

Alienation

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The notion of alienation is a very unusual one because it is at once an attempt to explain a widespread feeling—a very subjective, somewhat indefinable feeling—and a critique of the nature of any society that regularly produces it.

This was not always so. The feeling that one is not at home in the world, the sense of estrangement from one's surrounding, oneself, and other people, appears to be as old as history; for most world religions (Buddhism, most strains of Christianity and Daoism, Sufi strands in Islam) this feeling was seen mainly as reflecting a profound insight into the truth of the human condition. Hermits, monks, and meditators often actively valued or cultivated feelings of alienation as a way to something higher. Calvinism came closer to the modern conception in seeing feelings of isolation and emptiness as a sign of humanity's fall from grace, but it was really only in the nineteenth century that the modern understanding of the term came into being. This conception was closely tied to the experience of living in a vast, impersonal, industrial city. Feelings of alienation were particularly prone to strike those who in earlier generations might have been considered likely victims of melancholia: intellectuals, artists, and youth. The effects were much the same: depression, anxiety, hopelessness, suicide.

One might distinguish two main strains in the modern alienation literature: one that stressed the experience itself as an unavoidable (though possibly ameliorable) effect of the impersonal, bureaucratized nature of modern life, entailing the loss of any ability to use that experience to attain some deeper, more genuine truth about the world—since with the death of God and traditional structures of authority, most of these truths were considered definitively lost. The other, drawing on older theological traditions, saw alienation as the key to the true, hidden nature of the modern (i.e., capitalist, industrial) order itself, showing it to be an intolerable situation that could be resolved only by overthrowing that order and replacing it with something profoundly different.

The first tradition can be found in social thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Émile Durkheim, or Max Weber; novelists such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Franz Kafka; and philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard or Friedrich Nietzsche. Here alienation is the darker underside of all the positive values of modernity, the experience of those sundered from all previous sources of meaning: community, hierarchy, the sacred. It is the point where individualism becomes isolation, freedom becomes rootlessness, egalitarianism becomes the destruction of all value, rationality, an iron cage.

Probably the most famous formulation within this genre was Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) notion of anomie. Observing that suicide rates tend to go up during times of both economic boom and economic collapse, Durkheim concluded that this could only be because both booms and busts threw ordinary people's expectations so completely in disarray that they ended up in a state of lacking norms, unable to determine what they had a right to expect or even want from life and unable to imagine a time when they could. This kind of analysis could lead either to a resigned pessimism, the assumption (favored by social conservatives) that public life in modern society can never really be anything but alienated, or to a liberal approach that saw alienation as a form of deviance or lack of proper integration that policymakers should ideally be able to ameliorate or even overcome.

The other tradition can be traced to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who drew heavily on theological sources. For Hegel, "alienation" was a technical term, a necessary moment in the process whereby Spirit (which for Hegel was simultaneously God, Mind, Spirit, and Human Self-Consciousness) would achieve true self-knowledge. Human history involved the same story:

Mind would project itself out into the world, creating, say, Law, or Art, or Science, or Government; it would then confront its creations as something alien to it and strange; then, finally, coming to understand that these alienated forms are really aspects of itself, would reincorporate them and come to a richer self-conception as a result.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) remained true to this dialectical approach but concentrated on the material creativity of work, emphasizing that under capitalism, not only the products of one's labor but one's labor itself, one's very capacity to create—and for Marx, this is one's very humanity—becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold and hence appears to the worker as an “alien force.” Insofar as Marx shares Hegel's optimism, and sees this dilemma as opening the way to a new, revolutionary society, all this is much in line with the older, theological conception in which alienation, however painful, is a realization about the truth of one's relation to the world, so that understanding this becomes the key to transcending it. Twentieth-century Marxists, though, have not been so uniformly optimistic.

While Marxist regimes officially claimed to have eliminated the problem of alienation in their own societies, Western Marxism, starting with György Lukács (1885–1971) and climaxing with the Frankfurt School, forced to explain the lack of revolutionary change in industrial democracies, gradually became a prolonged meditation on the varied forms of alienation (reification, objectification, fetishism, etc.) in modern life. This emphasis set the tone for an outpouring of literature on the subject in the mid-twentieth century, not all of it Marxist.

France in the 1950s and early 1960s saw the emergence of a particularly rich body of alienation theory, ranging from the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which attempted to formulate an ethics for the isolated individual, to a variety of Marxist approaches, of which the most extravagant—and influential—was developed by the Situationist International, whose members saw modern consumer society as a gigantic “spectacle,” a vast apparatus composed of not only media images but market logic, the rule of experts, and the nature of the commodity form, all combining together to render individuals passive and isolated spectators of their own lives. Like many of the radical art movements from which they emerged, the Situationists were dedicated to imagining ways to revolutionize everyday life itself as a way of overcoming the “living death” of capitalist alienation.

After the failed insurrection of May 1968 in France, this literature on alienation rapidly disappeared in the face of poststructuralist critiques that argued it was impossible to talk about a human subject alienated from society or from itself because the subject was itself an effect of discourse and hence a social construct. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, these critiques spread outside France and the theme of alienation has, as a result, largely disappeared from intellectual debate in the early twenty-first century.

There are two main exceptions. First, in its radical, redemptive form, the idea of alienation has remained alive in artistic and revolutionary circles largely outside the academy. Situationism, for example, is still very much at the center of the (increasingly international) anarchist and punk scenes, both of which are largely rebellions against the meaninglessness and alienation of “mainstream” urban, industrial, or postindustrial life. These themes have suddenly reemerged to public attention with the rise of the “antiglobalization” movement, though they have still found almost no echo in the academy.

Second, in its more liberal, ameliorative form, the idea of alienation became ensconced in certain branches of sociology and hence reemerged in what is increasingly called “postmodern” alienation theory. When American sociologists started taking up the theme of alienation system-

atically in the 1950s and 1960s, they began by making it into a factor that could be quantified. Various questionnaires and techniques of tabulating an individual's degree of alienation were developed; surveys then revealed, not entirely surprisingly, that aside from students, those who scored highest for alienation were, precisely, aliens, immigrants, or else members of minority groups already defined as marginal to mainstream American life. Over the course of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, this sociological work has converged with an interest in identity and identity-based social movements to yield a new, "postmodern" body of alienation theory.

On the individual level, alienation is said to occur when there is a clash between one's own self-definition and the identity assigned one by a larger society. Alienation thus becomes the subjective manner in which various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) are actually experienced and internalized by their victims. As a result, where the older revolutionary conception sees alienation as essential to the fundamentally violent, antihuman nature of "the mainstream," postmodern theories now once again see alienation as a measure of exclusion from the mainstream. On the social level, the postmodern conception of alienation is said to be caused by a surfeit rather than a lack of freedom; a notion that appears almost impossible to distinguish from what were, in the late nineteenth century, called "modern" concepts of alienation. So far, these two traditions have barely come into contact with each other—except, perhaps, in recent environmentalist ideas about "alienation from nature." How or whether they will make contact remains an open question.

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