

# Alienation Theory in Comparative Perspective: Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*

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## ABSTRACT

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (hereafter *Manuscripts*), Karl Marx critiques alienated labor and private ownership under capitalism through his analysis of the harsh conditions faced by workers. Over a century later, Herbert Marcuse, building on Marx's theory of alienated labor and responding to new developments in capitalism, proposes the concept of *technological alienation*. He argues that science and technology have evolved into novel forms of social control. While Marcuse's theory of technological alienation inherits Marx's framework, significant divergences inevitably emerge due to the century-long gap between their historical contexts and the distinct socio-economic realities they addressed.

## KEYWORDS

Marx; Marcuse; Alienation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Manuscripts*, Marx first philosophically defines alienated labor, grounding his analysis in the concept of human essence. He elucidates how capitalist private ownership leads to human alienation, exposes the exploitative nature of capitalists, and systematically explains the root causes of workers' impoverishment, thereby delivering a profound critique of the capitalist system. Over a century later, Marcuse, inspired by the *Manuscripts* and building upon Marx's theory of labor alienation, proposes the concept of technological alienation. In *One-Dimensional Man*, he argues that advanced industrial societies, under the guise of technological rationality, suppress potential resistance through operationalist methods and a positivist ideology. This results in the transformation of individuals into one-dimensional beings and society into a one-dimensional system. By comparing Marx's and Marcuse's theories of alienation under new historical conditions, we gain deeper insights into the evolving manifestations of alienation in capitalist development, sharpen our understanding of capitalism's intrinsic contradictions, and draw critical lessons to address emerging alienation phenomena in contemporary Chinese society.

## 2. MARX'S THEORY OF LABOR ALIENATION

The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* marks Marx's transition from idealism to materialism and from revolutionary democracy to communism. A central concept in the *Manuscripts* is alienated labor, which diverges from earlier theories of alienation by grounding itself in the reality of human existence and critiquing, rather than inheriting, prior ideas.

### (1) Alienation of Workers from the Products of Labor

In capitalist society, workers not only fail to obtain the products of their own labor but are also compelled to sell their labor in order to acquire these very products, which in turn dominate them. Under the pressure of survival, workers have no choice but to continue engaging in productive activities and endure the ruthless exploitation of their labor by capitalists. As a result, they receive less and less from their labor, and even all the means of production are possessed by the capitalists. This ultimately leads to an ever-widening gap in wealth between capitalists and workers. Thus, Marx said: "Labor produces wonders for the rich, but for the worker it produces privation."

Moreover, in this context, Marx also emphasized the important role of nature. He pointed out that nature not only provides humans with the means of subsistence but also supplies them with the materials for life and consumption. Through labor, people transform the elements of nature into products of labor. Without nature, humans would be unable to sustain their lives. However, the objectification of labor under capitalism has led to workers increasingly losing control over their means of subsistence and survival, and thus becoming alienated from nature. Therefore, Marx said that humans have become alienated from nature.

### (2) Alienation of Workers from the Labor Process

After analyzing the alienation between the worker and the product of labor, Marx discovered that there also exists an unhealthy and irrational phenomenon between the worker and the labor process. Marx believed that people should develop freely and comprehensively in the labor process and be able to realize their own value. However, under the capitalist private ownership system, labor is no longer for oneself but for the capitalist. The worker is in a passive position during the labor process. For them, the sale of labor power is not an intrinsic or necessary need but an extrinsic and contingent one, a choice made under the pressure of survival. Therefore, "labor is external to the worker." In such labor, the worker is unfree and self-torturing. It is precisely for this reason that the products the workers produce can stand opposed to them as alien entities.

### (3) Alienation of Humans from Their Species-Essence

Marx, through his critique of political economy, had already understood that the true essence of humans lies in labor. He pointed out that the distinction between humans and animals is that humans possess conscious life activities. Humans are beings of a species, realizing their value through labor. The species-characteristic of humans is free, conscious activity. However, under the capitalist private ownership system, workers labor merely to sustain the existence of themselves and their families. At this point, labor no longer becomes a joyful activity for workers, nor an activity for realizing their own value. As a result, not only does the species-essence become detached from humans, but it also controls and oppresses them. "Man's species-life also becomes a means of maintaining his physical existence." Alienated labor has caused a separation between humans and their essence. Therefore, under alienated labor, there is no difference between humans and animals. Humans lose their self-consciousness and only care about how to survive. Even human labor has turned into a means of making a living.

### (4) Alienation Between Humans

Based on the analysis of the first three aspects of alienated labor, Marx derived the fourth aspect of alienated labor, which is the alienation between people. This is also the highest expression of alienated labor.

Firstly, the alienation between workers and capitalists is evident. Marx believed that the main cause of alienated labor is the capitalists who bring endless suffering to workers. In pursuit of more surplus value, capitalists ruthlessly exploit and oppress workers without considering their physical and mental conditions. In order to survive, workers have no choice but to sell their labor as a commodity to capitalists, leading to intense confrontation between capitalists and workers.

Secondly, there is alienation among workers themselves. Although the working class as a whole is the object of exploitation by the bourgeoisie, there are also contradictions and opposition within the working class. This is because, with the development of capitalist productive forces, capitalists purchase a large number of machines to replace some workers in labor, resulting in a surplus of labor. In order to obtain limited job positions, competition among workers is inevitable.

Lastly, there is alienation among capitalists. When capitalists regard workers as tools for capital accumulation, they fail to realize that they themselves have been alienated. The nature of capital is to increase in value, and capital can only achieve this through movement. Therefore, in order to gain wealth, capitalists must continuously engage in production. In this process, some capitalists with competitive advantages may lead to monopolies, technological innovations, and the emergence of multinational corporations through competition, while those without competitive advantages face bankruptcy and return to the situation of being part of the working class.

In summary, both capitalists and workers are in a state of alienation, and alienation between people has become a widespread phenomenon.

### **3. MARCUSE'S THEORY OF TECHNOLOGICAL ALIENATION**

Marcuse builds on Marx's framework, arguing that technological advancement has extended alienation into every sphere of society. In advanced industrial capitalism, technology becomes a tool of domination, enslaving humans through techno-rationality and ideological control.

#### **(1) The One-Dimensional Human**

In Marcuse's view, normal individuals should possess a critical attitude towards the existing society. However, under the influence of science and technology, people in advanced industrial societies have gradually lost their critical, transcendent, and negative capacities, and have come to unconditionally affirm all aspects of real life. As a result, they have become one-dimensional beings. The emergence of one-dimensional people is actually a state in which individuals, controlled by technological rationality, adapt to real life. Marcuse believed that with the development of science and technology and the continuous improvement of the socio-economic level, people's material needs are greatly satisfied. At the same time, however, the human spiritual world is increasingly enslaved and loses its critical and skeptical spirit. In addition, in advanced industrial societies, capitalists use mass media to create false needs. Under constant propaganda, people are deceived by these false needs and mistakenly regard them as real needs. Thus, people will try every means to satisfy these false needs. But in this process, people will be dominated by these goods that we do not actually need. What's more terrible is that they are completely unaware of it.

#### **(2) The Ane-Dimensional Society**

Marcuse argues that the advanced capitalist industrial society has become a new type of totalitarian society, which has only a single positive dimension, and this society has been eroded by alienation in all aspects of politics, economy, culture and thought, thus showing a kind of overall alienation.

In the political sphere, this one-way trend manifests itself in a clear convergence or convergence of opposing factions, with many political opponents abandoning the idea of competing for power, thus preventing society from making alternative choices. People who used to have a radical attitude towards the status quo may have taken a different stance, but now they are unable to voice their desire for revolution. All political factions became the defenders of the established order, so the political sphere ceased to be active, but became more and more closed.

In the economic sphere, the way of life of the people is gradually unified, and people of different classes are able to enjoy the same products, so that the differences between classes seem to have disappeared. But the fact is that in this kind of society, people no longer think about what they need, but give the right to choose to the capitalists, who produce commodities in order to chase capital, and

publicize these commodities through mass communication, creating a kind of "false demand" for people, but people's real needs cannot be satisfied, and people have become tools that capitalists can manipulate at will, and cannot refuse any production needs of capitalists.

In the field of culture, the development of science and technology has broken the unreachable distance between high-level culture and reality, and high-level culture has gradually been assimilated by reality and has become an accessory product of social reality and social system. Marcuse argues that culture is supposed to be a kind of alienation, in which some negative and unfortunate ideas exist, but now culture is losing its negativity and criticism, and has become the product of commodification, the purpose of which exists is to cater to people's needs and obtain benefits, so that such a culture has lost the value of the original "great rejection", and "the alienation of art, together with other negative methods, succumbs to the process of technical rationality".

In the field of discourse, the language used by people is also fully regulated, and society disseminates the fixed meaning of a word to the public through various media, so that people can only think of the fixed meaning of the word when communicating. In short, in such a one-dimensional society, people are controlled by technological rationality, and in order to develop, it is necessary to eliminate the alienation brought about by technological rationality.

#### **4. THEORETICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MARX'S AND MARCUSE'S THEORIES OF ALIENATION**

##### **(1) Technological Alienation Originates from Labor Alienation**

Marx's theory of labor alienation contains the germ of the theory of technological alienation, and the fundamental cause of technological alienation lies in the alienation of labor and the mode of production with capital as the core. Under the capitalist mode of production, people's labor has become a commodity, and the product of labor is an alien force to the laborer, and science and technology, as the product of labor, naturally dominates and enslaves the laborer, and alienates it from the laborer. With the development of science and technology, people have to rely on more and more complex technical systems, which will make people lose their creativity and become slaves of science and technology. As long as the alienation of labor remains, the alienation of technology will never disappear.

##### **(2) Technological alienation has developed labor alienation to a certain extent**

On the one hand, the development of science and technology has deepened the alienation of labor. Under the capitalist mode of production, the capitalists use science and technology to deepen their domination over the labourers, and "machines, the simplification of labour, are used to turn the growing, the completely immature – the child – into a worker, just as the worker becomes an unattended child." Machines accommodate human weakness in order to turn weak people into machines. The development of science and technology has turned workers into machines, and when they are treated as commodities, workers use labor power as exchange value, and labor still has human characteristics. However, when the worker is reduced to a machine, all the value and dignity of the worker disappears, and the subjective status of the worker in labor is lost. On the other hand, the development of science and technology has "alleviated" the alienation of labor. The wide application of various machines has reduced the number of people engaged in manual labor, reduced the labor intensity of workers, and relieved physical fatigue, and this change in labor methods and characteristics has reduced the workers' resistance to enterprises and systems, and even workers are willing and eager to participate in enterprise management, thus alleviating the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but this still cannot change the essence of workers as "exalted slaves".

## 5. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARX'S AND MARCUSE'S THEORIES OF ALIENATION

The different levels of development of the productive forces, the different historical periods, and the different means of ruling in the eras of Marx and Marcuse determined that the alienation of capitalist society had different manifestations. However, no matter how the form of alienation changes, the basic contradictions of capitalist society have not been completely eliminated, and the fact that the proletariat has been oppressed has not changed.

### (1) The focus of the research is different

Although Marx and Marcuse lived in different eras, both were situated within capitalism, where the root cause of alienation was capitalist private ownership. However, the difference lies in the distinct emphases that Marx and Marcuse placed on the study of alienation.

In the early stages of capitalist development, as means of production became separated from producers, capitalists employed workers who sold their labor to generate profits while suffering ruthless exploitation. Social alienation thus manifested primarily as labor alienation. Marx viewed labor as the fundamental characteristic distinguishing humans from animals, through which people could achieve free and comprehensive development. However, under capitalist private ownership, labor as human essence becomes alienated from workers, transforming into a force that dominates and enslaves them. Marx further elaborated four dimensions of alienated labor: alienation of workers from the products of labor; alienation of workers from the labor process itself; alienation of humans from their species-essence; and alienation between individuals.

Marcuse argued that in contemporary society, alienation prominently manifests as technological alienation. He observed: "The distinctive feature of advanced industrial society is the effective containment of centrifugal forces through technological means rather than terror, based on the dual foundation of overwhelming efficiency and rising living standards." In Marcuse's era of capitalist development, industrial civilization had created tremendous wealth and welfare systems that significantly improved workers' living conditions. This created an illusion of vanished class distinctions, leading to the gradual erosion of revolutionary, critical, and negating consciousness. Marcuse attributed this phenomenon to the development of science and technology into instruments of domination. He contended that in advanced capitalist societies, technology loses its neutrality and assumes totalitarian characteristics, becoming capitalist ideology that manipulates political, economic, and cultural spheres. This technological rationality subjects people to its rule, resulting in comprehensive alienation across all aspects of life.

### (2) Divergent Approaches to Transcending Alienation

Marx posited that alienated labor emerged as a product of private ownership at a specific historical stage, and private property fully manifests itself only at its most advanced phase. Thus, only when capitalist economies reach their zenith, with the proletariat mired in extreme poverty and contradictions between the bourgeoisie and proletariat reaching an acute intensity, can the proletariat seize arms through violent revolution to abolish capitalist private ownership entirely, overthrow outdated relations of production, and achieve human liberation.

In contrast, Marcuse proposed a radically different path to eliminate alienation. He argued that the hyper-development of Western science and technology has distorted human essence and repressed libidinal desires (eros). To transcend alienation, he advocated for the liberation of eros, formulating his "theory of erotic liberation." How, then, to liberate eros? Marcuse placed this task in the realm of art. He fused literature and art with revolution, asserting that "art is inherently alienating" and that "artistic alienation constitutes a conscious transcendence of alienated existence—a 'higher' or mediated form of alienation." In other words, art itself alienates the already alienated reality, transcending it. Within the fictional, imaginative world of art, individuals are freed from external constraints and can

develop autonomously. Art's capacity to transcend and oppose reality lies decisively in its aesthetic form. Through novels, plays, and other aesthetic mediums, art accommodates the bizarre and absurd, allowing people to envision alternative futures within these fantastical realms. Thus, Marcuse saw alienated art as a redemptive force, using symbolic expression to transport people to a world beyond oppression, thereby resisting repression and achieving erotic liberation.

### (3) Divergent Agents of Alienation Transcendence

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx emphasized the proletariat's role in overcoming alienation. Under capitalist private ownership, the bourgeoisie appropriates the proletariat's labor, extracting surplus value through relentless exploitation. As the most deeply oppressed class, the proletariat harbors the strongest demand to overthrow capitalism. Hence, Marx unequivocally assigned the task of overcoming alienation to the proletariat, who yearn to liberate themselves from alienated labor, escape exploitation and oppression, and realize free, holistic development.

Marcuse, analyzing postwar capitalist societies, argued that the agents of transcending alienation were no longer the proletariat but marginalized "substrata"- "the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and colors, the unemployed and unemployable." He contended that rising material standards had masked class inequalities with illusions of freedom and comfort, diluting proletarian revolutionary consciousness. The working class, having lost its "negating" critical stance toward society, could no longer serve as the primary force for change. Instead, revolution depended on those at the bottom of advanced industrial societies- "The vagrants and outsiders living at the bottom of society, the exploited and persecuted people of different races and skin colors, their lives are the most direct and realistic demands for an end to the intolerable living conditions and systems."

## 6. CONCLUSION

Marx identified acute contradictions between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, advocating violent revolution to dismantle capitalism and establish communism. Marcuse, bound by the Frankfurt School's limitations, shifted the burden of overcoming alienation to marginalized groups and emphasized cultural and ideological revolution, rendering his theory utopian and divorced from practical methods of societal transformation. Yet, Marcuse's insights remain relevant, particularly in an era of rapid technological advancement where humanity is both beneficiary and captive of techno-rationality. Comparing Marx's and Marcuse's theories reveals how alienation manifests differently across capitalist development stages, enriching Marxist discourse on alienation.

In China's pursuit of modernization, alienating phenomena have emerged: excessive materialism, a "rat race" mentality under unprecedented pressures, loss of agency in labor, and spiritual emptiness masked by entertainment. Addressing these issues through Marxian and Marcusean frameworks to build a harmonious socialist society demands deeper exploration.

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