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Objective Alienation: No ‘essentialism’, nowhere¹²

Lukas Meisner³

Abstract: Even if its’ right is no longer straightforwardly denied, the concept *alienation* remains under official suspicion today. This is due to its supposed background in metaphysical discourse – a background ‘derived’ from Marx’s early use of the term species being – which is accused of idealisations such as the ahistorical ‘true kernel’ of ‘human essence’. Beyond such allegations, the article shows why Marxian alienation is, if properly read, conceived neither ‘essentialistically’ nor metaphysically but – on the opposite – historically and materialistically. As a result, ‘alienation’ is not (as, say, in Rahel Jaeggi’s ‘reactualisation’) reducible to a subjective attitude or affect towards the world but was and remains

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- 1 “No essentialism, nowhere” refers to Christa Wolf’s book “Kein Ort, nirgends”. Next to the two reviewers, I would like to thank the feedback by Helen Akin, Helene Thaa, Mirela Ivanova, Marlen van den Ecker, and Christoph Henning, as it was expressed at a workshop on *Entfremdung* at the University of Basel, 26-27th of May 2022. By ‘essentialism’, I refer to an *ahistorical* and *static* account of (human) essence (‘Wesen’) – hence, I follow the way Jaeggi (and other postmodernists) use the term (often in a strawman-version). As Henning and Ivanova stress, this understanding of ‘essentialism’ is already intrinsically problematic since (the) ‘essence’ (of human beings) can explicitly be understood *as historical and processual*. In that sense, it may be argued that non-‘essentialist’ theorisations of ‘essence’ are well possible. See, f.e., Christoph Henning, *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Entfaltung: Die politische Philosophie des Perfektionismus* (Frankfurt/ Main: Campus, 2015).
 - 2 This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (GA n. 725883 EarlyModernCosmology).
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a precise description of this world as an objective societal reality. Even more, with an update of the concept *objective alienation*, alienated labour can be shown to result – in the long run – in *alienated consumption* as well as in an alienation from ‘nature’ and from ‘life’. Only with a profound understanding of objective alienation, finally, can the phenomenologically denotable subjective alienation be *explained* as well – instead of only being *described*.

Introduction

Even if its’ right is no longer straightforwardly denied, the concept ‘alienation’ remains under official suspicion today. This is due to its supposed background in metaphysical discourse – a background ‘derived’ from Marx’s early use of the term ‘species being’ – which is accused of idealisations such as the ahistorical ‘true kernel’ of ‘human essence’. In the Frankfurt School tradition, Rahel Jaeggi’s recent ‘reactualisation’ of the term justified its conceptual transformation so far off from its radical former meanings that it cannot but be described as a domestication of the concept. Against this domestication, I show that Marx’s theorisation of alienation is under attack, in fact, due to a stark misunderstanding of his basic approach. More precisely, I demonstrate why Marxian ‘alienation’ is, if properly read, conceived neither ‘essentialistically’ nor metaphysically but – on the opposite – historically and materialistically. As a result, ‘alienation’ is not reducible to a subjective attitude or affect towards the world but was and remains a precise description for this world as an objective societal reality. Indeed, Marxian ‘alienation’ and Marxian ‘exploitation’ are closely related analytical tools for an understanding of the political economy of capitalism⁴ – which does not confine itself to a narrowly conceived ‘differentiated economic sphere’. With such a non-domesticating update of the concept of objective alienation, then, alienated labour can be shown to result, in the long run, in alienated consumption as well as in an alienation from ‘nature’ and from ‘life’. I will prove that these updated forms of alienation do not posit the alienation from any romanticised abstract ideal of lost origins but, rather, refer to an alienation from the very concrete conditions of possibility

4 So that – which is only a side effect – ‘social’ and ‘artistic critique’ cannot be separated from each other in the first place.

of human survival and living. Only with an understanding of this objective alienation, finally, can the phenomenologically denotable subjective alienation be explained as well, instead of only being described.

1. Sketching the roots of *alienation*: From Rousseau to Marx

The first outspoken theorisation of alienation can be found in the (early) work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For him, alienation happens *in structural societal form* as the alienation of

- 'true being' vis-a-vis mere appearance
- individual authenticity vis-a-vis social distinction, role play and being-persona (mask)
- self-will vis-a-vis public opinion and common sense
- the 'depth' of 'naturalness' vis-a-vis artificial superficiality
- self-love (*amour de soi*) vis-a-vis the comparisons, competitions, and insufficiencies of less narcissistic than heteronomous vanities (*amour propre*)
- equality among humans vis-a-vis private property and coerced labour.⁵

To put it in a nutshell, Rousseau's theory of alienation is a critique of appearance, social distinction, common sense (*opinion*), superficiality, comparison, heteronomy, and inequality as alienating tendencies in modern societies. As such, it is equally a critique of the structural alienations of competition, meritocracy, and their multiple pressures to perform. Today, it can ideally be adopted as a lens to read consumerism including conspicuous consumption (Veblen), and the logic of status including the wide spectrum of violence through symbolical capital (Bourdieu).⁶ More generally, Rousseau's work shows that it makes perfect sense to argue against

5 Cf. especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

6 This Rousseauian perspective – of inner-directed vs. other-directed social character – was developed for the emerging post-war consumerism in David Riesman (et al.), *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character. Abridged and Revised Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

the capitalistically tailored *mission civilisatrice* of progressivism and urbanisation *due to* – and not *despite of* – being for a realisation of freedom and equality as one and the same demand. The idea that self-determination and self-realisation belong together, and that we are alienated from them without a society conducive to both at the same time, is the leading premise throughout Rousseau's oeuvre. It can be used not the least against today's *ideologies* of self that privatise and thus sabotage (and alienate from) ideals of intersubjective authenticity and social individuality.

Following the standard history of philosophy, it would be logical to take a step to Hegel after Rousseau before getting to the young Hegelians. Yet, in this essay, I do not consider Hegel's 'Entfremdung' as part of a Critical Theory of alienation. This is because, in Hegel, *Entfremdung* (not sufficiently distinguished, say, from *Entäußerung* and *Vergegenständlichung*) serves not as a historically specific relation but as *the* necessary or (onto-)logical structure of self-consciousness – which always needs to objectify itself in-order to know itself. Unlike Hegel, then, it is the young Hegelians – from Feuerbach to Moses Hess and Bruno Bauer – who criticise religion as an exemplar of the "self-alienation of human essence"⁷. According to this critique of religious alienation, humans 'objectify' themselves in God, yet only to forget about this objectification, which is the precondition of worshipping one's own object as if it were a primordial subject. In Feuerbach, humans alienate themselves from themselves by first projecting their wishes, desires and fears unto God, and then identifying their own projections as realities to bow down in front of. Alienation, here, is approximated to *inversion*. Whereas in the alienated logos of theology, God created humans, it is the other way around within Feuerbach's anthropologisation. Before they could pray to him, humans had to create God to begin with – and they did so in their own idealised image. This understanding of religion as *self-alienation of a human product* (God) *from human producers* is crucial also for another young Hegelian – namely, for Karl Marx.

7 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 76: "Selbstentfremdung des menschlichen Wesens". The following short exposition of Feuerbach's basic idea is taken mainly from this major work of his.

The inversion in which a *product gains power over the producer*, forcing her to (*re-*)*produce* her very own domination, simultaneously hiding the (*re-*)*producedness* of this domination, is precisely the kind of alienation Marx lays bare in the capitalist economy. Here, however, the new 'God' is capital (or accumulated dead labour), which increasingly dominates (living) labour (and living beings).⁸ Hence, by 'putting Feuerbach from head to toes' – by radicalising his *anthropologisation of theology* qua a *sociologisation of anthropology* – Marx deconstructs the projection of God-like capacities unto capital, including the theodicy of the spontaneous self-regulation of markets⁹, and the quasi-tragic reproduction of capitalism as if it were a super-power outside of humans' hands.

Yet, the 'God' of capital, unlike that of other religions, does not remain only in the *heads* of the people. Rather, it 'incarnates' on earth as 'real abstraction': as a real relation between humans and their own (sur-)real organisation of society. Capital's 'religion', in this sense, is *material, immanent, or secular*.¹⁰ Despite lacking in meaning and purpose, it nevertheless is more and other than mere illusion. Under the regime of capital, what becomes a *fact* is that humans no longer have their time and work at their own disposal, since they have-to sell themselves to survive – mostly by getting some kind of compensation for their commodified labour on competitive markets. The more humans work in capitalist relations, however, the less they are in control of what they (*re-*)*produce* and its resulting economic dynamics. Still, the realities of capital, commodities and markets are not just subjective reactions to the world as it is, but

8 Cf. Harald Schliwa, "Entfremdung als Ausdruck nichtbeherrschter Vergesellschaftung", in Peter Hehr, *Zum Inhalt und zur Funktion des Entfremdungsbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Berlin (GDR): Thematische Information und Dokumentation Reihe B, Heft 50, 1985), 62-67, here p. 64: "Der Begriff der Entfremdung erfasst die Umwandlung der im gesellschaftlichen Arbeitsprozeß hervorgebrachten sozialen Macht in eine die Produzenten beherrschende Macht".

9 Cf. on the theodicy as economics Joseph Vogl, *Das seltsame Überleben der Theodizee in der Ökonomie*, presentation given the 7/7/2016 at the HU Berlin.

10 For this argument in more detail, see Lukas Meisner, "Beyond capitalism as religion: Disenchanting modernization for a radicalized project of modernity", in *Platypus Review*, 145 (2022a), online, no page count.

an objective transformation of this world itself – in these realities' own image. That is, Feuerbach's 'self-alienation', here, is applied by Marx to socio-historical phenomena. Alienation is demonstrated to have both a subjective and an objective side, as I will show later on.

2. Denying *alienation*: six ways

Although Marx showed why alienation is an objective condition of societal organisation, the reality of alienation gets denied since long – mainly, but not only, along the lines of reducing its objectivity to subjective sentiments. In fact, the objective Marxian account of alienation got denied from a multiple of backgrounds over the last decades.¹¹ There are (at least) six (often intertwined) ways of denying Marxian 'alienation' its right, either as a concept, or as a specific way of using this concept, or as a reality:

- (1) *Ontological negation*: it denies the existence of alienation on ontological grounds. The argument for such denial is that, since there *can be* no authentic self in the first place, there *can be* no alienated – as 'inauthentic' – self either.¹² In Foucauldian manner, the wish for authenticity, autonomy and subjectivity is claimed to be an *epistemic illusion*, until the hopes for a non-alienated life become (dangerous) illusions as well (uniting *humanism* with the critical *humanities*). The term 'alienation', here, is seen as nothing but as an 'essentialist' fraud.
- (2) *Anthropological necessitation*: it denies that a non-alienated human (or humanity) *could ever not exist*, so that the *human* condition is a condition of *alienation*. Arguments for this necessitation are, for example, that human beings are always already 'existentially' *external* or 'ex-centric' to themselves, and thus never 'at home' or 'centred' in

11 There is no space, here, to reflect on the (political) reasons of this bisection, and the concomitant denials; a convincing explanation is given by Chris Yuill, "Forgetting and remembering alienation theory", in *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(2) (2011), 103-119.

12 In fact, this is one of the main arguments underlying Jaeggi's redefinition, see Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems. Mit einem neuen Nachwort* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2016).

themselves.¹³ Another version along the same lines is the thesis that it is only 'wearing masks' (becoming-*persona*) which makes humans truly human (becoming-*persons*). This is because the human as a political animal is supposed to be nothing without the public of the polis, whose eyes are always constructing *personae* (masks), behind which the 'human' is no other than an animal.¹⁴

- (3) *Moral re-evaluation*: it denies that alienation is to be judged as a bad thing whatsoever – or at least not as an unambivalently bad thing. There are varied versions of this re-evaluation, in which 'alienation' becomes something more or less positive. For example, alienation is said to bring *more* freedom instead of less¹⁵, or to make possible the *realisation* of self instead of its derealisation (Marx's *Entwirklichung*).¹⁶ In this re-evaluation, it is helpful to redefine 'alienation' as simply meaning to 'get into contact with the alien' – which has nothing to do with Marx's usage of the term but goes back to a (Hegelian?) confusion of (capitalist) *Entfremdung* with (Brechtian) *Verfremdung*.¹⁷ Still,

13 The classic on this is Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 1975).

14 This necessitation is developed in most liberalisms, f.e. in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), second chapter; and reformulated in many postmodernisms, f.e. in Byung-Chul Han, *Transparenzgesellschaft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 57 ff. For a critique, see exemplarily Georg Lukács in his 1967 *Vorwort* in Georg Lukács, *Frühschriften II. Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2013), 26: "Für die bürgerlich-philosophische Kulturkritik, es genügt an Heidegger zu denken, war es sehr naheliegend, die gesellschaftliche Kritik in eine rein philosophische zu sublimieren, aus der dem Wesen nach gesellschaftlichen Entfremdung eine ewige ‚condition humaine‘ zu machen, um einen später entstandenen Terminus zu gebrauchen."

15 For the classic, see Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes. Gesamtausgabe. Band 6* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), fourth chapter.

16 Cf. Gavin Rae, "Alienation, authenticity and the self", in *History of the Human Sciences*, 23(4) (2010), 21-36.

17 Along these lines, Stakemaier's – perhaps least possible Marxian – understanding of alienation is "treating alienation not so much as an original sin but rather as a constitutive privilege [!]", see Kerstin Stakemaier, *The Aesthetic Properties of Alienation*, a presentation at *Antarctica. An Exhibition on Alienation* in *Kunsthalle Wien*, 30/8/2020.

when redefined as the *opposite of xenophobia*, alienation no longer is a problem but the very solution.¹⁸

- (4) *Historicist antiquation*: it denies the concept of alienation its' relevance for today, since it is suggested to be outmoded, old-fashioned, and/or inadequate for the present age. This point is most often put forward by stating that the concept of alienation, officially taken from the factory age of Manchester capitalism, could no longer hold for new modes of capitalist accumulation. Interestingly, that view was developed both from within the conditions of real-socialist societies¹⁹, and from within the neo-capitalist creative, lean, and team labour conditions of Toyotism (including its hedonistic consumerisms).²⁰
- (5) *Psychologist privatisation*: it denies alienation's objectivity by inferring the theory of alienation from the 'alienated feelings' of marginalised intellectuals. In this privatisation, 'alienation' is reduced to individuals' theorising reaction against a marginalising society. Alienation, here, is not embedded in society for real, but only a *psychological resentment* in certain people, especially in academics.²¹
- (6) *Academic (philosophic) prohibition*: it denies the concept 'alienation' its philosophical dignity or legitimation, proposing that under new university fashions (analytic philosophy, pragmatism, postmodernism²²

18 Against Stakemaier, Adorno still got it right when he reminded us that "Nur Fremdheit ist das Gegengift gegen Entfremdung", Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 4* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 103.

19 Cf. Armin Trebeß, *Entfremdung und Ästhetik. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Studie und eine Analyse der ästhetischen Theorie Wolfgang Heises* (Stuttgart/ Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2001), XIV, who writes of "die Tabuisierung des Begriffs [der Entfremdung], wie sie für die Länder des realen Sozialismus charakteristisch war."

20 Cf. for this Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia. Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

21 For this characterisation, see Peter V. Zima, *Entfremdung. Pathologien der post-modernen Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2014), 31.

22 For a clearer understanding of 'postmodernism' and a historical-sociological genealogy of its genesis and persistence, see Lukas Meisner, "The Political Economy of Postmodernism and the Spirit of Post-Bourgeois Capitalism", in *&&&Journal. The New Centre for Research & Practice* (2021), online, no page count.

etc.), the term as it was formerly known can no longer be defended in intelligible ways. Aligning with the common sense of academic booms and the newest vogue in intellectualist thought styles, 'alienation' is claimed to be in-need of complete redefinition, if it is granted the right to survive at all.²³

All in all, then, denying Marxian 'alienation' is the shared characteristic of many conservative, liberal, communitarian and postmodernist thinkers. Arguably, most of these denials share a premise that reduces the objectivity of alienation to subjective, moral, philosophical, psychological, or academic sentiments. Interestingly, the best-known Frankfurt School attempt at a 'reactualisation' of the term results in a similar denial of its once Rousseauian, Feuerbachian, and Marxian content. In this account, as well, alienation gets reduced to a mostly subjective issue.

3. Domesticating 'alienation': Jaeggi's conceptual transformation

Whereas the term alienation was broadly missing in the social theories of the 1980s and 1990s, even when it finally re-emerged in the Frankfurt School of the 2000s, it did so in a fashion far off from its Marxian roots.²⁴ With this chapter, I focus on Rahel Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' because she, at least in the German-speaking world, is traded as today's hegemonic interpreter of the term. Astonishingly, the main reason Jaeggi gives to dismiss the *Marxian* theory of alienation is that it would – quite obviously – contradict liberalist and postmodernist positions, or analytical and post-

23 As will be seen in the next chapter, this is – most prominently – Jaeggi's position.

24 As Adrian Wilding, "Rahel Jaeggi. Kritik von Lebensformen. Review", at *Marx & Philosophy* (13/2/2016), online, no page count, summarises Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' of alienation: "what appeared at first sight as a laudable revival of a key idea turned out to cede extensive ground to Marx's liberal and postmodern critics." He continues: "A straw man ('essentialism') has provided the foil for a quite etiolated and sociological image of unalienated life." Alternative reactualisations to Jaeggi's closer to Marx include Barry Padgett, *Marx and Alienation in Contemporary Society* (New York/ London: continuum, 2007); and Jerome Braun (et al.), *Alienation and the Carnivalization of Society* (London: Routledge, 2012).

structuralist philosophies.²⁵ This approach to an ‘update’ is particularly problematic if one remembers the “post-structuralist laudations of alienation as [...] an unhuman condition that can [and should] *be enhanced and radicalized*.”²⁶ To a certain extent, Jaeggi’s dismissal of Marxian alienation already follows from her closeness to Althusser’s structuralist critique of early Marx²⁷, since – after all – “the project Althusser” consisted in “definitely disposing of the concept of alienation.”²⁸ The resulting ‘theory of alienation’, then, either denies alienation a negative evaluation (liberalism) or gives it an ontological status (postmodernism) – until “alienation becomes constitutive and inevitable”²⁹. Hence, the way Jaeggi ‘reactualises’ the concept is by getting rid of its Marxian contents, its analysis of political economy, its critique of capitalism, and its main problems: from labour to the commodity. If this is not a wholehearted “‘farewell’ to the [former] concept”³⁰, it is at least an almost complete redefinition of it which comes close to the abolition of its objective contents.³¹ Let us look more closely into the reasons for and ways of this ‘abolishing rescue’.

The four main arguments Jaeggi offers for her reactualisation are the following:

“[1] The use of the concept of alienation had become too inflationary in the times of its boom, [2] its philosophical foundations seem too outdated in the age of ‘postmodernism’, [3] its political consequences seem too questionable in the age of ‘political liberalism’ – and perhaps, [4] the critique of alien-

25 Cf. Jaeggi, *op. cit.*, 51-57.

26 Keti Chukhrov, “Desiring Alienation in Capitalism. Zeal to De-alienate in Socialism”, in *Crisis & Critique*, 4:2 (2017), 132-152, here 142, my emphasis.

27 On her closeness to Althusser, see Jaeggi, *op. cit.*, 52.

28 Étienne Balibar, “Strukturelle Kausalität, Überdetermination und Antagonismus”, in Henning Böke (et al.), *Denk-Prozesse nach Althusser* (Hamburg: Argument, 1994), 36.

29 Jaeggi, *op. cit.*, 56: “Entfremdung wird konstitutiv und unausweichlich”.

30 *Ibid.*, 317: “‘Verabschiedung’ des Begriffs”.

31 Cf. also Armin Kuhn, “Jaeggi, Rahel, Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems. Rezension”, in *Das Argument*, 268, 48. Jahrgang, Heft 516/2006, 250-251.

ation also seems too hopeless under the sign of victorious capitalism."³²

These are wondrous considerations. Let us go through them step by step. To start with, one can at least argue that if a concept was used inflationary once (1), this may be less *caveat against its usage* than *proof of its relevance* – as much as a call for its stricter re-theorisation (instead of its utter redefinition). Moreover, that the 'philosophical foundations' of the theory of alienation appear as antiquated in postmodern times (2), and that its 'political consequences' are outrageous for political liberalism (3), cannot be counted as *arguments at all* if one does not identify either with the claims of postmodernism and/ or of liberalism (which, arguably, belong together). Last but not least, the fatalism bowing down to capital's winner-takes-it-all-mentality after 1989 (4) is, if anything, reason to return to the category of alienation instead of removing it. Jaeggi, however, instead of reading 1989's 'end of history' as a call for a *critique* of alienation that puts capitalism at its very centre seems to prefer to surrender to the alienations *of* capitalism, namely of a capitalism that even lost its systemic competitor. Consequentially, Jaeggi does not draw the conclusion that the concept of alienation needs an update for today's capitalism which keeps the radical edge of the term but that *its very substance needs to be altered* via its 'reactualisation', "conceptual transformation"³³, or philosophical redefinition.

The resulting 'reactualised' version of alienation, then, comes down to the abstract formula of a 'relation of a lack in relations'³⁴, which points to people's insufficient appropriation of the social world. That formula serves well as a psychologisation, individualisation and subjectivation of a formerly sociological concept. Whether it is the *feeling* of powerlessness vis-a-

32 Jaeggi, op. cit., 11: "Zu inflationär war der Gebrauch des Entfremdungsbegriffs in den Zeiten seiner Hochkonjunktur geworden, zu überkommen scheinen seine philosophischen Grundlagen im Zeitalter der ‚Postmoderne‘, zu fragwürdig seine politischen Konsequenzen in dem des ‚politischen Liberalismus‘ – und vielleicht auch zu aussichtslos das Anliegen der Entfremdungskritik im Zeichen des siegreichen Kapitalismus."

33 Ibid., 13: "begrifflich transformiert".

34 78 f.: "Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit".

vis *one's own* earlier decisions; the deficient *self*-appropriation of one's social role; the problem of subjectivist *self*-alienation; or the *sentiment* of an *individual's felt* indifference³⁵, all of Jaeggi's 'phenomena' of alienation regard *inner conducts to* and *interpretations of* the world – instead of this world's societal structures. As a result, *not* being alienated signifies "a specific way of *relating* to oneself and *to the conditions in which one lives* and by which one is *determined* (!) – of being able to *appropriate* them."³⁶ Yet, arguably, if it is the case, thus, that the conditions in which one lives *determine* one, then one's scope of possible actions against alienation is narrowed down to *identifying* with these given conditions. Consequentially, for Jaeggi, to dis-alienate mainly means to "learn", "know", "internalise", "assimilate"³⁷, "understand"³⁸, take an "attitude"³⁹ to, "coherently interpret"⁴⁰ and "get into a relation with"⁴¹ these very conditions. Hence, instead of transforming societal conditions, getting beyond alienation with Jaeggi seems to come down to be able to *relate, assimilate, adapt to* and *appropriate*⁴² them in-order to "function"⁴³ within and "integrate"⁴⁴ into them. Inasmuch as it is more about *reinterpretation* in theory than about *transformation* in practice, however, Jaeggi's 'appropriation' is quasi-idealistic. Even more, if its alternative to alienation is the appropriation of the institutionalised world *as it is*, it almost approximates right-Hegelianism's affirmation of given *Sittlichkeit*.⁴⁵

35 See 80-212.

36 58, original emphasis: "eine bestimmte Art, sich zu sich und den Verhältnissen, in denen man lebt und von denen man bestimmt ist [!], in *Beziehung zu setzen*, sie sich *aneignen* zu können."

37 64 f.: "Lernen", "Einsicht", "Assimilation", "Verinnerlichung".

38 78: "begreifen".

39 100.

40 176.

41 299.

42 64: "aneignend zu Eigen machen".

43 180.

44 Cf. 215, who speaks of a "Mangel an [...] Integrationsfähigkeit".

45 Cf. 14.

The latter danger gets most obvious when Jaeggi deals with the issue of social roles. For her, it is not only that roles can only "be reinterpreted but not reinvented (!)"⁴⁶. Even more, for Jaeggi, one is *never more than the role one is playing* "inasmuch as we, anyway, always (!) exist in roles"⁴⁷. Here, a postmodern bias *ontologises* what liberalism just *devalued normatively*: authenticity is not only seen as politically dangerous (liberalism) but as ontologically impossible (postmodernism).⁴⁸ Against any prohibited "relapse into an ideal of authenticity"⁴⁹, inner and outer space, oneself and one's role become one and the same – leaving only a 'become who you are' of the most one-dimensional kind. For the postmodernist Jaeggi – in direct contradiction to the founder of the theory of alienation, Rousseau –, "there is no 'truth of the self' beyond its expressions"⁵⁰, since there "is nothing (!) behind the roles"⁵¹. Instead, appearance and being, interior and exterior, will and act, self and institution are *identified* with each other. In the eyes of Jaeggi, nobody was ever more than an in-between of the divisions of public labour, which effectively *universalises acting* as if it were the only *being* possible: "True humaneness is always performed."⁵² Jaeggi, thus, *inverts* (read: *alienates*) the Rousseauian understanding of alienation – for which (many) roles are alienating – by stating that "the individual alienates herself from herself *by* (!) alienating herself *from* her roles (!)"⁵³. Hence, the problem no longer are alienating roles but a lack in

46 66: "lassen sich umdeuten, aber nicht neu erfinden".

47 114: "sofern wir ohnehin immer in Rollen existieren".

48 Along the liberalist-postmodernist bias, it is claimed either that the overcoming of alienation is more dangerous than alienation itself (by being close to politically problematic ideas of 'reconciliation' and 'harmony': liberalist bias), or that (Rousseauian-Marxian, or structural-sociological) alienation is not even possible at all (since there is no state of authenticity or transparency in the first place: postmodernist bias).

49 124: "Rückfall in ein Authentizitätsideal".

50 74: "Es gibt keine ‚Wahrheit des Selbst‘ jenseits seiner Äußerungen."

51 117; see also 76, 113.

52 136: "Wahres Menschsein ist immer gespielt."

53 My emphases, 299.

identification with them. Consequentially, every space *outside* of “societal expectations and roles” becomes utterly “fictitious”⁵⁴.

For Jaeggi, there is no self whatsoever – where self once was, there emptiness shall be: an emptiness as an interface (or shell) of acts, structures, roles, performances, and institutions.⁵⁵ The paradoxical result is that the only ‘alienation’ left, for Jaeggi, is *self*-alienation, yet a self-alienation *without the existence of selves*. Similarly, the paradoxical solution she offers is *self*-determination and *self*-realisation without, however, any self to determine or to realise: a self-appropriation as the ‘self-less’ process of appropriating the given.⁵⁶ Yet, what is denied in postmodern fashion when the Rousseauian concept of self is denied is also the “romantic” concept of a “self that can resist and oppose”⁵⁷, a “resisting individuality”⁵⁸ – the potential of a *transcending interior*. What is denied in the *immanentism* of institutions and their roles⁵⁹ is the ‘substance’ of self less as a self-transparent *essence* but as a non-identity of *persistence* and *resistance*: the potential of a latent, self-integrated, particular self beyond mere (role-)acting.⁶⁰ Equally denied is the potential of a *socius* that is not mediated through role pressures but through more non-identifying or *queer* forms of socialisation.

Importantly, this denial of *Rousseauian* alienation also leads into a denial of *Marxian* alienation. The examples Jaeggi gives of alienation are unex-

54 Ibid.: “Das Individuum entfremdet sich von sich, *indem* es sich von seinen Rollen entfremdet”. By contrast Zima, op. cit., 138, makes clear: “,Selbstentfremdung’ ist alles andere als eine Leerformel, weil das Wort *die Verleugnung der eigenen Veranlagung und den Verzicht auf den eigenen Lebensentwurf* bezeichnet.”

55 In this sense, the postmodernist Jaeggi does not get rid of the corresponding shell when she gets rid of the “kernel of self” (Jaeggi, op. cit., 219 ff.), but instead transforms everything into a shell, including the self.

56 Cf. *ibid.*, 275 ff. (In his *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche understands “Selbstlosigkeit” not as altruism but as the absence of self: ‘self-lessness’ as lack in oneself, as afraid of being one self, in fear of saying ‘this is me’.)

57 Lionel Trilling quoted in Jaeggi, op. cit., 251.

58 Jonathan Glover quoted in *ibid.*, 253.

59 Cf. *ibid.*, 258 ff.

60 Cf. for that esp. 144-186.

ceptionally taken from “privileged-middle-class”⁶¹ backgrounds and “academic sensitivities”⁶² – from the “young editor” to the “banker”, from the “young scientist” to the “financial consultant”, from the “journalist” to the “professor of linguistics” (himself taken from an academic’s novel).⁶³ Since for Jaeggi, the point of dis-alienation is that of an “individual appropriation” of a “pre-giveness”⁶⁴, alienation gets privatised into a personal business of adaptation to that very given. At this point, the central question becomes whether one can be “open” (*erfahrungsoffen*), “connectable” (*anschlussfähig*), “flexible” (*beweglich*)⁶⁵, “fluid” (*verflüssigt*)⁶⁶ enough to integrate oneself into the constantly changing roles and institutions. Appropriation, here, means to “dispose of oneself”⁶⁷ or to be in command, first and foremost, *over oneself*, so that appropriation becomes adoptability. Yet, if the ‘end of alienation’ is achieved as soon as one is adaptive, flexible, adjustable, fluid or “candyfloss”⁶⁸ enough, then the conceptual transformation of alienation comes close to an *inversion of its Marxian meaning* – and thus to the almost complete *domestication* of its once critical potential.

To be fair, in the 2016 afterword, Jaeggi openly admits that in her book from the early 2000s, “the analysis of the social conditions of phenomena of alienation has remained unperformed”⁶⁹. Since, meanwhile, the neo-liberal hegemony is in crisis, “alienation-theoretical social critique”⁷⁰ has become academically acceptable again. Consequentially, unlike in the 300

61 Thomas Klikauer, “Rahel Jaeggi’s Alienation. A review”, at *Marx & Philosophy* (28/10/2014), online, no page count.

62 Christoph Henning, *Theorien der Entfremdung zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2015), 188: “akademische Befindlichkeiten”.

63 Jaeggi, op. cit., 71 f., 81, 104, 187.

64 Ibid., 128: “individuelle Aneignung”; “Vorgegebenheit”.

65 133.

66 296.

67 77: “über sich verfügt”.

68 249: “Gespinst aus Zuckerwatte”.

69 325: “die Analyse der sozialen Bedingungen von Entfremdungserscheinungen unausgeführt geblieben [ist]”.

70 326: “Entfremdungstheoretische Gesellschaftskritik”.

pages before, Jaeggi now *is* concerned about the “structures and institutions”⁷¹ of alienation. Also, it is no longer the subjects that fail in their appropriation of the world to “feel at home” but now, it *is the world itself* which is no longer *inhabitable* as “home”⁷². Unfortunately, Jaeggi’s belated insights remain without any mediation with the rest of her book. After all, society as a whole does not seem to be too damaging for Jaeggi. Even in 2016, for her, the “logic of the market” is friendly enough to only “offer (!)” (*anbietet*) instrumental modes of relation⁷³; the logic of consumption may only be “accused (!)” (*nachsagen*) of fostering alienated forms of self-reference⁷⁴; and the logistics of structures and institutions may, at least, “limit painfully” the individual life of actors – but only “under certain conditions (!)” (*unter Umständen*)⁷⁵. Hence, still in 2016, it is Jaeggi’s main question whether one’s deeds are “connectable” (*anschlussfähig*) to their “practical conditions”⁷⁶ – so that her original diagnosis remains basically the same.

To summarise, Jaeggi’s transformation of the concept of alienation – its “formal turn”⁷⁷ – has domesticated it at the core. As has been shown, this domestication of ‘alienation’ was undertaken not only by individualising and psychologising, liberalising and postmodernising the concept, thus taking away its clear anticapitalist content known from Marx. Even more, in the process of domestication, the concept was emptied of the horizon of a truly non-alienated society in which people can be more and other than roles, namely recognised and affirmed in their non-identity – as in Rousseau’s imaginary.

71 327.

72 329.

73 330.

74 329 f.

75 327.

76 322.

77 *Ibid.*: “formale Wendung”.

4. Reactualising 'alienation' as heterocracy: *Entfremdung as Fremdherrschaft*⁷⁸

Next to Jaeggi, there are two other recent 'reactualisations' of alienation in Critical Theory, one by Hartmut Rosa and one by Rainer Forst. Whereas Rosa's basic account remains close to Jaeggi's – mainly exchanging her de-alienating ideal of *Aneignung* (appropriation) with the less 'disposing' (*verfügende*⁷⁹) ideal of *Anverwandlung*⁸⁰ –, Forst proposes an understanding of alienation which is closer to Marx. With him and beyond Jaeggi, it may be said that the question of alienation is not whether one identifies with what one is doing (f.e. one's social roles) or what is around oneself (f.e. social institutions), but whether they are – at least potentially, and gradually – *self-determined* in democratic manner. Along these lines, Forst conceptualises "alienation as a loss or denial of autonomy, thus not relying, as is usually the case in alienation theory, on a particular notion of authenticity"⁸¹. His way to get out of the Rousseauian connection between alienation

78 It should be clarified that I do not intend to theorise *all* alienation, not even *all objective alienation*, only as a lack in autonomy; nor *all* lack in autonomy – immediately – as stemming from capitalism. Rather, I concentrate on these aspects especially to highlight the *objective* character of alienation, to defend it against the accusations of being 'essentialist' – as the term is used, for example, by Rahel Jaeggi –, and to develop a Critical Theory of Political Autonomy as a Critical Theory of, against, and beyond capitalism. In short, the intention of this essay is not to develop a global theory of all forms of alienation possible but to flesh out the Marxian understanding of alienation as a most basic analytical tool of the critique of (material) ideology at the methodological heart of Critical Theory. I am thankful to Hartmut Rosa for stressing the need of this clarification. Still, the thesis of the essay is that from alienated labour also follow *most other forms* of alienation under capitalism – to be found as much *within* the sphere of production as *beyond* it.

79 Cf. Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2020).

80 See Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung und Entfremdung. Entwurf einer kritischen Theorie spätmoderner Zeitlichkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2013).

81 Rainer Forst, "Noumenal Alienation: Rousseau, Kant and Marx on the Dialectics of Self-Determination", in *Kantian Review*, 22(4) (2017), 523-551. I quote the text from a PDF-version downloaded from Forst's website at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/ Main, 2.

and inauthenticity, thus, is not via a postmodernised ‘right-Hegelianism’ but via a left-Republican Kantianism: “introducing democracy as a major practice of overcoming alienation”⁸². ‘Alienation’, for him, is not to be read as an alienation from some eternal metaphysical kernel of humans but as a structural lack in democratic self-determination. Indeed, “the theme of *Entfremdung* in Marx must never be reduced to an ethical issue of being ‘truly’ and authentically oneself, as it first and foremost addresses relations of *Knechtung*, that is, of social domination in the form of economic exploitation and general political and legal oppression.”⁸³

Importantly, such an egalitarian Republicanism goes way beyond liberalism because it understands (radical) democracy as a *dialectics of private and public autonomy*. Here, the ‘self’ in this self-determination is the inter-subjectivity of a *political autonomy*⁸⁴ whose “individual and collective self-determination”⁸⁵ cannot be split from but are mediated through each other. Individual and collective self-determination need to be thought together because “no true personal independence is possible without true commonality in an order of self-government.”⁸⁶ Put differently, individual and collective self-determination are in a dialectics since democratic societies cannot do without taking into account their social individuals’ say, whereas individualisation itself is a social process which is impossible to happen as the isolated endeavour of a solipsist monad – thus being dependent on an anti-isolationist societal framework conducive to its development. Without public autonomy, thus, there is no private autonomy either; and without political autonomy, there is no autonomy at all. This approach is not invented by Forst but goes back at least to Marx’s *Alienated Labour*. In Forst’s words:

82 Ibid., 4.

83 18.

84 Cf. f.e. Rainer Forst, *Das Recht auf Rechtfertigung. Elemente einer konstruktivistischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2010a); Rainer Forst, *Kritik der Rechtfertigungsverhältnisse. Perspektiven einer kritischen Theorie der Politik* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2010b).

85 Forst 2017, op. cit., 3.

86 Ibid., 14.

“Her [the worker’s] products, production itself, her potentials as a free subject and, finally, other human beings all appear to her as part of an ‘alien power’ [Marx], which shows that, despite the ethical-teleological implications of the idea of the generic being, it is in particular the loss of collective autonomy that is the main feature of the condition of alienation: that individuals cannot be social beings together with others in a self-determining society.”⁸⁷

Alienation, in this Marxian view, is a socio-economically induced *objective heterocracy*. Put differently: *Entfremdung* is to be read as structural *Fremdherrschaft*. The way to tackle such alienation as heterocracy is the inter-subjective democratisation of political autonomy which reclaims its own powers from the structures, mechanisms and dynamics conjured up by alienated forms of socialisation.

Yet, by merely demanding “radical critique, the public use of reason and sober social analysis”⁸⁸, alienation will not be abolished. This is because, pace Forst, alienation is *more than a moral, deontological or (re-)cognitive problem*: it is an economic, real-societal, objective phenomenon. In fact, Forst himself reminds us that alienation “is much more than a state of mind, as it refers to intersubjective relations, social structures and a whole social order”⁸⁹. Consequentially, the solution to alienation is necessarily one that includes collective decisions over realms that liberalist paradigms prohibit from democratic participation. The *res publicas* of a truly self-determined ‘republic’ includes not only public discourse but must be extended to the not-yet democratised sci-tech-economic com-

87 Rainer Forst, *Normativität und Macht. Zur Analyse sozialer Rechtfertigungsordnungen* (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 181 f.: “Seine [des Arbeiters] Produkte, die Produktion selbst, seine Potenziale als freies Subjekt und schließlich auch die anderen Menschen erscheinen ihm alle als Teil einer ‚fremde[n] Macht‘ [Marx], was zeigt, dass es trotz der ethisch-teleologischen Implikationen der Idee des Gattungswesens insbesondere der Verlust der kollektiven Autonomie ist, der das Hauptmerkmal des Zustands der Entfremdung darstellt: dass Individuen nicht gemeinsam mit anderen gesellschaftliche Wesen in einer sich selbst bestimmenden Gesellschaft sein können.”

88 Forst 2017, op. cit., 21.

89 Ibid., 22.

plex, encompassing also the reproductive functions of society. What is needed, in short, is *social and political autonomy*, which cannot be divided from each other, since both remain circumscribed as long as they do not include science, technology and the economy in their scope of application.⁹⁰ For such a view, however, one needs to leave Forst's Kantian Republicanism of political institutions too close to social democracy and return to a Marxian *socio-economic* overcoming of the heterocracy of capitalism and its apparatuses.

5. Defending Marxian 'alienation': Between 'alienated labour' and the 'alienation from life'

Whereas most of today's 'reactualisations' of alienation omit its objective dimension by one-dimensionally fleshing out its subjective side, in the Marxian account, there is an objective *and* a subjective form of alienation, and one cannot be understood without the other. One may also state that 'alienation' implies a relation of an objective *lack in autonomy* to a subjective *lack in meaning* – which are related due to the "constitutive connection between self-determination and self-realisation"⁹¹. Usually, alienation from the control over one's own life, and alienation from being-in-the-world more broadly, coincide.⁹² If one cannot act self-determined or according to one's needs, it also becomes hard to live a meaningful life with purpose among others who try to do the same, and thus recognise each other. Whereas the objective form of alienation as *Entfremdung* points towards heterocracy – or *Fremdherrschaft* –, its subjective form can point to the resulting feelings of powerlessness, overstrain, anxiety, depression or burnout, in which one feels as if 'not-being-at-home', 'alien' or 'estranged': *fremd*. Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung*, from this angle,

90 For sure, the political should not be reduced to the state, as Forst is doing when calling Marx "apolitical", see 20.

91 Jaeggi, op. cit., p. 46: "konstitutiven Zusammenhang von *Selbstbestimmung* und *Selbstverwirklichung*".

92 For these two dimensions of alienation, see Robert Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom. The Factory Worker and his Industry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

then, may be described as an "Alienation of Alienation"⁹³, or as the conscious estrangement from the alienation one is living in. His *Verfremdung* is raising a subjective awareness – an anti-identifying disenchantment, or a *Befremdung* – of the objective *Fremdherrschaft* one is forced into.⁹⁴ In any case, the Marxian concept 'alienation' (*Entfremdung*) includes the subjective reaction or response to objective structures (*Befremdung*, *Fremdheit*, *Verfremdung*), yet it underlines these structures themselves (*Fremdherrschaft*). As such, alienation describes both, psychological-cultural 'effects' and societal-economic 'causes'.⁹⁵

In the remaining article, I will show why and how Marx's approach is still the best choice to understand both objective and subjective forms of alienation. I start with reading his concept of alienation along the lines of alienated *labour* to further elaborate on alienation's *objectivity* (a); next, I refute those critics who accuse Marx of being productivist, anthropocentric or 'essentialist' as *misreading* his early work (b); and finally, I demonstrate that today, the alienation of labour is equally an alienation of consumption and distribution, as much as an alienation from 'nature' and 'life' (c). This last point entails an *update* of Marx's *Alienated Labour* as an alternative to its domestication.

93 Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature. Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 178 f.

94 Many postmodernists and post-Marxists confuse these levels of *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*, *Fremdherrschaft* and *Fremde* – see f.e. op. cit., Kerstin Stakemeier. Yet, Brecht's estrangement (*Verfremdung*) alienates the actors from their alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*), and it alienates the spectators from the theatre of alienation: its coldness, distortion and shock are not an end in itself (towards more alienation) but directed to make conscious (or *befremdlich*) the coldness, distortion and shock doctrine of reality (against and beyond alienation). This difference is especially important if one notes how Jaeggi's reactualisation of the term does not follow Brecht's estrangement against the people's identification with their roles and institutions, but on the opposite reconceptualises a successful identification with these roles as a successful overcoming of alienation itself. In this inversion (or alienation from the term 'alienation'), then, to end *Entfremdung* means to end *Verfremdung*.

95 Cf. Rae, op. cit., 28: "While the individual's subjective perception plays a part, alienation is not solely dependent on her or his subjective perception."

(a) The objectivity of alienated labour

In capitalist labour, the objectivity of alienation becomes most obvious as “an *actual* economic fact”⁹⁶: as structural heteronomy, or heterocracy. This objectivity of alienation is *not* to be confused with the process of *objectification* (*Vergegenständlichung*), which every labour necessarily undertakes. Whereas to objectify oneself remains, first and foremost, a realisation of oneself (a self-expression) in and as reality, alienation only happens if what one objectifies is outside of one’s control: only then, objectification appears as “as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*”⁹⁷. Labour is objectively alienated not if it objectifies but if it and its objects are not in the ‘subjective hands’ of its labourers. Hence, alienation is not only about the failure to ‘(re-)appropriate’, ‘re-internalise’ or ‘return’ from what one has objectified⁹⁸ but it already is a *privation and privatisation* of the very *act of objectification*. Alienation comes at the *inception* of the process, not at its end: *it is when objectification is not self-determined that it becomes alienation*. Alienation is not only that one does not get back one’s products which one has produced for their consumption, but it is, first and foremost, that one *has-to produce* against one’s will what one does not need *due to the coercion of labour*.

At its base, the alienation of labour follows from coerced labour as a *forced selling* of one’s labour power as commodity, after which not only the fruit of one’s labour but *this labour itself* “belongs to another”⁹⁹, and is thus controlled by someone else. Marx famously distinguishes between four dimensions of alienated labour:

- (1) An alienation from the “act of production”¹⁰⁰, which may also be termed “active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of

96 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 71.

97 Ibid.

98 This seems to be the one intuition that Jaeggi and Henning share.

99 Marx, *op. cit.*, 74.

100 Ibid., 73.

- alienation"¹⁰¹ or an "activity turned against"¹⁰² the one who is active.
- (2) An alienation from the products of labour, as a result of which the product of labour becomes "*an alien object exercising power*" over its producer as the "estrangement of the *thing*"¹⁰³.
 - (3) An alienation of *producers from other producers*, or of *society from the economy as a whole*: the total process of labour not being in the labourers' hands but being "private property"¹⁰⁴ as the "means by which labor alienates itself"¹⁰⁵.
 - (4) An alienation from 'nature', 'humanity', 'life', and consciousness at the same time¹⁰⁶ that naturalises alienation by alienating from the collective 'life-activity' of labour as a *conscious metabolism with nature* specific to humans. In its turn, humans get alienated also from their bodies, their preconditions, their time, and their mind – by ossifying the most basic division of labour between head and hand.

Hence, for Marx, the alienation of labour leads into a multi-dimensional totalisation of alienation in whose macro-societal outcome, alienated labour (re-)produces "*something alien*", a "*power independent of the producer*"¹⁰⁷, or "*an alien power*"¹⁰⁸. Here, alienated labour (re-)produces an external authority as 'alien power' vis-a-vis itself: "the more the worker spends h[er]self, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which [s]he creates over-against h[er]self"¹⁰⁹. Arguably, a lot of subjective alienation is the result of that most basic distortion: the labourer experiences her own "negation in the *alienated, objective* conditions of

101 74.

102 75.

103 Ibid., the first emphasis added.

104 81, in the original in italics.

105 Ibid.

106 Cf. 76.

107 71.

108 79; the latter being my emphasis.

109 72.

labour”¹¹⁰. Here, humans become means for capital as an end-in-itself instead of the economy being means for humans: “the more objects the worker produces [...] the more [s]he falls under the dominion of [her] product, capital.”¹¹¹ Capitalism as capital’s heterocracy is, at its very base, the self-alienation of its (re-)producers, or their (re-)production of their own heteronomy vis-a-vis capital (as dead labour). The ‘alien’ in alienation denotes “that the life which [the worker] has conferred on the object confronts h[er] as something *hostile and alien*.”¹¹² Alienation is the cause and the effect of a *heteronomous* organisation of the sci-tech-economic complex from which follows a *hostile* societal and natural world¹¹³: a world of antagonism, competition, and struggle – spellbound by a power that appears as alien.

For Marx, then, the problem of alienation is not only a problem of quantification, exchange value, homogenisation and indifference. Rather, it *also* is a problem of *exploitation*.¹¹⁴ Indeed, capitalist exploitation could not even *happen* without the capitalist alienation from one’s process of production, self-produced products, productive forces, and relations of production. Alienated labour – which may be said to start with the alienation from the means of production – results in the ‘alienation’ of the surplus value produced: this is, in exploitation. If classically Marxian ‘exploitation’ is about appropriating the surplus value from the labourer by paying less than the worth she created, then exploitation is only possible if work is alienated: if people do not decide together on what to produce but are forced to produce what somebody else wants them to, since they have nothing but their

110 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 175, my emphasis.

111 Marx, op. cit., 71.

112 Ibid., 72, my emphasis.

113 Cf. 75: “nature as an alien world antagonistically opposed to [the worker].”

114 Similarly, the problem of commodification is not only that everything becomes exchangeable and monetarised, but that the (re-)producedness of human relations becomes naturalised, and that human productivity is equipped with seemingly ‘supernatural’ qualities vis-a-vis a new human powerlessness.

labour power to sell in-order to survive. In this sense, exploitation follows from alienation. The labourer only owns her own labour power to sell it for someone else's privatised profit: under the exploitative conditions of alienated labour, the fruit of production gets substituted by a wage in which the surplus has disappeared. The alienation of labour is as objective as its exploitation: the former even is the precondition of the latter.

**(b) Criticising the critiques:
No essentialism in *Alienated Labour***

It became part of the academic common sense after Althusser to see in Marx's *Alienated Labour* a romantic, Hegelian, metaphysical text. This is usually justified by pointing out Marx's usage of concepts taken from Feuerbach, such as 'species being', 'humanity' and 'nature', which are supposed to stand against alienation as *essentialist* categories. I would now like to argue that it is philosophically questionable to reduce one's understanding of words to their ring instead of looking at the way they are actually developed. Indeed, Marx's approach to these terms is deconstructing their German idealist heritage from within. To read a transhistorical human essence into *Alienated Labour* as its critical benchmark must be judged as a crass misreading of the text. As it should be clear by now, the *alien* in alienated labour does not at all stand for an alienation from 'human nature', 'lost origin' or 'anthropological essence', especially not as something static. Rather, the 'alien' Marx is most concerned about is the *alien power* (*Fremdherrschaft*) of capital as dead over living labour, and its resulting *heterocratic reign of hostility*. To analyse capitalist production as alienated in this way – to diagnose a structurally heteronomous organisation of society –, no Other of anthropocentric 'essence' is needed whatsoever. Yet, there is one concept that is usually read to be bare proof of Marx's essentialist, metaphysical, anthropocentric bias. This concept is the concept of species being, or *Gattungswesen*. Let us look into it in more detail to prove that it is, in fact, not essentialist either – especially not if 'essentialism' is supposed to mean 'transhistorical' or 'static' (as in Althusser, Jaeggi and others).

For Marx, what humans' 'species-being' denotes is precisely *not* any pre-given metaphysical or biologist nature of 'the' Human. On the contrary, Marx's human 'species-being' denotes the *openness of what humans can be* – set inside the historically grown society they constitute, and by which they are constituted at the same time. 'Species-being', in this sense, carves out nothing but the *practice of societal self-construction* within humans' relations among themselves and to nature. If 'species being' is defined by Marx, then not as a fixed essence but *as undefinable per definitionem* – or as *historically contingent*. The 'free universality'¹¹⁵ Marx speaks about, and which he links with *historicity*, is about this *impossibility to define* once and for all any 'transhistorical' depth of what humans are or must be. As 'historically universal' beings, humans' 'species-being' *consists* in being unfixable into pre-set eternities. The main 'essence' this species-being entails is its "conscious life-activity", or that its "own life is an object"¹¹⁶ for itself. This is, what humans are and what they can be is not yet known, and will never be known forever, but will always only be an approximation to the potentials and specificities of particular times and places. To say that human essence is historical and dependent on the material world, however, is to say that humans' 'essence' is non-essentialist, if essentialism is the undialectical understanding of a fixed and narrow essence.

Perhaps, Jean-Paul Sartre's *non-essentialist* – existentialist – humanism can be of some help to further correct the 'metaphysical' misunderstandings of Marx's 'species being'. For Sartre, humans' 'essence' *is nothing but having no essence*, since *humans are existence*.¹¹⁷ Instead of obeying certain rules that are already prescribed in human nature, whether ontologically, naturalistically, or theologically, what humans can be is dependent on what they decide to be, or on their own conscious and sub-conscious

115 Cf. Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*. [Mit] Kommentar von Michael Quante (Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 89: "*universellen, darum freien Wesen*".

116 Marx 1988, *op. cit.*, 76.

117 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Édition Nagel, 1954).

re-constructions. The resulting 'species being', then, comprises the 'human' not as essence but – if anything – as lack, void, *too-much or not-yet*. 'Species-being' is an *under-defined as over-determined* category: it is grasping an *openness*. This openness is directed towards one's (partially) conscious *becoming as one's very being*. What defines humans, thus, is that they are undefinable: their 'essence' is to be existential. In Marx's dialectical phrasing: the particularity of the human is that it is 'universal' – human nature is social, and human essence is historical.

Yet, in contrast to Sartre's denaturalised individualisation of the concept close to subjective idealism, in Marx's intersubjective materialism, it is not isolated individuals but the whole of the species which – in its historically changing metabolism with nature – transforms its being and the world accordingly. The reproduction of society is (even under free market conditions) a *planned activity organising the metabolism with nature*. 'Nature', however, is – as their 'inorganic body' – not outside of humans, since they are within it. For Marx, it is precisely the human being as "part of nature"¹¹⁸ that is a "*universal and therefore a free being*"¹¹⁹ – a being *both* of history and nature, mediating between the two. Marx's definition of 'species-being', therefore, is *de-defining it as an opening*¹²⁰: its 'nature' is societal; its presence is historical; its 'being' is between becoming and having-become. Since humans' 'species being' is an "ensemble of societal relations"¹²¹, what alienation alienates humans from is their *capacity to decide together on what they want to be and become* in the long run, this is: *in which society they would like to live*.

With his concept of 'species being', Marx defines humans as historically universal, or as *undefinable within transhistorical frameworks*. Under alienated-alienating conditions, it is not "god, not nature, but only

118 Marx 1988, op. cit., 76.

119 Ibid., 75.

120 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto: l'uomo a l'animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002).

121 Karl Marx (et al.), *Marx Engels Werke. Band 3* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990), 6: "das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse."

[the hu]man [it]self” that “can be this alien power over [the hu]man”¹²². Hence, it can also only be humans who are able to emancipate themselves from this historic situation, namely by getting the sci-tech-economic complex back under their own democratic control. In that manner, humans would be starting history, that is, make history instead of merely being made by it: making history less with despotic will (‘domination of nature’) than with responsible consciousness (deciding on *how to* realise the metabolism with nature necessary for every self-(re-)production).¹²³ The strategy beyond capitalist alienation, then, is *not* to make disposable more and more of nature, expanding one’s realm of the controlled without constraint, but to reclaim society’s *own* becomings, and to get into grip those dynamics and mechanisms that have been conjured up by society at large.

What people are supposed to reclaim, here, is not any ‘lost truth’ of ‘homo sapiens’, nor anything other that was or is ‘given’. To be reclaimed, instead, is what is ‘given’ to and by people to and by themselves, namely, *their own socio-economic products and (re-)productions*.

In this view, Marx is focusing so much on alienated *labour* as on the production-side of capitalism not due to productivism or a forgetfulness of consumption and distribution, but rather to emphasise that it is not only politics or culture but the sci-tech-economic complex which is a *product and (re-)produced* by human beings. Marx’s stress on (re-)production is the stress on how humans realise, maintain and transform what is and what becomes, which includes a stress on the possibilities of other ways of doing so. In that sense, Marx is neither using anthropological constants nor productivist imaginaries against alienation but the idea of a reclamation of products and the (re-)production process on the side of the producers. That “production is [human’s] active species life”¹²⁴,

122 Marx 1988, op. cit., 79.

123 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Science and Technology as ‘Ideology’”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 81-122, here 118.

124 Marx 1988, op. cit., 77.

then, does not entail a metaphysics of labour but simply underlines that the 'species-being' of humans is not an already given state of things but something to be produced and reproduced by human society and its members themselves. All in all, the external authority of a supposedly alien power – the authority of capital – has as its antipode not the interior of human essence but the intersubjective self-determination or political autonomy of self-democratising societies.

To summarise, there is no essentialism in Marx's *Alienated Labour*. Even the most contested term, 'species being', denotes no classical anthropological essence but an 'existence' explicitly open and historical, underdefined and over-determined, produced and reproduced, in which 'nature' is neither external nor abstracted, since humans themselves are natural, never outside but always part of it. Moreover, Marx's focus on labour is a focus not only beyond the ideologies that hide exploitation in the spheres of distribution or law, but a focus which highlights the producedness and (re-)production of the state of alienation, and thus the potentials of their overcoming.

**(c) Alienated labour, alienated consumption –
alienation from nature, alienation from life**

The alienation of labour is only the foundation of more sophisticated alienations as expressed, for example, in "trade, competition, capital, money"¹²⁵. Marx's alienation denotes not only the state when "the productive forces of societal labour are not controlled" but, more generally, a "non-mastered socialisation"¹²⁶ which includes the political, the cultural, the social, the scientific and the technological. As such, the term alienation is grasping a totality, which means: a process of totalisation. Under capitalism, the economy is increasingly *de-differentiating* as an intrinsically expansive, colonising, disembedding sphere. In this way, the 'alienation of labour' spreads also into formerly – or officially – out-

125 Ibid., 82.

126 Schliwa, op. cit., 63: "die Produktivkräfte der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit nicht beherrscht werden"; "nichtbeherrschte[] Vergesellschaftung".

er-economic spheres, which may exemplarily be seen when labour is invested in care, emotions, or relationships. With the culturalisation of the economy and the economisation of culture, with dislimited labour conditions and their erosion of the classical dualisms between workplace and home, with the collapse of leisure in labour time and with the totalisation of consumerism and the commodity form, alienation *invades most forms of daily life – also beyond the classical confines of work*. As a result, objective alienation not only refers to the ‘economic realm’ but to the sci-tech-economic complex more generally, as much as to the areas of culture, politics, and art.¹²⁷ The category of alienation transcends the classic realm of the economy precisely because, under the reign of capital, the economy disembeds from the confines of being a differentiated sphere.

Now, no matter what position one is in within this division of alienated labour, oneself gets the more subsumed under the heterocracy of capital the more autonomous the economic sphere becomes. Objective alienation is a form of real inversion in which the economic sphere is not in the hands of humans, so that production, consumption, and distribution put humans to work, instead of the other way around. Hence, alienation can be described as a “relation of powerlessness among individuals vis-a-vis the societal process as a whole”¹²⁸. Tellingly, the way the resulting individual powerlessness expresses itself is by the hyper-active delirium both of new forms of labour and of consumerism. Whether in the self-exploitative entrepreneurial subject(-ion) or in the commodity-addicted consumerist, doing, acting and being-active all remain under the spell of capital – therein, *even leisure becomes a form of alienated labour*. Under the law of capital value, every increase in autonomy in the workplace is synonymous to an increase in self-exploitation – or to a decrease in political autonomy vis-a-vis capital. Labour is thus not less but even more alien-

127 In this sense, ‘realpolitik’ may be seen as an alienation from politics; scientism as an alienation from science; technocracy as an alienation from technology; and culturalism as an alienation from culture.

128 Wolfgang Heise, “Über die Entfremdung und ihre Überwindung”, in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 13: 6 (1965), 684-710, here 702: “Ohnmachtsverhältnis der Individuen gegenüber dem gesellschaftlichen Gesamtprozeß”.

ated under post-Fordist, Toyotist, or lean conditions. Inside 'neo-capitalism', it is not that the worker finally sets herself free from the stupefying actions of repetitive toil. Rather, now, the worker's *whole personality* gets alienated, including her spirit, will, motivational apparatus, drives, social hopes and corporeal needs. The wages, in turn, are paid not only for the reproduction of the bodily function of workers but for their function as consumerists as well – thus getting reinvested into a consumption that works more along the lines of the needs of the productive forces than of the needs of the producers. This extension of alienated labour into formerly non-economic realms may thus be called "alienated consumption"¹²⁹. In alienated consumption, productivism and consumerism build up a closed dialectics of capital accumulation in which humans are not only designable products but also cheap raw materials and lucrative investment portfolios.

The dialectics of productivism and consumerism, however, destroys 'nature', or the environment of life, without which living beings cannot survive at all. Productivist alienated labour and consumerist alienated consumption lead together into an alienation of producers and consumers from nature as the very foundation of their existence. This alienation is an alienation both from inner and from outer nature, or from *the body* and from *planet earth*, as well as from their interconnectedness. Of course, the most extreme form of alienation from nature (both as body and as earth) can be observed with the lack in any sufficient structural transformations of the sci-tech-economic complex despite the decade-old knowledge of imminent human-induced climate change and its obvious threats. Alienation from 'nature', in this sense, is not an alienation from any romanticised abstract ideal of metaphysical origin. Rather, it is the *alienation from the conditions of possibility of one's very concrete everyday survival down-to-earth*.

129 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century", in David Bell (et al.), *The Cybercultures Reader* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2001), 291-324, here 308.

With Kohei Saito, it may be said that this form of alienation could have only happened once the worker was separated from her self-subsistence through primitive accumulation – a self-subsistence that was still largely intact under feudal conditions. Within feudalism, *political* power structures were mediated through persons and their property in soil, leaving at least the “physical security” and “freedom and independence in the production process”¹³⁰ to the people. By contrast, the *economic* power structures of capitalism are mediated through the depersonalised logic of the law of value and its *property in time and labour*, so that people have no other choice but to *sell themselves* – their life (time) and work – on the market in-order *to survive*. Hence, the lack of subsistence and the precarity of survival under capitalism are synonymous to the dependency on the whims of a market which is abstracted from nature (both as body and as earth), and thus threatening its very survival. De-alienation, then, would also be one in regards to inner and outer nature, from bodies (needs) to planet earth (environment).

The alienation from the ‘bio-logistics’ of ecology, however, alludes to the alienation from ‘life’ even more broadly conceived. ‘Life’, here, does not stand for any mystical vitalism but for the *very real, scarce and fragile lifetime we got to live on earth*. This is the point Martin Hägglund raises¹³¹: alienated labour and consumption are about an alienation from life inasmuch as we are forced to waste most of our lifetimes with unnecessary labour (even during leisure) – despite living in an over-productive society. The short, precious, rare time of our very own lives gets commodified, sold, and thus externally determined by the alien force of capital, which coerces us into labour. Within the heterocracy of capital, life and living are no longer sufficient to themselves since they need to be ‘earned’ by ‘earning a living’. This brings together the objective phe-

130 Kohei Saito, *Natur gegen Kapital. Marx’ Ökologie in seiner unvollendeten Kritik des Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/ Main: Campus Verlag, 2016), 40: “physische Sicherheit”; “Freiheit und Selbstständigkeit im Produktionsprozess”.

131 Cf. his beautiful study Martin Hägglund, *This Life. Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2020).

nomenon of alienated labour with the subject-related phenomenon of a lack in lifetime: being stolen by labour. Under capitalism, most of the time one got is the time one needs to spend to survive, or to work. The result is a paradoxical situation in which *survival negates living*. This is the most basic sense of the inversion that alienation denotes: we live to work, instead of working to live. Or, in Marx's words: spellbound by alienated labour, "life itself appears only as a *means to life*, to live, to survive"¹³² – if not as something to be consumed (*als Lebensmittel*). Here, lifetime "which, in concrete life, is a qualitative experience" is transformed "into a quantified, abstract force that dominates the worker's life."¹³³ Time – from its measurement to its acceleration – becomes a form of domination. Alienated labour, then, may be read as synonymous to an alienation from life for the sake of survival of capitalism. Yet, even more, the capitalist alienation from life is one also from survival of the many bodies of life including humans, and of the environment as a horizon of life, living and survival.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I developed an objective account of alienation without which the *appearance* of this objectivity *within the subjects feeling alienated* cannot be explained either. That is because feeling alienated is not due to a subjective failure, say, in being able to feel at home in given institutions and roles but, rather, due to an objective failure of the given structures to enable their subjects to feel at home within them. Consequentially, only with a Marxian foundation of objective alienation can the phenomena of subjective alienation be explained as well. As such, however, the problem of alienation is never just a lack in individuals' appropriation of their microcosms but always a lack in society-wide reappropriations of the sci-tech-economic macrocosm. In other words: subjective alienation cannot be overcome if objective alienation is still firmly established. As

132 Marx 2009, op. cit., 90: "Das Leben selbst erscheint nur als *Lebensmittel*."

133 Ryan Gunderson, "Things Are the Way They Are: A Typology of Reification", in *Sociological Perspectives*, 64:1 (2021), 127-150, here 137.

important as the clarification of the many instances of subjective alienation are, therefore, they remain both theoretically one-dimensional and practically powerless if they are not coupled with an understanding of objective alienation.¹³⁴

After having sketched the roots of the concept of alienation in Rousseau, Feuerbach, and Marx (1), this essay compiled a list of official denials of the reality of alienation (2). Interestingly, most of them depend, in one way or another, on the denial of its objectivity, and its reduction to a merely subjective phenomenon. As a next step, I demonstrated why and how Rahel Jaeggi's 'reactualisation' of alienation is mainly just another version of this subjectivist reduction (3). By effectively abolishing the more radical accounts of all three, Rousseau ('authenticity'), Feuerbach ('anthropology') and Marx ('socialism'), Jaeggi's conceptual transformation ends up in a privatising domestication of the concept. As an alternative, I continued with presenting Rainer Forst's approach to alienation (*Entfremdung*) interpreted, here, as heterocracy (*Fremdherrschaft*) (4). Indeed, Forst's take is part and parcel of a "critical theory concerned about the reclamation of political autonomy", that is, as a "form of collective action."¹³⁵ Despite its advantages, however, it became clear that Forst's

134 In this essay, the 'subjective' (normative or moral) reasons as to why objective (structural) alienation is not justified, or why it should be resisted, are not discussed. The implicit premise behind this choice is the belief that subjects need no normative clarification by theorists to practice resistance, since it is their very bodies and sociality that 'convinces' them to resist what destroys their soma and sociality – not any better or worse arguments regarding what is unjust or unfair. That is, in regards to alienation, *if people can judge* on why they feel as they feel *by unveiling the structural background* of their feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness, then there is no need to *additionally explain* to them why these structures are to be overcome 'also', or why they are not justified. Still, subjective resistance is the logical (social-somatic) outcome *if and only if* objective alienation is *understood in 'theory'* and can thus be *transcended in practice* as well. That is the dialectics of theory and practice that was called, by Marx, revolutionary *praxis* (to be taken up, later, by Lukács, Gramsci and the Yugoslavian Praxis School, among others).

135 Forst 2015, op. cit., 24: "Eine kritische Theorie, der es um die Wiedergewinnung politischer Autonomie geht, sieht in der Überwindung dieser Entfremdung ihr Ziel, d.h. der Entfremdung von der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit

account largely remains inside existing institutions of the liberal public due to his Kantian republicanism, which splits off the political from the social.

By contrast, Marx's original text on *Alienated Labour* is still the most convincing analysis – both of objective and of subjective alienation, and of the ways to transcend them in practice. The essay, therefore, demonstrated that the accusations of Marx's theory of alienation as 'essentialist' can largely be deconstructed as misreadings (5). That is because in Marx's historicised, materialist, economic concept of 'alienation', there is no place for transhistorical, static, unchanging essences and origins. Moreover, Marx's account is as up to date as ever since his use of 'labour' can be extended not only beyond productivist bias but also beyond an economic 'sphere' too narrowly conceived. 'Alienated labour', as a result, can denote capital's alien power *over most divergent forms of labour*, which include 'alienated consumption' as much as an alienation from 'nature' and from 'life', both concretely conceived. This Marxian approach is also the most straightforward way to overcome alienation in the long run. Its expansion of the political autonomy of inter-subjective self-determination onto the sci-tech-economic complex effectively equals a qualitative growth in substantial democratisation.¹³⁶ Until this democratisation has been carried out, both objective and subjective alienation will remain a bitter – interdependent – reality.

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und der politischen Eingriffsmöglichkeit als Form kollektiven Handelns."

¹³⁶ See, on this, also Lukas Meisner, "Die Radikalisierung des politischen Projekts der Moderne: Marcuses emanzipatorische Vernunft für eine rationale Gesellschaft", in: *Kritiknetz – Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft* (2022), online, no page count.

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We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

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