

Three Moments of Alienation

With reference to the organic crisis of the state, social reproduction, and the planet

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Our paper sketches various concepts of alienation and it connects them to a discussion of the organic crisis of 21st-century world capitalism, social reproduction and the biosphere

The *Oxford English Dictionary* 2017 has several definitions for the term alienation, involving its multiple origins and etymologies:

1. In ancient history “alienation” had positive and negative definitions. On the one hand it was associated with the idea of reaching a higher state of contemplation and an escape from a limited existence in the world – here alienation was understood in a positive sense. On the other hand religious conceptions of alienation implied a separation from God or the religious faithful that is alienation was understood as a form of metaphysical estrangement, and therefore used in a more negative sense.
2. Ever since the ancient Romans there has been a specific political-legal and ultimately modern definition, where to alienate property is to transfer ownership to someone else. This latter usage has continued to this day, including through the pre-Renaissance period, for example 12th and 13th centuries in Anglo-Norman and French usage where it referred to (legal) transference of property, especially land, to another person (according to the OED c1260 in Old French).
3. The term alienation has also been used to refer to the taking of something from a person, that is as an act of appropriation without authorization, including a diversion of something from its intended use or to a different purpose (historical examples would be the alienation of indigenous lands by settler colonialism, or the use of church funds to accumulate capital or build private estates).
4. At least since the early Renaissance period and roughly in keeping with modern psychoanalytic and sociological uses, the concept of alienation also referred to mental instability, delirium, separation, or to a state of being estranged or alienated from the wider society.
5. These definitions notwithstanding, our paper will focus mainly on what is perhaps the most prominent use of the concept by Marx, for example in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which partly embraces aspects of definitions 2-4

above. Here we paraphrase: Marx referred to the economic and social alienation of workers (and society) because of the class-based power relations between labour and capital. This caused a separation and disconnection from what workers (“labour”) produced, for whom they produced, with whom they produced, why they produced, and more fundamentally, a separation from their social and individual potentiality (*Gattungswesen* or "species being"). Under capitalism workers are reduced to labourers and consumers and social reproduction is increasingly subordinated to capital accumulation. Capitalism, understood as a system of class exploitation, whereby the products of their labour are separated from their use value and transformed into exchangeable commodities therefore produced an alien system of structural power that denied workers their potential to objectify their productive capabilities and possibilities of self-actualization.

An important dimension of these forms of alienation (*Entfremdung*) – one that builds on the social ontology we advanced in our first book together – *Power Production and Social Reproduction: Human in/Security in the Global Political Economy* (2003) – is that of work from labour. We argued, “Work broadly mediates relations between social and natural orders”. Whereas “Labour is a particular aspect of work which in a capitalist formation is that part which is appropriated and controlled by capital in the capital-labour relation (Bakker and Gill 2003: 19).” We embraced an ontological conception of the world as grounded and created in and through processes and practices of work, not all of which can or should be commodified, reflected for example in education, culture and in other institutions of social development. By contrast, in a capitalist order the social and power relations of capital reduced the creative capacities and potentials of workers to an instrumentality, transforming the possibilities of human freedom and its objectification into means to accumulate profit, and thus into labour. “This type of labour is estranged labour and society becomes subordinated to an alien power. Nature, people and the means of exchange are reduced to means, and social relations are redefined” in a series of legal fictions that became laws associated with political and social practices to constitute the capitalist order (Bakker and Gill 2003:22).

Within such processes Marx also implied that even capitalists experience alienation because they are forced to endlessly compete and exploit workers in ways that produce mass alienation. In that sense we might suggest the supreme form of ideological alienation in what we call capitalist market civilization today is reflected in the categorical imperatives of competitiveness and endless consumerism as the principal engines of economic growth. Their mantras are endlessly applied by political leaders and by both capital and labour on a world scale. Competitiveness is inscribed into the

constitutional structures that govern the European Union such as the Lisbon Accords. By definition not everyone can be competitive in this sense and only one person can be number one.

In what follows we will build upon such perspectives and connect this in a series of hypotheses to historical structures.

For the purposes of this paper historical structures are understood as persistent patterns of ideas, institutions and power potentials – or more broadly practices – that configure the limits of the possible for different individuals, communities, classes and social forces under certain historical conditions. However such limits are neither immutable nor inevitable but are constituted and transformed by human thought, initiative and (collective) action. Historical structures are neither "subjective" nor "objective" but rather they are what Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, called "humanly objective."

In *Power, Production and Social Reproduction* we sought to link these historical structures to the (re) privatization of the governance of social reproduction and how, under what we have called disciplinary neo-liberalism and new constitutionalism, this is a counterpart to a general increase in the range, depth and scope of exploitation in global capitalism and accumulation by dispossession (primitive or original accumulation). Primitive accumulation has involved not only privatization but also a further extension in the privatization of parts of the state form itself (see below). We argued that there are at least two dimensions to this shift: (a) the (re) privatization of previously socialized institutions associated with provisioning for social reproduction (b) the alienation or enclosure of common social property which we see as part of a new global enclosure movement. Both (a) and (b) are therefore associated with what Marx called the alienation of politics and of the state that grants more power to capital, while simultaneously undermining socialized forms of collective provisioning and human security.¹

¹ Care work is an interesting dimension of these processes as the full commodification of care is necessarily an incomplete process compared to other aspects of household labour. Caring occupations are not fully commodified as workers have motivations that are not purely monetary or reduced to an exchange transaction and they also care about the results of their work. Indeed, "paid caring may not be so different from unpaid caring." Himmelweit, Susan. 1999. "Caring Labor." *Annals, AAPSS*, 561, January.

These considerations could be connected to our discussions in this forum.

The conjuncture for these considerations is that we live in a period of morbid symptoms, involving different dimensions of alienation and dislocation, where the future of the world is beset with a multiplicity of intersecting and interrelated crises, each of which present not only moments of danger and opportunity for different political forces, but also a kind of global turning point. These moments combine in a “global organic crisis” that confronts a condition of political impasse for disciplinary neoliberalism that shapes the searching for new directions and potentials. This situation poses political questions that go well beyond questions of capital accumulation and it raises fundamental ethical questions concerning the making of our collective future, and of whether that future is sustainable in a political, social and ecological sense.

To help explore the historical structures that configure this situation, several moments of alienation are hypothesised in order to develop discussion:

A. *The alienation of the state* as understood by Marx in relation to his concept of primitive accumulation and in particular his discussion of creation of the national debt, and the way in which general provisioning of public goods and welfare, and in particular that for what feminists call social reproduction, is subordinated to public financing regimes that are ultimately accountable, not to citizens but to servicing debts in order to repay private creditors and holders of government bonds and financial instruments. This process (the ‘national debt’) originated with the creation of the (private) Bank of England in 1694 and the imposition of regressive taxation backed by coercive force, partly to finance foreign wars, colonisation and the dispossession of indigenous peoples. More broadly this process is linked to the private governance and control over the issuance of money in capitalist societies.

B. This concept is somewhat narrower than Marx's wider concept of the *alienation of politics* since that refers to the role of politics in shaping and organising economic forces in a particular direction to create, maintain or extend a capitalist social order, for example the way in which disciplinary neoliberalism intensifies the discipline of capital and market forces not just within the labour process but in the wider social and economic formation of society, and in the practices and organization of the state.

C. *The alienation of processes of social reproduction* and their links to the intensification of commodification and exploitation of labour (and more broadly of key elements of social life provided that they yield profit).

Today, apart from the issues we mentioned earlier, this set of processes is linked to how individuals, families and communities struggle to sustain their consumption and patterns of social reproduction, under conditions of austerity, precariousness of employment, and stagnant or indeed falling real wages, a tendency which has increased as a result of the so-called global financial crisis and government measures (including massive bailouts of banks and other corporations) to respond to the meltdown of global capitalism. One of these household survival strategies is connected to the expansion of personal and family debt, and the use of mortgages as well as credit cards in order to sustain consumption levels. The broader process involved globally is massive indebtedness at all levels from the individual, to local governments, to corporations and states, and aggressive process of transferring wealth and income from the lower reaches of society to the upper echelons (indeed small fractions) of the top 1%. This is why there has also been an unprecedented increase in global inequality and massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a new plutocracy since the onset of neoliberal strategies to govern capitalist societies.

D. *The alienation of the planet and the biosphere*, which is linked to the commodification and appropriation of nature, with disastrous effects on climate change, on species extinction, along with pollution, waste and the despoliation of oceans and land.

It is also associated with exit and escape strategies associated with boltholes for the wealthy (massive fortified bunkers and “safe rooms”) as well the expansion of new frontiers of commodification associated with the colonization of other planets and private initiatives to gain ownership of elements of space and its celestial bodies. Pioneers of the new space race as defined above include billionaires Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk who use the profits stemming from their corporations to finance these activities, and engage in public-private ventures to mobilize their aspirations.

Such forms of alienation and associated dislocations can be linked back to what Karl Polanyi, discussing the way in which the 19th-century project of a self-regulating capitalist market society was consciously and politically constructed by the power of the state. He argued that this type of commodified society would, if left unfettered, ultimately be destructive of society and nature, and was therefore a doomed effort to construct a “stark utopia”. This was because the attempt to commodify and marketize life and nature would inevitably cause enormous stress and dislocation that it would necessarily generate counter movements, some progressive and some deeply reactionary, as in the 1930s, when history rapidly moved “in the gear of social change”.

Since Polanyi published *The Great Transformation* in 1944, the world has witnessed a “great acceleration” in the economic, social and geological processes noted above as well as massive proliferation of military-scientific production, deployment and development, including weapons that can quickly destroy virtually all life on the planet, perhaps sparing only the very rich and the powerful ensconced in their hardened bunkers. In the 21st-century neoliberal capitalist market civilisation has been associated not only with individualism, consumerism and the somatic society, celebrity culture, and ecologically myopic energy-intensive patterns of production, distribution and consumption based on non-renewable resources, but also with a broader organic crisis of ethics, hegemony, representation, legitimacy and sustainability.

This is the broader situation and associated set of historical structures that are linked to the responses of a range of social movements, particularly on the reactionary right, that have been motivated by these dislocations – such as the Tea Party, Donald Trump, and some of the forces supporting Brexit. On the other hand, movements responding to the global organic crisis that are associated with not only the defence of women’s rights, of minorities, public healthcare, public education but also the redefinition and rebirth of the commons. These forces also engage with other progressive concepts such as the development of sustainability (as opposed to the neoliberal capitalist concept of sustainable development) as well as solidarity, social justice and more comprehensive regulation of capital to address the social and political crisis. These movements have been associated with progressive forces, concerned scientists, indigenous peoples, landless workers, farmers, many trade unions, and the forces of the left that seeks to go beyond the social democratic subordination to disciplinary neoliberalism.

At issue in this context are the political inclinations and commitments of the (alienated) middle classes – those on the left and on the right. One dimension of this question concerns whether they will favour the extension of the public goods and the social commons, as well as preferences for greater social inclusion, improved provisions for social reproduction and stewardship of the biosphere, and more generally the socialization of risk on behalf of the majority. By contrast, many middle-class people associated with self-employment and small businesses, for example, may well favour further marketization of social and economic life, more gated communities, and the repression and “othering” of strangers and the marginalized.