

# The Transmutation of Alienation: From Labour Alienation and Need Alienation to Consumption Alienation

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## Abstract

The alienation of labour, the alienation of needs and the alienation of consumption are three forms of alienation, and three stages in which the degree of alienation continues to increase. In terms of their transmutation history, the three alienations are the composite products of different historical periods, levels of productivity and degrees of industrialisation. In terms of their generative logic, labour alienation is the starting point for the emergence of a series of alienating forces; need alienation is the inevitable product of labour alienation and the necessary intermediary for the emergence of consumer alienation; and consumer alienation is the joint effect of labour and need alienation.

**Keywords:** alienation theory, labour alienation, need alienation, consumption alienation

## 1. Introduction

The theory of alienation is an critical theory in Marxism, which presents itself in diverse forms in different historical periods and economic conditions. Along with the development of capitalism, alienation mainly presents itself in three forms of expression: alienation of labour, alienation of needs and alienation of consumption. Of these, labour alienation is the cornerstone, needs alienation is the mediator, and consumption alienation is the latest manifestation. Understanding the variations in Marxist alienation theory is key to understanding the development of human beings under capitalism.

## 2. The Origins of the Concept of Alienation and Its Changes and Developments

Alienation refers to the loss of human freedom under certain economic structures, social relations and political systems. As one of the dynamic theories in the history of Western thought, the exploration of the concept of alienation can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's work *The Ideal State*. In this book, Plato uses the term "Alloiosis" to denote a religious activity carried out by man. The German word "Entfremdung" was really developed by Martin Luther in 1522 when he translated the Bible from the Greek word "Allotriōsis" in the New Testament. The word "Allotriōsis" in Greek primarily means estrangement, strangeness and separation, and Martin Luther used it primarily to describe the state of alienation and separation of man from God in religious life. According to Professor Hou Cai, the word "Entfremdung" in its secular German usage also incorporates the Latin words "Abalienare" and "Alienatio". The word "Abalienare" is also used in secular German. The word "Abalienare" means to alienate, to deprive, to transfer. The word "Alienatio" means stranger, detachment, transfer. Subsequent uses of the word were inherited by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and others, and Rousseau added the dimension of human freedom to the realm of alienation for the first time. Since Hegel, the discussion of alienation theory has gradually extended from the philosophical and conceptual realm to the social and practical realm. Feuerbach, for his part, used the term alienation to express his critique of religion. Feuerbach argued that previous religions and theologies, which saw God as the source of human consciousness and reason, as the 'class essence' of man, were indeed a reversal, a form of alienation.

Marx was arguably the first thinker to formally introduce alienation from the realm of philosophy into the realm of social production, using the term 'alienated labour' to reveal the plight of workers in the early days of capitalism. In the Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844 (hereafter referred to as the Manuscripts), the theory of alienation is summarised in four aspects: the worker is alienated from the product of his own labour, i.e. the product of his labour; the worker is alienated in his productive activity; the worker is alienated from his own class nature; and the worker is alienated from his social relations with others. In the middle of the capitalist development, the Frankfurt School was the one who brought the theory of alienation to the fore in the discussion of science and technology. The first generation of Frankfurt School representatives, Horkheimer and Adorno, focused on the various rational enlightenment ideas of the modern era that emphasised the omnipotence of reason and the domination of technology. They argued that instead of achieving the goal of removing myths and enabling human happiness, the modern enlightenment and scientific endeavours had degenerated into a new kind of myth, forming a new kind of control and oppression over human beings. Instead of human freedom being realised, it was once again restricted, and the rationality of science and technology became the rationality of domination. In these conditions, man is in a profoundly alienated Frankfurt II figure Marcuse focuses on the way in which the development of science and technology and the enormous economic growth have shaped and distorted human nature. Marcuse argues that the domination of technology relies on not only might and violence, but also increasing wealth and freedom, so that this domination has the appearance of legitimacy and man succumbs to this rapid growth of materialism and loses his ability to criticise. Another representative figure, Habermas, focuses on a reflexive critique of the social consequences of technological rationality, for which he proposes a series of concepts such as the colonisation of the living world, among others, in an attempt to use communicative rationality to alleviate the repression that technological rationality imposes on man. Through his meticulous observation of capitalist society, Baudrillard found that capitalism had entered a new phase in which the rapid development of productive forces had gradually enabled people to escape from the commodity age of scarcity, and in which society took on the fundamental characteristic of abundance. Baudrillard argues that the fundamental cause of the alienation of man in an affluent society is the symbolism of the consumption of the commodity itself. In the age of consumption, the consumer is caught up in the symbolic consumption of goods and desires and loses his sense of resistance in consumption, which is called consumer alienation.

As can be seen, the development of alienation theory focuses on two main aspects: firstly, the repression and distortion of human nature by capitalist production and technological development, and secondly, the alienation of human beings by the great abundance of commodities and the huge gap in consumption levels in consumer societies, which manifests itself in the alienation of needs and the alienation of consumption.

### **3. The Alienation of Labour Is the Basis for the Creation of the Need Alienation and the Consumption Alienation**

Based on the definition that alienation is the state in which what is created by humans in turn controls humans. Marx also analyses the alienation of consumption in the Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844, "The movement of private property - production and consumption - is the sensual presentation of the movement of all production so far, that is to say, the human realization or the reality of man." Since the root of alienation lies in private property, which in turn contains production and consumption, alienation naturally consists in the alienation of production and the alienation of consumption, and the alienation of labour is the source of the production of this series of alienating forces; to explore the transmutation of alienation it is necessary to first clarify the process and the connotation of the production of the alienation of labour.

In the Manuscripts, Marx takes alienation as a central category and formally proposes alienated labour, which is manifested in the following four aspects.

First, the alienation of the product of labour. "The more the worker produces, the less he is able to consume; the more value he creates, the more worthless and inferior he himself becomes; the more perfect the worker's product, the more deformed the worker himself becomes; the more civilised the object created by the worker, the more barbarous the worker himself becomes; the more powerful labour is when the worker is powerless; the more resourceful labour is, the duller the worker becomes, the more he becomes a slave to nature. " This then sets the stage for the creation of the alienation of need and the alienation of consumption.

Secondly, the alienation of the labour process. "The worker in his own labour does not affirm himself, but denies himself, does not feel happiness, but misery, does not freely exercise his physical and mental powers, but leaves his flesh damaged and his spirit destroyed." This then makes some goods a short-lived remedy that can soothe the wounds and cause a change in the working man's inclination to need.

Again, the alienation of the class nature of man. According to Marx, the class essence of man is free and

conscious activity, with a will and mind of its own, knowing how to create according to the laws of beauty, whereas alienated labour makes the free and conscious character of man disappear, makes creativity and aesthetic feeling disappear, and man becomes like an animal in his existence, losing his class essence. There is no longer any difference between man and animal. The human class essence cannot be realised, much less truly possessed. Man's class essence becomes the sum of animal-like relations of survival competition, and man will not be man.

Finally, there is the alienation of man from man. The relationship between man and man becomes one of things and things, and man becomes a means and tool of others, used and ruled by others. "The direct result of the fact that man is alienated from the products of his own labour, from his own vital activity, from the nature of his own class: the alienation of man from man." This means that the alienation of the products of labour, of labour and of man's nature, inevitably leads to the alienation of man from man.

It follows that human production is supposed to be a free and conscious activity, which is the essence of human labour and the essence of man. But the products of 'alienated labour', including the institution of property, constitute an alien antagonistic relationship with the worker, and because the alienation of human labour practices into animal-like survival instincts, the essence of the human species cannot be realised. The need for labour becomes the need for the product of labour, which results in the alienation of need. The human being as a class loses its purpose, and the relationship of equality and solidarity between human beings as a class becomes alienated, i.e. a relationship of struggle between individuals for their own interests, and the alienation of needs becomes deeper. The need for alienation is exacerbated.

#### **4. Need Alienation Is a Necessary Product of the Labour Alienation and a Necessary Mediator of the Consumption Alienation**

Need, as a conceptual demand based on the real situation, governs the purposive outcome of production and the purposive choice of consumption. Marx states: "Without need, there is no production. And consumption reproduces need." It is thus clear that 'need', from the point of view of the human subject, provides a mediating and directing role for production and consumption, and that the kind of need there is points to the kind of production to be carried out and directly determines the object of consumption, with production and consumption building a bridge between the idea of the human subject in the form of need. In Marx's time, due to the influence of production technology and purchasing power, the alienation of needs was not obvious, and the needs of the general public were still directed towards the basic needs of food, clothing, housing and transport, which sustained people's survival and development, leaving no time for higher needs. However, Marcuse lived at a time when the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars caused enormous economic losses and human casualties, but the war that swept the world played a powerful role as a cultural blender - the idea of 'just-in-time' enjoyment had a fundamental impact on the way in which the world was perceived. The ideology of 'just-in-time' fundamentally influenced the way people consumed and their attitudes to consumption. At the same time, the military industry flourished and developed as a result of the war. After the war, the civilisation of a large number of military industries enriched people's material life, social material wealth increased dramatically and people's standard of living was greatly improved beyond recognition after the war. In this context, developed capitalism ushered in an era of unprecedented consumption. People's production needs and consumption needs were mixed with economic and political factors and went far beyond the previous demands for low needs satisfaction for physical development.

Marcuse in this era therefore set his sights on the alienation of needs brought about by the domination of technological rationality. In *One Dimension Man*, Marcuse follows Marx's theory of 'commodity fetishism' and alienated labour, and further develops the theory of 'false needs'. Marcuse argues that capitalism has suppressed the critical, negative and transcendental tendencies within people, so that in the frenzy of overproduction and consumption, people are unable to recognise whether their needs are truly necessary for their development, or whether they are being held hostage to the false psychology of capital.

Marcuse attributed the creation of 'false needs' to the great advances in technology. Marcuse's argument from the domination of technological rationality to technological alienation to the alienation of needs presents a clear line of argument based on Marx's theory of the alienation of labour - the alienation of labour makes man dominated by the products he produces, as does the technology he invents and the needs it generates. The creation of need alienation is therefore inseparable from the development of science and technology, and the concepts of 'false demand' and 'the domination of technological rationality' are inseparable from the discussion of need alienation.

Firstly, the alienation of need is not only a manifestation of the need of the human subject for other things, but also of the need of other things for human beings. The high level of technological development has led to a rapid

increase in the number of 'non-productive workers', a change that, according to Marx's theory of the organic constitution of value, has led to a change in the constitution of value and the prominence of machines in the production system. In Marcuse's words, "man is integrated into the machine system". In this process, man is abandoned as a product of self-created technology, and his need to produce machines instead results in the dominance of machines that decide where man goes, as if steel has the power of man.

Secondly, the alienation of needs also reveals the connotation of the need for the domination of human desires. While scientific progress changes the material conditions of existence from the outside, at the same time, "it dissolves man's negativity and rebellion against society by constantly satisfying his material needs and by providing him with more and more diversions through popular culture" Marcuse further points out that, on top of the technological development of industrial society The instruments of production are overshadowed by totalitarianism. The tools of production dictate the direction of social demand and implicitly determine the needs of people. Capitalist society has created thousands of material goods that satisfy every aspect of people's needs, and Marcuse's statement that "these goods instil, control and promote a false consciousness" shows that these needs are not the real needs of people for their own development, but a means for the ruling class to seek absolute domination. They are "false" needs created and imposed on people, so-called "false demands".

Needs play the role of a relay from production to consumption, and false needs naturally lead to consumption in vain. Consumption, an act that is supposed to be determined and chosen by people, becomes an act that dominates them.

### **5. The Alienation of Consumption Is the Product of the Combined Effect of Labour Alienation and Need Alienation, as a False Compensation for the Loss of Freedom**

In the introduction to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx states: "The individual produces an object and returns it to himself by consuming it." The inevitable result of the alienation of labour is the separation of the producer from the product he produces, which is the reality of the alienation of consumption. Secondly, as a bridge between production and consumption, the "need" of the subject influences the choice of the object of consumption, and with this need being controlled by capitalism, the alienation of consumption becomes a necessity.

The alienation of consumption means that under the ideological system of consumerism, people take their desires rather than their basic needs for survival as the starting point for consumption, which leads to the loss of the subject position and the rational spirit in the consumer discourse, and the alienation of the human essence to consumer goods.

Western Marxism argues that in contemporary capitalist society, although the labour conditions of workers have improved considerably as a result of scientific and technological progress, the "fragmentation", passivity and externalisation of labour still exist, and labour is still a monotonous, tedious and boring drudgery for people. In labour, man is not free, so his freedom-seeking nature drives him to turn his attention to the realm of consumption and to realise his nascent creativity through the 'free' act of buying and consuming goods.

Firstly, the creation of consumer alienation undoubtedly facilitated capitalism's better control of people. According to Coetzee, the logic of capitalist production and accumulation is to maximise the profitability of capital, so that the commodities produced by the hands of labour must be consumed by labour in order to achieve this ultimate aim.

Secondly, as the alienation of labour alienates the worker from the act of labour, this sets the stage for creating the illusion that consumption can buy pleasure and gain freedom, and that beneath the social spectacle of material abundance is the barrenness of the spiritual world. "Labour is not voluntary labour, but forced compulsory labour". In order to get rid of the goods produced on the assembly lines of the developed industrial societies that do not operate without rest, capital further takes the power of speech and uses the platform it occupies to tell people that they can only be truly liberated if they work hard and buy more advanced products, creating The more you have, the happier you are. Thus, consumption is no longer about survival and development; people become slaves to consumption - they live to consume, furthering the poison of commodity fetishism. In political terms, capitalism suppresses the real needs of people and replaces them with all kinds of false needs, so that people give up their resistance and criticism and lose their ability to deny the capitalist system. It is the constant supply of consumer goods that allows workers to enjoy the same television programmes, read the same newspapers and even own the same cars as the capitalists. The alienation of consumption changed the consciousness of the workers and when their desire for consumption was largely satisfied, their demand to rebel against the system was abolished.

Western Marxism sees consumer alienation as a loss of freedom and a state of passivity. Marcuse and Fromm argue that in contemporary capitalist societies there is a dazzling array of commodities that dazzle the consumer. This is both a result of technological progress and also causes the occurrence of consumer alienation. As commodities permeate all aspects of social life, everything becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, and people who are dominated by commodities see their happiness as the amount of consumption, the amount of wealth they possess, and the difference in class and social status, so that the normal relationship between people becomes a commodity relationship between things, and human subjectivity is gradually reduced to an extremely passive state of subjugation. In this regard, Marcuse, Fromm, Ager, Baudrillard and others have developed their arguments. They recognise from the universality of alienation that alienation is a phenomenon common to both capitalism and socialism, and that only the overcoming of alienation can lead to a better life, as Fromm puts it: "High production and high consumption become the ultimate goal everywhere. The figure of consumption becomes the criterion of progress. This criterion applies not only to the capitalist countries, but also to the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the competition between the two systems seems to revolve around the question of who can produce a higher level of consumer goods, rather than creating a better life. As a result, in industrialised countries, man himself becomes increasingly a voracious, passive consumer. Instead of goods being used to serve man, man has instead become a slave to goods". Thus, consumption in this situation is in the end nothing more than a false compensation for the loss of freedom.

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