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### **Alienation in Capitalism: Rediscovering Fulfillment**

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**Alienation in Capitalism: Rediscovering Fulfillment**  
**Senior Thesis - ECON 799**  
**Written by Gregory Lee Carter**

## Western Capitalism: An Important Preface

Since the United States underwent the industrial revolution during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the country has been regarded as one of the strongest economic powers in the world. Industrialism has made conventional the factory worker's individual contribution to a larger goal- to provide every household in America with the products they needed and wanted. This revolutionary breakthrough in the production of goods, which encouraged the material lifestyle and 40-hour workweek, led many to believe initially that capitalism was an unstoppable economic force. Products and entrepreneurs quickly materialized in order to seize their opportunity for profit. It was a country full of people driven by the all too familiar notion of the "American dream" and the desire to become a self-made success. Up and coming firms consequently began the U.S.'s historical trend of inventing laborsaving technologies to reduce labor costs, and eliminate the need for classic industrial blue-collar jobs that previously made up the "back-bone" of the U.S. The result has been a national economy with a dwindling middle class, limited employment opportunities, and a vastly uneven distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor. How did this situation arise?

The periodical enlargement of corporate firms' power in the U.S. has been driven by immoderate profit seeking behavior. Corporate giants have not only overtaken much of the global market majorities, but have also asserted their political influence over the democratic system. This effect has removed U.S. democracy's bureaucratic decency, and replaced it with what is known as a *technocracy*; big business exercises control over government decision-making. No government can afford to antagonize big business at the expense of its own strength; thus the [Western] nation has become identified with the policies of its leading firms (Gorz, 1967: viii). Not all has been well on the Western Front:

"What was thought to be the greatest strength of Western civilization, science, technology, and economic progress, turned out to be Pandora's boxes that threaten this society with destruction...a society mainly motivated by self-interest has great difficulty in carrying out altruistic measures."  
(Weisskopf, 1972:15)

The U.S. government aligns with these firms and overspends on its defense budget in the name of its own uninhibited growth policies. There is sufficient economic turmoil ongoing in the U.S. that its inhabitants must soon pinch themselves awake and address the economic goals that reside outside of individual profit. André Gorz notes that waiting on proposed government alternatives is simply ineffective in eliminating these issues. He points out that political and ideological struggles are only effective if their objectives, instead of appearing as mirages of the more or less distant future, are geared to potential or more concrete ongoing mass actions that the political battles amplify (Gorz, 1967: 60). In other words, if we want to make societal conditions better for ourselves, we must take collective and autonomic action. “Hope and new insight transcending the narrow limits of positivistic-mechanistic think of social science today are needed, if the West is to emerge alive from this century of trial...Indeed while Western thought from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century was one of hope...the last forty years have been of increasing pessimism and hopelessness. The average person runs for shelter; he tries to escape from freedom and he seeks for security in the lap of the big state and the big corporation” (Fromm, 1961: VI). The latter mentioned adverse effects that capitalism has had on the U.S. and global economy are ones that shall prove onerous to resolve. Capitalism, as predicted quite accurately by some of its scholarly predecessors like Hegel and Marx, has created a number of problematic trends. It has forced U.S. policy-makers to adopt financially implausible & unsustainable welfare policies in wake of recessionary periods, and formed an economy that is heavily financially weighted in the favor of private corporations. The contemporary job market is made up largely of corporate cogs devoid of personal expression and freedom. Why does all of this matter, one might ask? Today’s economic picture, painted quite bleakly here, is pertinent among the matrix of choices to be made in terms of where to focus one’s career energies, hopes, and aspirations.

The generations to come must deal with one harsh reality; this is an economy headed in a disheartening direction. Economic textbooks attribute the capitalist man’s happiness to his level of wealth; as his wealth increases, so does his utility. How then can we hope to explain why the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s generally increased levels of wealth have actually led to a lower level of happiness among U.S. citizens? David Leonhardt

describes the effects that our misguided contemporary economic charter has had on its inhabitants:

“Over the last 60 years, and particularly in the last 30, a powerful set of social forces has outweighed the effect that rising incomes have had on people’s well-being. People work more hours, lose their jobs more often and, most importantly, get married less and divorced more than they did in the past.”  
(Leonhardt, 2001: 2)

If we continually demand more from life, does that mean we are inherently unaware of how happy we really are, or how happy we *should* be? The discussion of people’s happiness levels, particularly as it pertains to systems of affluent capitalism, draws attention to a very complicated yet important issue; the issue of *alienation*.

### **Alienation: What is it?**

The definition of the word alienation reads in the dictionary as follows:  
“the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved.” When man feels aimless and does not enjoy his life, his job, or the company his friends, it could be that he is experiencing alienation from the world around him. It is a term that has been accusingly referred to as idle intellectual babble, and a concept that is intangible without the presence of academically bolstered fabrication of thought. However, it is errant to believe that alienation is nothing more than a theory conceived by people with too much free time on their hands. Alienation is inextricably linked with all aspects of our lives, and despite the elusiveness and complexity of its origins, it undoubtedly occurs on a material level; it is connected directly with the circumstances we are forced to deal with on a daily basis. It arises on a social and political basis in which the individual becomes *estranged*, that is, he develops a general mistrust of his relationships with external parties. He no longer feels close or affectionate to the groups that he did once before. Alienation occurs when relationships falter between friends, adulteration is committed between wives and husbands, and political dishonesty is practiced in our modern excuse for “democratic” legislation. Man feels a growing estrangement from his world in the wake of these demoralizing things that he sees and experiences around him. It is a *feeling* to which the individual will fall victim, as well as an alteration of his *understanding* of the things that he thought he

understood. He suffers the loss of connections previously dear to him, as well as the tangible benefits that those connections formerly provided:

“If you ask friends a favor, they try to respond. They make efforts to please; your opinions carry weight with them. But I have no influence on the former friend who is now a stranger...if I asked him a favor he would refuse.”  
(Schmitt, 2003: 1)

Alienation of the individual represents also the loss of a certain power or influence over someone or something that was previously a friendly entity to him. To lose that connection is to feel even more powerless, and helpless in executing the plans that he has made for his own life. The aforementioned estrangement that occurs as a result of man's distancing from things in his life is the root problem associated with alienation. As he loses familiarity of comforts he once knew, he will instead naturally turn to the comfort of conformity among the masses. He may lose his autonomy and his self, and go on living an alienated life unawares. The question then remains, how does man then go about avoiding this unwanted isolating affect? In the context of U.S. capitalism, for example, how does one separate himself from the oppression, or the collective goals that his country and economy have collectively set forth for him? Is it most important to be an efficient & productive member of a monetarily motivated society? Or is personal fulfillment above all the goal that we should strive to achieve?

### **Explanation of This Paper's Empirical Method**

This thesis is not a quantitative one in the sense that it weighs econometric methods of regression-analysis to measure economical impact of gathered information and statistics. It is largely for the lack of a fixed reference point when measuring happiness levels that this paper avoids statistically based evaluations. Currently, research measures only what conditions unhappiness is associated with at the time of information gathering. Happiness research is also based on subjective self-evaluation. People are considered satisfied if they say they are satisfied, and their analysis can change if their expectations grow or the meaning of the word 'happy' subtly shifts (Leonhardt, 2001: 2). What yet remains to be improved upon in research of this issue is the *longitudinal* emphasis of the research conducted regarding happiness levels. By focusing on a human

subject's happiness evaluations over the course of their entire lives, researchers can make more intimately trace the route of our happiness. It is for the lack of access to such information that this paper does not present data as a means to drawing conclusions. This paper instead considers the conceptual influences on human happiness levels; a topic in the study of economics that is more qualitative than quantitative. Most commonly referred to in the study of economics as "utility" or "well being," this paper deconstructs our world's present state via social, philosophical, and economical theory. It looks at the stark contrast between human nature within and the capitalist system- alongside the dichotomy of the connection between man's actions, his action's effects on reality, his unique ability to be aware of this connection, and his ability to adapt his behaviors based on how he favors his present circumstance.

This paper is not intended to prophesize capitalism's impending doom as Marx once did. It is instead a social critique naturally formed from the existence of the capitalist system in the first place. Walter Weisskopf writes in his book *Alienation and Economics* that "social existence never encompasses the totality of human nature...social critique derives its force from what is repressed under the existing social conditions" (Weisskopf, 1971: 17). Participating in a *social critique*, as Weisskopf elects to call it, might be regarded as a utopian or perfection-seeking practice to undertake. I will argue however, that critical/utopian thought is imperative to practice in our daily lives. We must make conscious efforts to better societal (and therefore the U.S.'s *capitalist*) repressions as they stand today. In order to objectively criticize the social and economic terms under which we find ourselves, we must transcend the given situation we are in, and reject certain parts of our cultural realities and norms in order to criticize them. The empirical body of this paper consists of scholar's past works, attempting to dissect this simultaneously philosophical and economic issue. Via publications containing theoretical discussion and historical recounts of the concept, there is much extractable knowledge that one can use to clarify the controversial topic of coping with *alienation*. This paper will review the early development of original theories surrounding alienation, and proceed to apply them in a contemporary economical context.

The contemporary relevance of intellectual material first formulated hundreds of years ago is proven by the reality of present day. It is not without significance to note that

some of the predictions Karl Marx made in his writings were inaccurate; capitalism in all Marx's theorized weaknesses did not succumb to the fate of being replaced by Communism, as he believed. *Rolling Stone* magazine pointed out in an article published just this year that reality today does indeed emulate some of the *accurate* predications that Marx made as well. Marx argued that capitalist firm's relentless drive for profits harbored a chaotic nature, and would lead those firms to "mechanize their workplaces, producing more and more goods while squeezing workers' wages until they could no longer purchase the products they created." The collapse of the housing bubble and the ensuing Great Recession are each products of what Marx termed *fictitious capital*. These financial instruments, like stocks and credit-default swaps, are what Marx considered "accumulated claims" the future claims on the growth value of actual physical capital. The abuse of fictitious capital has contributed to the chaotic nature of capitalism- and it is still playing out in front of us today. "We produce and produce until there is simply no one left to purchase our goods, no new markets, no new debts" (McElwee, 2014: 2). This trend has caused the deepening inequality of incomes and therefore the average American consumer's increased involvement with debt financing. The fictitious economic practices adopted before the collapse of the housing bubble temporarily allowed consumers to enjoy overproduced and overvalued homes. When there were no subprime borrows left to scheme, the whole façade fell apart, and millions were made to suffer the potential volatilities of capitalism as Marx predicted they would. Should man trust an economic system that would so easily expose him to such volatile risks? The sound mind might tell us no.

The ultimate goal of this analysis is to give the reader a better understanding of how he can go about making his own place in the world (bearing in mind that the mutually shared goal of mankind is to live a fulfilling life). It is therefore beneficial to contemplate the route causes of daily subconscious attitudes. By deepening our understanding of the factors that influence our individual identities, we can more comfortably settle into answering the mind numbingly broad questions like; what is our true purpose in this world, what should our goals and aspirations be based on, and how can we overcome oppression in its varying forms? My thesis is the following: By confronting alienation present in our lives- on a personal and institutional level- we can



apply effective life alternatives that reduce our current circumstance's tendency to alienate the nature of humankind.

### **Rousseau: Concept of 'Self-Love'**

Swiss writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the first to observe alienation. He was particularly concerned with the natural conformities and loss of individuality created by organized Western culture. Rousseau began his intellectual work in 1750 with a book called *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. In the book he illustrated his own distrust in the very institutions that his colleagues felt were the pride of their country. He argued that Europe's progression in arts and sciences was in fact obstructing the freedoms and moralities of the European people. He was deeply concerned with the culture surrounding him, which contained a shifting focus from intellectuality to uniformity.

“All minds seem to have been cast in the same mold: constant politeness demands, propriety commands; constantly one follows custom, never one's own genius. One no longer dares to appear what one is...One will thus never really know with whom one is dealing.” (Rousseau, 1986: 6)

By hiding who he truly was from an increasingly proper society, Rousseau noted that the individual in society began to lose the uniqueness of his identity in himself. He therefore also lost his ability to develop sincere friendships stemming from intellectual variances. Rousseau draws attention to his specific concept of where alienation occurs when he mentions that “one no longer dare[d] to appear who [he was]” anymore. He notes that the route cause of alienation in European society was in man having gone astray from his previously natural state- one in which he was formerly unbounded by expectations and the establishment of social pressures. He therefore went from being happy to being concerned with issues that were above his natural means of primitive contentedness- like defining what beauty was at the hands of human creation (art). The morals and virtues that formerly determined man's course of action in his natural state waned and were replaced instead with the Westerner's trademarked desire for commerce and money. One can't help but notice that this story sounds familiar- the European post medieval era that Rousseau describes and was surrounded by parallels quite seamlessly with the story of the U.S. industrial revolution. Each civilization's unprecedented periods of growth had a hypnotic affect on their citizens- a life with dependable cultural principles and generally

conformed theories represented security in numbers if nothing else. Alienation was rampant in both cases of societal organization because people, instead of trying to be themselves, succumbed to the demands of an elevated society and arranged their lives to meet its norms.

In Rousseau's view, the goal is instead to be ourselves at all times. Instead of relying on science and cultural trends as empirical determinants of life's purpose, we must create our own distinct idea of what is good and evil, important and unimportant. Instead of measuring life in the length of each day that passes, we must measure it in how richly we live each of those days. Humans lack an innate sense of what life is truly 'about,' in other words, we are incapable of predetermined life planning. This would require that we know things about our own lives beforehand; what career to pursue, whom to marry, how many children to have, and when to retire beforehand (Schmitt, 2003: 75). We must instead rely on our own values to determine our paths. If we are sure of our individual values, then we will not hesitate to *act* on them. Having regard for the clarity of life's purpose and the value of certain pursuits is only useful if man follows his own plan with vigor and persistence. The only values real to the individual are the ones that animate his actions.

“Just saying that one [holds] these values is not sufficient...Hypocrisy or flagrant self description may well be symptoms of alienation. Firmly in possession of oneself, one does not hide one's values but puts them forward unambiguously for all to see.” (Schmitt, 2003: 20)

Lastly, Rousseau notes pragmatically that the individual must form ideas about his life in accordance with what is possible for him to achieve. A certain level of alienation occurs when the discrepancy between man's desires and his powers to obtain them exists. By establishing equilibrium between our personal capability and the will to achieve our goals, we can decrease the alienating difference between our desire and power. By doing so, man does not resign that life is incapable of pleasing him; he instead notes the important difference between perpetual dissatisfaction and the notion of 'living in the moment.' The latter mentioned 'perpetual dissatisfaction' of the individual is a clear parallel of capitalism's ultimate crux. In an economy that is constantly striving for additional growth, how can its consumers and producers ever truly be happy with their current state? An economic mechanism that must constantly be fed diminishable

resources will subsequently diminish the health of its neighbors and its occupants. In the United States, alienation displays itself in the frantically desperate activity of man and his neighbors to advance their careers and possessions so that they can obtain the happiness that seems to elude them:

“He is constantly striving toward an imagined, hoped-for future, devaluing thereby what one has already accomplished and the life one leads. Those who are forever striving for new and higher goals always fall short; they are never adequate to the tasks they have set themselves. Failure is unavoidable because whatever they attain is never enough.”

(Schmitt, 2003: 21)

Sean Achor of Netflix’s popular series, *Ted Talk*, has a name of his own for this type of thinking called *positive psychology* (Achor, 2011). He observes that our current view regarding success is as follows; by working hard we’ll be successful, and if we’re successful we’ll be happy. However, this mentality is backwards because our definition of success tends to change as we continue to achieve new tiers or success. If man lives ‘outside’ of himself, a place in which he constantly feels he is failing or never quite accomplishing success, he also loses confidence in his self-trust and wisdom. When man feels that his goals are discreditable, he also discredits his former sense of self. The individual becomes dependent on others for the replacement of his lost value of self and subjects himself to conformity of opinion and prevailing societal ideas, because he is incapable of providing approval of success and achievement for himself. Such is the life of an alienated individual, and Rousseau’s analysis of the individual’s bandwagon tastes is quite applicable to today’s pop culture crowd. Instead of considering an article of clothing’s beauty for its color and appeal to individual taste, people hold that the popularity of the clothing’s *designer* brand determines its value.

When determining the importance of what career he is to commit himself to then, man should consider above all else how that career aligns with his personal values. A parent may encourage the safety and security of a full-time insurance job because it provides cultural validation and the feeling of *pride*; this is against what Rousseau believes to be the proper course of life fulfillment. By electing to take the path of fulfillment in providing labor, the individual is able to practice *self-love*. Self-love differs

itself from pride in that a proud man feels so because he has adhered to the practice affirmation seeking among his peers and his society.

Rousseau's concepts contain a strong insistence on the importance of self-establishment. However, Rousseau overlooks the inevitability of cultural exposure; can an individual plausibly be capable of *fully* escaping alienation as he defines it? If our beliefs are to be purely separate from the vast majority, we could only truly accomplish individuality and avoid Rousseau's idea of alienation through isolation. When an infant adapts to his surroundings through imitation, he showcases a paramount process of human nature. As the infant grows, the people he imitates influence his behavior closely; he first learns his values and morals from the very people routed in Rousseau's speculated cause of alienation. It is then implied that man has already submitted to conforming or being alienated by society's influence. Rousseau's successors made efforts to improve upon the thought behind this one key fallacy, which leaves the role of personal choice in overcoming alienation oversimplified to an extent.

### **Kierkegaard: Hedonism & the 'Thinking Animal'**

Much in the same manner that Rousseau noted the importance of keeping in check our powers and desires, Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard characterized the opposing aspects of human life as a discrepancy between man's predetermined physical bounds and his virtually unbound capacity for intellectual exploration. Kierkegaard differs most significantly from his intellectual predecessor in that he denotes the uncontrollable forces that add to the complexity of self-identification. A non-thinking animal lives its life contently and without perturbation- a *thinking animal* weighs obsessively the significance and meaning of different aspects in its life. The thinking animal (man) therefore exposes himself to the predispositions that frustrate him and oppose his desire for flexibility. As mentioned earlier in the Rousseau section of this paper, we know that man is dependent upon his surroundings in order to adapt, learn and survive. He therefore cannot simply distinguish himself from any and all surrounding parties. Kierkegaard elaborates on this opposing forces in man's life by pointing out that a randomized upbringing exposes the individual to factors that predetermine his life circumstance.

“We are born into situations and bodies that leave indelible imprints on our lives in ways that we discover only very slowly. We inherit personality traits, abilities, and defects, opportunities and deprivations that largely makes our lives what they are, and our capacity for altering any of those traits is very limited.”  
(Schmitt, 2003: 28)

Finding a self-distinguishing combination of morals and values is therefore, an ongoing and arduous process that man must undergo for his entire life as he comes to understand different aspects of his upbringing (and therefore *himself*) at his own pace.

Kierkegaard also discusses alienation as a product of the ‘aesthetic life’ or *hedonism*- the pursuit of pleasure. In this context, he refers literally to a pleasure that translates to ‘fun’ activities. He believed that hedonism was both an insufficient replacement for and distraction from the demanding issue of determining life’s purpose. Man alienates himself by obsessively pursuing pleasure not only because he is acting in direct avoidance of his true ambitions, but also because of the self-defeating tendency of a pleasure seeking lifestyle. Pleasure is exposed to predetermined factors just as man is. Man cannot take pleasure in the sun on a cloudy and rainy day. The varying conditions of the weather might discourage the individual’s pleasure-motivated lifestyle; it interferes with the *consistency* of the pleasures that he is able to find. Kierkegaard also notes that the individual can sequentially diminish the pleasures he initially received from a novel activity as he continues to repeat it. Alienation in this regard is reflected by the shift in the fluidity of man’s life events. If he strives to focus exclusively on one positive aspect of his life, he will estrange himself from other important parts of his life.

“Pleasures come and go; hardship is a part of every life. But the pleasure seekers are not prepared to face the inevitable sorrows. They lack the resources to meet the inevitable pains of life and to bear them bravely.”  
(Kierkegaard, 1959: 81)

Lastly, Kierkegaard notes that alienation is not *caused* by societal influences over the individual’s mind as Rousseau believed. The misguidance of public opinion was instead a direct result of alienation. Alienated lives, fostered by lack of direction and purpose, caused conformity and therefore the establishment of a certain community purpose. This is important to note because it separates conformity and alienation as being synonymous terms. Alienation is then under Kierkegaard’s definition, caused not by individual senselessness, but rather by life’s unavoidable acute tensions. By acknowledging the

inevitability of these tensions, however, man can readjust his expectations for what life has to offer. Between Rousseau and Kierkegaard then, we have a decent understanding of the individual's role in determining the degree to which he may or may not be personally responsible for manifesting his own alienation in the world around him. What remains to be discussed, however, is the importance of a society's organizational structure in influencing alienation.

### **Marx: Alienation of Labor**

We arrive now at the work of famed philosopher Karl Marx. Wrongfully accused as a fanatic of Communism, Marx was largely misinterpreted by the masses as a result of general ignorance & U.S. anti-communist propaganda campaigns implemented during the peak of the Soviet Union's power. Marx's existentialist philosophies, a great portion of which can be found in *Marx's Concept of Man*, critiques the imperfections capitalist system and discusses their economic implications in depth. Marx differed from the likes of Kierkegaard and Rousseau in that he believed the man's alienation is concretely based on his membership in a given *society* and a given *social class*. Marx's individual was both aided and help captive by the development of society. The esteemed philosopher protested against man's alienation; the loss of himself and his transformation into a thing within a capitalist society, and Weisskopf concurred with Marx regarding the importance of emphasizing capitalism's societal uniqueness:

“The present condition of [Western] society displays its difference from the earlier state of civil society in that- in contrast to the past- it does not integrate the individual within its community.” (Weisskopf, 1971: 17)

Marx was concerned in particular with the concept of man's *alienation of labor*- namely, how alienation manifests itself in the lives of capitalist wagedworkers. Marx's works are especially impactful today because, unlike many of his predecessors, he studied man and history by *beginning* with the real man and the economic and social conditions under which he was forced to live. This practice is referred to as “materialism,” when one begins with the most basic level of reality and moves on to theorize the processes that explain it. Marx's bluntly logical intellect contrasted with mankind's previous go-to explanation for our world; the heavens and the powers above. Marx described the

historical method on which he based his widely discussed theories regarding alienation and the imperfections of capitalism:

“The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather, it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.”  
(Fromm, 1961: 10)

Marx draws a connection between who man is, and what he does in life, as being one and the same; man *is* what he *does*.

### **Marx: Alienation of Labor**

And thus we arrive at the connection between alienation and its affect on one’s designation of productive abilities- or the *alienation of labor*. For Marx, the increasing social and economic development of man was what also increased the degree to which he experienced alienation in his life. Work to Marx was man’s active relatedness to nature and his contribution to the creation of a new world. Marx’s alienation of labor revolved around the idea that private property, and the subsequent division of labor power, *stripped* labor of its character and its power of the working individual’s expression. As capitalism imposed its systematic restrictions on labor and its products, they assumed “an existence separate from man, his will, and his planning” (Fromm, 1971: 47). This process began with the shaping of man’s alien world around him as a direct result of his labor:

“The object[s] produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being; as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is turned into a physical thing; this product is an *objectification of labor*.”  
(Marx, 1844: 95)

These objects stand above and against the alienated worker; they reaffirm what Rousseau refers to as his *pride* in his societal accomplishments and not his *self-love*. The work of the individual has then ceased to be a part of his nature, and so he feels denied of his expression and unfulfilled in his occupation. In this pattern of labor, Marx argued that

man not only feels alienated from himself, but also becomes dominated by the product of his labor as well. Here, we see a different manifestation of Rousseau's conformist theory; instead of conforming to the society and the individuals who make it up, Marx's individual conforms to the process of production in the capitalist system. As a result man is exploited both economically and individually; he is transformed into a thing. "The laborer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the laborer" (Marx, 1964: 536). Marx knew that this was not an affect on labor *exclusive* to the capitalist system, but he argued that alienation reached its peak therein. Capitalism's methods for raising the social productiveness of labor are brought about at the cost of the individual laborer. According to Marx, the very social and political circumstances under which we find ourselves are closely associated with the objectified labor that man allows to become his masters. If man is sacrificing his own well being for the sake of production, then it must be for *something*; or for the enjoyment of another man. We can see quite clearly that a laborer's alien entity manifests itself in capitalism as the profit and therefore power of the firms to which the worker devotes himself. Big corporations, who reap the benefits of thousands of workers, contain an unrivaled economic power in our contemporary global economy. By devoting his own potential profits and powers to the firms, the individual's political powers are also essentially taken from him.

Lastly is Marx's alienation of man from his *species-being*. When confronting his own alienation, man also confronts his relationships with other men, whose labor and objects of their labor are alienated as well. Unable to escape this interrelated connection, man is imprisoned and forced to adopt existential egotism. He lives for himself and worships the objects that he holds in self-esteem. This malpractice conduces man's alienation from his social connections and the power that is associated with them.

Private property, acquisitiveness, the separation of labor, capital and land, exchange and competition, & the value and devaluation of man, are all symptomatic of a system based on *money*; thus the paradoxical dilemma between money and its purchase of happiness. "Marx foresaw with amazing clarity the completion of [the alienation] process in capitalism... 'every man speculates upon creating a *new need* in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin'" (Marx, 1844: 101). Here we see again



the perpetual dissatisfactory motivations of the alienated individual. Marx refers here to both the individual's perpetual dissatisfaction with his pursuits, and the *objects* that capitalism forcibly provides him with. The capitalist market offers a constantly growing mass of products, each of which subjects him to a new false need; a new potentiality of deceit and robbery. The alienated individual elevates such products to be the pinnacle of his life's value, and he comes to rely on his money to take control of his alienated self. From this insatiable drive comes capitalism's inherent immoderation of consumption and its globally destructive nature.

### **Choosing One's Career**

In his writings on the alienation of labor, Marx largely neglects to include the specifics or the type labor being pursued. He does refer to the alienated individual as a "wageworker," a title he knowingly gave to the unskilled industrial worker. However, even Marx would have been surprised by the degree to which all levels of labor, specialized or no, would be subjected to the alienating tendencies of capitalism. Today, "idolatry-" the worship of objects owned and yielded directly from man's labor- is very much routed in the lives of the majority of actively employed individuals in the U.S.. It is of course an oversimplification to suggest that in the pursuit of labor, man must completely separate himself from objects in order to transcend his alienating tendencies. The latter would leave him without means with which to produce anything at all. Man's surrounding nature makes up the "sensuous external world-" or the material world in which his labor is active and realized (Fromm, 1961: 96). Man therefore must elect a proper alternative to a career in which he alienates himself from the world he inhabits. It is important to pay attention not only to the *end product* of labor, but also the *process of production*- the ongoing duration of a laborer's energies during production. In order to be alienated from his products, the labor that man is completing must be external to his personal nature; it must be *forced* labor.

"Choosing work carefully would seem to be a way of trying to resist the precondition of alienation by finding in one's work life a guiding thread to one's existence...a steady occupation that gives one's life some continuity does not give meaning to one's life...the unchanging profession is only a means for evading the pre-condition of alienation by enabling one to live

heedlessly, more or less from day to day, without asking oneself what one is doing and why.”  
(Schmitt, 2003: 54)

If man elects to commit his energies to work in which he feels he is not sacrificing his own nature, then it stands to logic that he would be able to largely circumvent personal sacrifice, and therefore the alienation of his labor. Therein lies the importance of designating ones energies purposefully and with conscientious intent. Take for example a student who has graduated with a law degree. She is rewarded for her earning her degree with a prestigious job, and is then assigned to defend a large firm who has imposed disagreeable harm to its customers and the environment. Does she then quit her job? Perhaps it would have been wiser to earn her major in a different discipline (but that is now a sunk opportunity cost.) In light of this proposed dilemma, it is important for man to consider closely how he aligns his educational path with his personal passions. Also important is the degree of flexibility in his given situation; whether he can easily find a new job, or if he considers his current profession alienating enough to the point that he would leave it gladly without an immediate alternative. Such are the considerations man must weigh on a *personal* basis to determine how alienated he is by his profession.

Marx purposefully chooses to analyze the *individual's* repression, as Kierkegaard did, in order to frame the importance of man's role in realizing his own alienation. The needs of the individual also represent the needs of mankind, which leads us to an important point; global relinquishment from alienation goes beyond one individual's grasp of it. In his critique of capitalism, Marx painted a dynamic picture of alienation's complex interrelationships. Alienation of labor stems also from our society's organizational ramifications and our relationship with our species being. This calls for further concrete alternatives to be proposed. Western economies regard their standard of living as having been higher today than ever before, but it remains a problem that our contemporary economy belittles the importance of the individual's labor power. We must find a way to elevate the individual's importance without hindering our economy's basic needs. Because it has been observed that capitalism creates false needs for the self and for the objects we are advertised, it is essential that we eliminate those falsities. Concrete alternatives to our current social system will therefore be discussed in the hopes that they foster an environment, which is at the least *increasingly* liberated from individual

oppression. In regards to capitalism, we must practice what is known as *aufhebung*- we must transcend suppression, and preserve our humanity by consciously raising our social structure to a higher level of fulfillment.

### **Parsons: Evolutionary Universals**

Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons categorized long-term persisting societal patterns of organization into a category he called *evolutionary universals*. Evolutionary universals, by his definition, sprung up independently in many different environments and ultimately remained unscathed by their trials. In Parson's view, evolutionary universals are good to an otherwise primitive society in that they give their inhabitants advantages over other societies in regards to organization of kinship, money, markets, and democracy. The "evolutionary" segment of the phrase implies of course that these systems continually undergo gradual development and change. Since the beginning of capitalism, change has been the rule and lack of change the exception; therein lies the problem. Parsons believed that capitalism and democracy would be present until the end of human history, and it very well might be. It is astonishing that many societies have come up with institutions such as money, markets, and private property, while very few have given up these institutions once they have caught on. (Bowles, 2005: 528).

So in which direction will capitalism tend to go? Will it be the system's demise that predates the capitalist man's reluctant release of private property and individual profits? Marx believed that institutions emerge and persist as long as they are consistent with the current level of technology and class relations, and by now we know that Marx thought no differently of capitalism. The remaining issue lies in the alternatives that might be pursued in the effort to establish a suitable system that outperforms Parson's single-minded vision and differs from Marx's communist vision.

### **Case Study: What is the Proper Workweek Length?**

The reduction of the *workweek* remains a fundamental demand in Western society, not as an increase in idle time, but an increase in the socially productive time which is objectively and subjectively necessary for the production of human individuals and a human world. In capitalism, these essential humanist demands are in fact repressed;

firms prefabricate (create through advertisement new objects of) individuality in order to sell their product to individuals whose own individuality has been destroyed. Stress levels in the American work force are higher than ever before; workers spend hours griming about the long weeks they have to work. This truth makes evident the fact that hours don't necessarily equate to productivity. Where then could we look to draw lessons from countries who have yet already made efforts to reform their current system's structure? Belgium and the Netherlands have a 30-hour workweek; and Germany, the fourth largest economy in the world, commits its workers to a yet shortened 35-hour workweeks. There is must evidence that a reduced work week not only increases free time as mentioned before, but also is directly correlated with a reduction in work related illnesses and an increase in productivity of the workers on the job.

If affluent capitalism in Western society is in fact at the whim of accusations including but not limited to the overproduction of goods, the alienating treatment of its laborers, and a globally suffocating hunger for profits, then it is imperative that we reduced our work week to anywhere between 30 and 35 hours. It will alleviate many of capitalism's overeager tendencies. Henry Ford's reduction of the workweek from 80 hours to 40 hours (alongside an increased wage) saw his company flourish, and individual worker productivity increase drastically. However, Ford's example falsely bolsters one of capitalism most durable myths- that it has reduced human toil. The luster associated with Ford's major reduction of the workweek from 80 to 40 hours makes the assumption that 80 hours was the previous historical norm- but this is not the case. Medieval peasants were forced into 80-hour workweeks; but their work rates were actually much slower than the rate warranted by modern capitalism. The modern-day imposition of a so called "labor discipline" and the growing instrumentality of work have combined to create a subjective disconnection in the way that man spends his time. Work is what he dislikes but is forced to do; leisure is what he chooses and likes to do (Schor, 1991:14). Upward trends in production/consumption driven behavior have yielded some improvements in quality of life. But when one adds up all the items consumed in a capitalist society, it is difficult to argue that all goods are necessary and contain intrinsic consumer value. As businesses pushed the image of the 'dissatisfied customer,' consumerism became increasingly common. In the choice between income and leisure,

the quest for relative standing has pitted man against his neighbors and made him biased toward income:

“Consumerist traps are the flip side of the bias toward long [workweek] hours embedded in the production system. We are not merely caught in a pattern of spend and spend...The whole story is that we work, and spend, and work and spend some more.” (Schor, 1991: 125)

The capitalist man must let go of the idea that ‘goods’ are what make life good. He must reject the idea that competition is the absolute determinant of our motivations. He will then begin to liberate himself from the material mindset that permitted him to feel obligated to an over extended workweek in the first place.

Research has revealed that a significant portion of U.S. workers would be willing to trade future wages for additional leisure time (Schor, 1991: 124). This trend is cause for employers to consider using leisure time as a unit of compensation. Some employers even *require* overtime hours from their employees:

“One straight forward reform, long overdue, is to outlaw the practice of mandatory overtime. Workers should not be forced, as many currently are, to work more than their normal workweek in order to keep their jobs” (Schor, 1991: 146).

If employers make overtime hours optional and give their workers the ability to convert such hours into future free time, average hours worked per week would actually decrease overall, but this progressive system known as *sale of labor by the hour*, helps contribute to a more productively efficient and humanized work environment (Schor, 1991: 146). Using time to pay for time is an incentive that employers have yet to fully utilize, but it represents one alternative to capitalism’s *current* system of work compensation, which favors paychecks, consumerism, and maximized work hours above all else. Other substitutes for the long workweek that can effectively raise productivity include giving workers more participation and decision-making power on the job, narrowing wage differentials. A number of studies show that these reforms raise satisfaction. By committing 2% of income the employer would otherwise *pay* its employees for long hours as free time, the average workweek could be reduced significantly over the course of just a century. Figures from Juliet Schor’s Overworked American project these numbers:

**Potential Gains in Leisure  
Annual Hours If 2 Percent Productivity  
Growth Is Transformed into Leisure**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Hours</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Hours</b>
1991	1961	2002	1608
1992	1961	2003	1577
1993	1922	2004	1546
1994	1885	2005	1516
1995	1848	2006	1486
1996	1811	2007	1457
1997	1776	2008	1428
1998	1741	2009	1400
1999	1707	2010	1373
2000	1673	2020	1126
2001	1641		

In a decade, hours could potentially decrease from 1,960 to 1,600 hour worked per year. That’s enough for two additional months of vacation or a 6.5-hour workday. If a person’s real income were to rise by 4 percent per year, and all of it was channeled into time off, after ten years the annual worker would be near 1,300 hours- a total gain in annual free time of over 600 hours. This person could go to school one semester a year, take a four-month vacation, or follow a 5-hour daily schedule year round (Schor, 1991: 147). Reduction in the contemporary workweek requires us to separate from the “keeping up with the Jones’ complex” of constantly striving to keep up with others; this is not a transformation that can be made over night, but it is possible through a socially democratic means of governance combined with the unification of labor power.

**Gorz: Concrete Labor Power Alternatives**

A commonly known flaw of Marx’s work is his belief that socialism would prove to be man’s emancipation from alienation. He believed it would allow man to return to himself and abolish the need for division of private property and its subsequent detriments. Marx knew that capital was alien to the intuitive needs of human nature, and therefore an alternative system that he called “socialism” would accommodate human desires better. That socialism is a necessity has never struck the masses with the compelling force of a flash of lightning (Gorz, 1967: 3). But that same prediction is however, in more general sense, correct in its assertion that the evolution/replacement of

our contemporary social & economic structure is the proper alternative to our current state of capitalism. André Gorz points out in his book *Strategy for Labor* that Western society is not entirely at unrest in its current state because its *natural base* for doing so (the lack of basic necessities) no longer exists in the majority of the population. Despite one fifth of the U.S. population suffering from poverty, it is not a peasant class similar to its predecessors; the demographic is spread out and geographically variant in its areas of concentration. Gorz notes that without peasants to revolt against a system that makes them miserable here and now, it is not so clear that the Western status quo represents the greatest evil. However, the modern day worker's current condition is unacceptable not only by virtue of the direct oppression of labor in productive life, but in its negation of the meaning of productive life due to the purpose which capitalist exploitation assigns to work; *alienation*.

“Labor must precede the reduction of labor, and industrialization must precede the development of human needs and satisfactions. But as all freedom depends on the conquest of alien necessity, the realization of freedom depends on the techniques of this conquest.” (Marcuse, 1964: 18)

What Marcuse described aligns well with Marx's theory on the development of societal institutions. According to Marx, institutions emerge and persist as long as they are consistent with the current level of technology and class relations (Bowles, 2005: 529). Monopoly capitalism imposes on society a model of “affluent consumption,” and to struggle against the exploitation of labor is necessarily to struggle against the purposes for which it is exploited. The idea that capitalism currently plays the role of a neutral manager above classes and parties, dedicated to a rationality which transcends them, is only defensible under the current system's following errant assumptions:

- 1.) That there exists no alternative to the type of rationality of the existing society, or that alternative never be made sufficiently explicit as a requirement on the path to human fulfillment.
- 2.) That the incompetence of anti-capitalist forces be evident in their inability to manage the economy and the State without catastrophe.
- 3.) That a labor movement would be insufficiently strong enough to counterbalance the pressure exercised by monopoly capital on the State (Gorz, 1967: 48).

The latter observations are imposed on today's collective Western psyche, but it is entirely impossible to overcome these false impositions. Gorz suggests that since the intolerability of Western capitalism is no longer absolute, but rather relative, supplementary mediations will be necessary to make intolerability felt. To believe that the inhabitants of an economy are incapable of fundamentally resolving the essential problems which capitalism's development brought about is errant. Society can resolve these problems in its own way by means of superficial repairs aimed at making the system tolerable. Gorz emphasizes that such "repairs" can no longer be tentatively fought in the name of a new system, only differing from capitalism in its method of economics and politics. Western capitalism's alienation of mankind encompasses more than those two dimensions of society as Gorz points out:

"The dictatorship of capital is exercised not only on the production and distribution of wealth, but with equal force on the manner of [man's] working, thinking, living. As much as over the workers, the factories, and the State, this dictatorship rules over the society's vision of the future, its ideology, its priorities and goals; over the way in which people experience and learn about themselves, their potentials, their relations with other people and with the rest of the world. This dictatorship is economic, political, cultural, and psychological at the same time: it is total."

(Gorz: 1967: 54)

Gorz essentially combines Marx's all encompassing capital domination theory with Rousseau's *conformity* and Kierkegaard's *acute tensions* to describe what we have come to know wholly as alienation. Capitalism, if overcome with a radically different structure of labor, can be replaced with a system less predisposed to alienating conditions.

Gorz provides one such example of a repair in the formation of *union autonomy*- or the collectivized implementation of labor power against its economic system. According to Gorz, collective labor power applied in an aggressive manner is one concrete solution to revealing our current system's flaws. This mass organization of labor is necessary to reveal the true concreteness of problems in the modern day affluent capitalist system; it is the only means by which class' needs, demands, and ends to be pursued can be elaborated upon. The phrase *union* carries with it political implications; it is for that very reason that all attempts to subordinate the union to the political system that enshrines it have to be avoided. Take for example the politically involved labor



movements against the shutdown of obsolete U.S. armament and commodity industries; this narrow conception of collective defense of work and employment goes hand in hand with a powerless revolt by the workers against the absurdity of their work. These inherently defensive actions do not harbor an encompassing political perspective which ties the immediate grievances of its members together in a strategic overall vision of class relationships; namely the transformation of society. Government must not involve itself, or try to limit or discipline the union's autonomy of action. Objective criteria such as economic fluctuations, the evolution of productivity, and stability of profit levels must not interfere with the process either. The freedom of action of the behalf of union autonomy must be defended; its role is to express its worker's real needs, means of satisfaction, and the individual's role in the national plan. Gorz describes the six levels of economic structure, each of whose current labor power alignments must be renegotiated:

1.) *On the shop level*: through conquest by the workers of power over the firm & work conditions.

2.) *On the company level*: by the conquests of a workers' counter-power concerning rate of profits, the volume and orientation of investments, technical level and evolution

3.) *On the industry & sector level*: by the fight against overinvestment fraught with future crises (ie; housing bubble), and against the shortcomings of capitalist initiative in regards to the development of socially necessary production.

4.) *On the city level*: by the struggle against the monopolies' stranglehold over the entire life of the city's inhabitants in public transport, real estate, organization of leisure, etc...

5.) *On the provincial level*: by struggle for new industries necessary to the survival of a specific region, alternate programs which aim at the establishment of regional centers of decision making, and are independent of monopoly capital and centralizing tendencies.

6.) *On the level of national plan*: by elaboration of an alternative plan which modifies the current economy and reestablishes priorities that align with real social needs, and which challenges the purpose of private accumulation (private property) and the consumers society (affluent capitalism) by developing human resources (education, research, health, public installations, city planning) and the material resources of the nation.

Gorz essentially calls here for the urgency of intellectuality to be returned once again to this issue, as it is one that clearly stretches beyond one common general misconception; that capitalism's imperfections are limited to the scope of issues economical and the political. He calls for economists to return to this formerly abandoned

field of major concern, in order to accommodate our current structure's desperate need for reform and therefore the creative minds behind the reform. Autonomic labor to Gorz power is supposed to act as a counterweight to capitalism's current structure of labor power, and therefore must not be interfered with by the factors that designate the current system in the first place. However, the formal recognition of such union organization remains an abstract demand among the alienated laborers themselves. The idea of union autonomy is incapable of naturally mobilizing workers, as long as it remains unlinked to the potential concrete powers of the laborer's *over* their producers. It is for that reason that the first task of the working class movement should be to devise new strategy that will indivisibly unite wage demands, the demand for control, and the demand for its self-determination of work conditions. Though unavoidably waged from within the capitalist process, the battle for structural reforms will create possibilities which point beyond capitalism and which therefore render the status quo all the more intolerable (Gorz, 1967: 60).

Social democracy is one example of a governmental form that makes an attempt to condone individual utility and expression. Although there is no true static definition of a social democratic government, it is a form of societal organization that at least aligns ideologically with the personal liberation of its inhabitants. Britain's social democratic form of government revolves around the unity of society- complex in its economic, cooperative, ethical, and emotional bonds (Gamble, 152: 1999). This 'liberalism' parallels definitively with the notion of transcending alienation; to achieve the free development of individuality and enable processes intellectual, moral, and emotional growth. Social democracy's emphasis on both personal freedom and collective action in the establishment of a free work force are essential in the collective efforts of labor to establish an equal position of authority in corporation driven economies. "Mutual aid [from the government] is no less important than mutual forbearance, the theory of collective action no less fundamental than the theory of personal freedom" (Gamble, 153: 1999). Social democracy is at the least a suitable platform over which U.S. democracy can consider changing its most detrimental one-sided politics, media exclusivity, and money-hungry market activities that cause negative externalities galore.

## **Where We Are Left?**

We have seen over the chronological development of thought regarding the issue of alienation, that its effects can be traced to many root causes, all of which revolve around the natural requirements for well-being generally accepted among mankind. Capitalism was not a mousetrap waiting to be stepped into before its material conception; it was rather a means to an end that mankind had yet to achieve in providing for itself on a basic level that predated the industrial revolution. However, since the boom in technological and productive capabilities formed particularly within the Western hemisphere and their capitalist organizational structures, it is absolutely necessary for us to readdress the make up of that structure in order to improve its contemporary applicability in assuring the fulfillment mankind's economic, social, and essential desires. Alienation is not, as it accursedly referred to by beneficiaries of capitalist affluence, a hopelessly utopian train of thought to pursue. Such accusations are blind in their ignorance. Social critique and mass movement for change is rather an all-encompassing frame of mind, which can be plausibly brought to fruition by the naturally formed counterbalance to monopoly capital found in *autonomic labor power*. By choosing to transcend our current condition and establishing concrete alternatives to today's relatively vague economic misdirection, we can revolutionize our system into one that if not completely free of alienation, is largely helpful in establishing a direction which encourages sustainability, personal expression, social benefit, and the happiness of man.

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