alienation.

5. Towards Reviving the Subjective

The concluding section of this thesis is by far the most tentative. Up to this point, I have offered a critique of the history of Marxist and critical theories of alienation. Starting with Rousseau in the 18th century and ending with Jaeggi in the 21st century, I have traced the movement of the concept through time to exemplify what I view as the more and less productive methods of theorizing alienation. In this last section, I will outline what I believe to be the steps towards a methodology that can revitalize the conversation surrounding Marxist theories of subjective alienation for future scholarship. This section is *not* meant to provide a theory of subjective alienation. Instead, I am turning towards approaches that I think would be productive for developing such a theory. Of course, this is a cursory overview and does not entirely address the numerous problems that this theory will face. However, it is written with the goal of demonstrating what I believe to be a productive path forward.

I will turn to E.P. Thompson for my argument in this section. Ultimately, I argue that a theory of subjective alienation can exist in tandem with the theorization of its objective counterpart, but it needs to be given a new primacy. I must make explicit that a theory of subjective alienation which is not attuned to the objective conditions will necessarily be insufficient.¹⁶⁶ However, instead of focusing on how to talk about the objective structures of alienation first and foremost, a theory of subjective alienation would start with how people express feelings of alienation and how they experience the objectively alienating dimensions of capitalist society. In this regard, I argue that we need to think about alienation not simply as an objective phenomenon in capitalist society, but as something which is lived and constituted by the working class in their

¹⁶⁶ Many theories of pure subjective alienation lack a critical political bent. Hegel is, of course, exemplary of this. This problem is also clear in the Robert Blauner study. Both cases, with very different aims of analysis and written in very different time periods make clear what happens when objective conditions are not addressed.

everyday lives. If, as theorists, we remain cognizant of this, then we can give alienation its due political primacy as opposed to relegating the notion to the philosophical realm.

First, as I am using Thompson's methodology to ground my argument, it is important to discuss his intellectual dispute with Althusser. Thompson vehemently rejects Althusser's framework for its "grotesque notion of 'ideological interpellation' or 'hailing' [where] we find even more *chic* notions of men and women (*except*, of course, select intellectuals) not thinking or acting, but being thought and being performed."¹⁶⁷ Thompson is spurning Althusser's notion that people exist and act only as the bearers of social structures. He further argues that Althusser's dismissal of the anthropological Marx is a gross oversight.¹⁶⁸ Thompson is particularly frustrated with Althusserian structuralism's inability to explain social contradiction and change. Therefore, his disagreement with Althusser is a project based on re-centering people and their ability to act as agents who reject their exploitation.

In response to the Althusserian break, and the rejection of the empiricist Marx, Thompson wrote *The Poverty of Theory*. The text itself can be seen as a mirror image of the Althusserian project, it so strongly rejects Althusser's ideas that it itself becomes dogmatic.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it is presented with such force as it aims to recapitulate the primary thesis; that agents matter. It is Thompson's attempt to save the humanist Marx from theoretical neglect. This tension between Althusser and Thompson is clearly articulated by Stuart Hall. He takes issue with the extreme rejection of Althusser and the borderline vitriolic polemics utilized by Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*. Nonetheless, the context Hall gives illuminates the political imperative Thompson was writing within; Thompson's personal upbringing was of fundamental importance to his

¹⁶⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 340.

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, 341.

¹⁶⁹ Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, 116.

Marxism. Althusser's argument that people are merely the bearers of capitalist social relations, wholeheartedly dismissing their agency, was an unforgiveable affront.¹⁷⁰

The debate between Althusser and Thompson is between two fundamentally incommensurable Marxist traditions.¹⁷¹ They begin from different understandings of what the point of Marxist theory is. Thompson therefore refuses to operate in the same plane as Althusser and rejects the science/ideology distinction. In this regard, he distinguishes himself from the other Marxist humanists, who are trying to reconcile this dichotomy. This is how I argue scholarship should approach alienation theorizing. If one is attempting to develop a philosophical account of alienation, I argue that these expressions of alienation should be used as an origin point instead of a theoretical concept of secondary importance. To write a critique of society based on alienation, theorists need not locate it as the crux of Marx's writings. Instead, we can think of alienation as a relevant and useful explanatory tool for the way people feel in conditions of capitalist exploitation. Therefore, expressions of estrangement in the working class can be taken as theoretically important in their own right and used to discuss the relationship people have to the objective structures of exploitation. This approach is far more akin to the method in Jaeggi's book than any of the other examples of post-Althusserian theorizing I outlined above. However, a theory of alienation which follows Jaeggi's methodology need bring back to the forefront the crucial account of the objective economic conditions which produce it.

In this regard, beginning with subjective alienation prioritizes the lived experience of wage labourers under capitalist systems of production. In focusing on felt alienation, I utilize Thompson's notion of class as a historical phenomenon. For Thompson, class cannot exist as a

¹⁷⁰ Hall, 117.

¹⁷¹ Hall, 118.

structure or category, it is something that is happening in the relationships amongst people.¹⁷² In this formulation, Thompson is arguing that concepts cannot entirely be anatomized into a structure, they only exist insofar as they are constituted and actualized by the people who form them. Thompson's method is not prescriptive in that it is not telling people how they exist under capitalism. Instead, his analysis sees people as they are and as they have lived to comprise class. Following Thompson, I argue for a re-orientation towards the feelings of alienation that wage-labourers express that imbue the concept with meaning.

The notion of emotions as a social phenomenon also need be noted here. Scholarship of affect has long worked towards examining emotions as social and cultural processes, not merely as psychological experiences.¹⁷³ Sara Ahmed's theory on the cultural politics of emotion can inform a methodological framework to conceive of what a theory of subjective alienation would entail. Ahmed argues that "emotions work by working through signs and on bodies" to create or consolidate others.¹⁷⁴ She is not interested in what emotions *are*, but the questions of what emotions *do*. This prioritizes the relational and fluid dimensions of an individual's emotional experience.

While Ahmed's subjects in her book differ greatly from classic Marxist conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the insights she contributes about how emotions exist in

¹⁷² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 8. Thompson believes that relationships are inherently fluent, and once they are perceived as structures, they are held static and lose their nuance. However, arguably, a relationship (if it is stable) is just a structure. Nonetheless this advocacy for viewing theoretical concepts as shifting instead of static provides a strong direction towards viewing alienation as relational in its subjective manifestations, not solely as an objective structure baked into the capitalist system of production.

¹⁷³ For an interesting discussion on emotion and alienation, Hochschild compares the Marxist analysis of how capitalism estranges the labourer from the product of their labour to how those that partake in emotional labour are estranged from experiencing their emotions for themselves. For example, a flight attendant must perform certain emotions of friendliness and servitude that they do not actually feel. The presentation of unguine feelings is both a way to manage workplace stress and can also become a workplace hazard as it necessitates estranging oneself from one's true emotions. This insight can be a valuable way of thinking about in which cases emotions are being performed and in which cases they are genuine expressions. [Arlie Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983)].

¹⁷⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2014).

relation to the social world is paramount for a theory of subjective alienation. Following Ahmed, I conclude by arguing that subjective alienation should not only be considered as constituted in relation to the objective, but as constituted in relation to estranged others as well. Emotions conceived as something we do in relationships with other people helps tease out what a theory which sees the political power of alienation could be. That is, felt alienation would not be merely the experienced dimension of exploitation, but something that can build connections and solidarity with other workers. In this regard, alienation can be a powerful current that runs through the constitution of workers as a group against the capitalist class.

However, I must note that I am not valorizing the notion of connections, nor do I believe that they will always result in positive social change. There are many instances where affects may generate connections that are not productive to working class mobilization. Indeed, Lauren Berlant points to this phenomenon in her book *Cruel Optimism*. They argue that individuals will often maintain attachments, be it to relationships, objects, or structures, which are ultimately unsatisfactory or undermine one's own desires.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, Berlant highlights the role of affect and emotion in shaping attachments. Berlant argues that people develop affective investments in the objects of their desires, forming deep emotional bonds that make it difficult to let go, even when it becomes clear that these attachments are harmful or unsustainable.¹⁷⁶ This argument, while not strictly a Marxist analysis, is remarkably similar to the Frankfurt School's discussion of pure objective alienation. Indeed, if popular culture has rendered people content with the systems which oppress them then they are, like Berlant suggests, maintaining an affective bond to a world which undermines their own freedom.

¹⁷⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University, 2011), 1.

¹⁷⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

Therefore, it is clear that the thin notion of “building connections” to understand alienation as an affective force behind political movement building is in and of itself conceptually insufficient. Theoretical work would need to be done to first, decipher what are the productive connections that can be fostered, and second, how this relates to the structure of objective alienation. In other words, a theory of subjective alienation as an affective relationship would need to discuss what feelings should be provoked and how that should be done. Therefore, it would not rest on a teleological assumption that felt alienation will inevitably lead to movement building, but instead work to investigate the conditions in which this is possible.

The promissory notes provided in this concluding section have aimed to highlight some potentially productive ways of theorizing subjective alienation. Indeed, they point to many questions which would need to be answered in order to develop any cohesive theory. Nonetheless, I have aimed to identify some methodological approaches that I believe would help address these questions, namely through the work of E.P. Thompson and the anthropology of affect.

Conclusion

The argument presented in this thesis emerged from an unease with the philosophical relegation of alienation to objective analysis. From this impulse, I developed an account of the history of alienation for the purpose of illuminating its trajectory through Marxist thought. This involved a discussion of where alienation began, where it was promoted as a concept of primary importance, by whom it was subsequently rejected, and what the effects of this rejection have had. Of course, this is not an exhaustive account. An exhaustive account of a concept as broad and as philosophically fraught as alienation would entail a far longer essay. While I may have

been unable to capture all the minutia of the debate on alienation, I have aimed to advance a discussion of the distinctive theoretical movements within the Marxist and critical theory traditions.

My argument is comprised of two primary claims. The first claim is that Althusser's intervention in the 1960's irrevocably shifted the discussion of humanist Marxist concepts. This shaped the paradigm of alienation theorizing and put those who wish to advocate for alienation into a defensive position. The effect of this shift has been a neglect of felt alienation as a dimension of the concept worth working through in and of itself. Instead, discussions of alienation were primarily oriented towards exhuming Marx's, scientifically viable, account of the concept as the centre of a critique of political economy. The second claim is that while the pre-Althusserian method of theorizing alienation is eminently flawed, especially insofar as it is mired in prescriptiveness, paternalism, and a supposed teleological resolution that is not adequately addressed, it is important and useful insofar as it does not lose sight of the political power of alienation.

The first claim was supported through an initial analysis of Althusser's writings in his three primary works, *For Marx*, *Reading Capital*, and *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. The goal of this overview was not to expound a detailed analysis of Althusser's anti-humanism, but instead to highlight that Althusser opposed humanism for its lack of scientific rigour and for its foundation on a notion that human beings can derive knowledge about the social world through their own empirical observations. While Althusser's writings are diverse, shifting, and complex, what is crucial is that they are a forceful interjection that breaks into a continuous method of theorizing. To talk about alienation (or any other humanist concept) afterwards is to reckon with the strongest critique leveled against it.

The primary response from those who wished to maintain alienation's theoretical importance was to defend the scientific, objective status of Marx's theory of alienation while leaving the subjective dimension of the concept behind. The most prominent discussions of alienation in the twentieth century also instrumentalize Marx's theory to make a broader point about political economy, instead of focusing on how feelings of alienation are manifested and expressed in wage-labourers. This in and of itself is a worthwhile endeavor. However, as I have argued, alienation is a fundamental concept in Marxist thought as it is uniquely attuned to the emotional dimension of exploitation, and that should not be neglected.

The attunement to alienation as subjectively manifested and/or as politically important is seen in the earlier iterations of the concept, namely in Marx's own writing, in the work of Lukács, and in Marcuse and the Frankfurt School. These discussions of alienation vary, but they are similar in that they all maintain alienation is a *political* problem. This is crucial as my argument aims to bring to the forefront of theories of alienation the emotional experience and its relationship to political movement building. Therefore, in the last section, I conclude with a tentative outline of what I believe a theory of subjective alienation should and could include. To write a theory of subjective alienation requires reckoning with a myriad of conceptual problems. Nonetheless, as my thesis has presented a critique of many different forms of alienation theorizing, I presented a methodology that future scholarship could use in deriving a theory of subjective alienation.

The critique presented in this thesis is motivated by a deeply held personal belief in the importance of how the working class feels about the exploitative conditions of labour. A theory which prioritizes the feelings of individuals is no easy feat. Politics are often acrimonious, and people seldom agree on what systems of governance they would like to see actualized. Nor do

they even necessarily feel the same way about the same social conditions. Nonetheless, to capitulate to these problems and ignore expressions of alienation is to neglect the commonality amongst workers that *can* emerge. Likewise, Marxist scholarship can often forget that the goal of writing theory is to comprehend the system of capitalist exploitation only insofar as it can lead to a better world for all workers. This goal need be the motivation for, and the foundation of, a theory of subjective alienation.

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