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The Return of Alienation to the Frontiers of Sociological Theory and Practice


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The notion of “alienation” has a strange history, oscillating between periods of undeniable eminence and apparent obscurity. There have been renewed attempts in recent years across different disciplines to recover the concept of alienation. The three books included in this review essay—*Karl Marx’s Writings on Alienation*, edited and introduced by Marcello Musto; *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, by Simon Hailwood; and *Alienation*, by Rahel Jaeggi—exemplify some of the most creative and exacting accounts of alienation that outline the frontiers of scholarship on the topic. In this short essay, I will briefly introduce their distinctive approaches but largely focus on the implications of their engagement with Karl Marx’s conception of alienation. I argue that the failure of Rahel Jaeggi and Simon Hailwood to read Marx’s account accurately is reflected in serious shortcomings in their critical outlooks.
Furthermore, I show how recent scholarship on Marx, as represented by Marcello Musto’s book, hints toward generative uses of Marx’s theory of alienation to address the very questions that Jaeggi and Hailwood are rightfully concerned about.

As one of the most influential scholars in contemporary critical theory, Jaeggi has been a leading force behind the recent revival of the concept of alienation in social philosophy. She characterizes alienation as “a concept of social philosophy par excellence” (p. xxii) in outlining interpretive schemes to examine individuals’ entangled relation with the self and the world. Her analysis of alienation revolves around the examination of a “disturbance in the development of interest and capacities” (p. 36) that leads to “a failure to apprehend, and a halting of, the movement of appropriation” (p. 1). “Appropriation” is defined as a form of praxis in “both the integration and transformation of what is given” (p. 1)—in other words, “the idea of productively and formatively interacting with what one makes one’s own” (p. 38). Put differently, the study of alienation entails an analysis of the conditions that underly individuals’ “inability to establish a relation to other human being, to things, to social institutional and thereby also . . . to oneself” (p. 3). Jaeggi argues that such an approach allows us to critically examine an alienated social form when “individuals cannot identify with it, when they cannot realize themselves in it, when they cannot make it ‘their own’” (p. xxii). This is why she conceives of alienation as “a relation of relationlessness”—hence itself a particular social relation—whose overcoming implies nothing less than “realizing freedom” (p. 2).

Jaeggi’s analytical framework appears as a synthesis between certain aspects of Marxist-Hegelian and existentialist critique to conceive of alienation as powerlessness and a loss of meaning, maintained through relations of domination, which lead to disconnectedness or alienness. Her philosophically sophisticated account masterfully avoids notorious objections to
the concept of alienation including essentialism, objectivism, and paternalism. Her account requires neither a unified self who is fully transparent to oneself, nor an objectively adequate or ethically good form of life, nor a teleological movement of history toward overcoming alienation. She conceptualizes an unalienated life as “a certain way of appropriating oneself—that is, a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the relationships in which one lives (relationships that condition or shape who one is)” (p. 33).

Although Jaeggi firmly embeds praxis of self-appropriation as always already mediated by an appropriation of the world, the sociopolitical and historical content of such mediation remains extremely thin and largely absent in her account. Her concept of alienation is not equipped to clarify the historical specificity of the generalized form of alienation under capitalism. Furthermore, the class dimension of the praxis of appropriation, which arguably shapes the “relation to the self mediated by the world” (p. 215), is not touched on in the book. The absence of these two components makes it possible to conceive of pockets of unalienated lives that meet all the criteria outlined for the praxis of appropriation (see p. 202) but arguably with skewed membership of those social classes with access to and control over material resources and institutional infrastructure. One could argue that her account would still leave substantial room for critique of a society in which the possibility of realizing freedom is severely limited to a privileged minority. However, the substance of such a critique remains mostly exogenous to Jaeggi’s theory of alienation, making her account politically toothless despite its philosophical brilliance.

Most approaches to the concept of alienation consider the commonly affiliated notions, the alienation-reification-externalization triad, in their complementary identity. However, Hailwood, a widely published environmental philosopher, shifts the focus to exploring the unity-
in-difference between these notions in order to lay out a neo-pragmatist foundation for an environmental philosophy that is based neither on a romanticist nor an instrumentalist approach to nature. To that end, he first breaks down the conception of “alienation” into “estrangement” (i.e., “the sense of a state of being separated or cut off from something”), “reification” (i.e., “reduction of humanity, human processes and products to mere given ‘things’”), and “property alienation” (i.e., “a renunciation of ownership”) (p. 16). He then decomposes the notion of “nature” into “nonhuman nature” (i.e., the “natural world insofar as it is not human or has not been shaped and interpreted by humanity or human-oriented ends”), the “natural world” (i.e., an “encompassing sense of nature, in which it is wider than humanity and of which humanity is a part but not the whole”), and “landscape” (i.e., the “natural world insofar as it has become so shaped [by humans]”) (p. 16).

Much of Hailwood’s book is dedicated to the ontological, epistemological, and ethical justification of this conceptual scheme and the qualified interrelation between its six building blocks to show that “alienation from nature can be justified, useful, and important.” At the end of a long tedious journey with many side quests throughout the book, we reach a succinct summary: “Reification of or within landscape is bad and to be overcome. Estrangement within the landscape is bad and to be overcome, except in relation to human difference. With regard to nonhuman nature, it is a qualified good, to be lived with, to some extent, rather than overcome. Estrangement from the natural world is bad and to be overcome. Alienation within landscapes is bad when unjust, for example, when coerced or exploitative. In relation to nonhuman nature and the natural world, it is a qualified good to be encouraged” (pp. 230–31). It is through such qualifications that Hailwood reserves a seemingly crucial theoretical space for the positive role of the alienation of nature in ecological philosophy.
Despite their conceptual diversity, none of the six building blocks in Hailwood’s analytical scheme are socio-historical categories. This is not to say that his key concepts do not have any temporal content or that they carry no relational significance. It is also not about the ways these categories may be “encountered” through mediation by “historically specific forms of production” (pp. 33–34). Socio-historical categories should enable us to make sense of how historically specific social relations are reproduced and how those very categories evolve within them. Without that, an environmental philosophy would be unable to illuminate the empirically observable connection between, for example, the current environmental crisis and the emergence of capitalism as a historically specific social relation beyond vague references to quantitative changes in its otherwise immutable categories. This is precisely what is lacking in Hailwood’s approach, as evident in the rare references to capitalism in a book that is about an ecological crisis that is demonstrably connected to the rise of industrial capitalism.

The political orientation of Hailwood’s analysis in this book, and therefore his conception of environmental justice, is limited to the politics of recognition. Accordingly, Hailwood offers a pragmatist approach to recognitional politics in response to a system whose historical manifestation follows a profoundly different logic, not of a “non-psychological status injurious misrecognition” (p. 89 f2) but of historically dynamic systematic exploitation. The political orientation of Hailwood’s account has profound strategic implications, as it primarily demands categorical reconfiguration and legislative protection to avoid status injuries to humans and nonhumans. But it would be naïve at best to think that such strategies would be sufficient to transform the dynamics of power and the relations of material interests that underlie the environmental crisis.
One of the most notable similarities between Jaeggi and Hailwood is found in their reading of Marx’s conception of alienation, which reflects their general neglect of the centrality of the political economy of capitalism in relation to alienation. Despite their acknowledgment of the continued relevance of the concept of alienation throughout Marx’s intellectual life, both authors limit their engagement with Marx’s ideas to his early writings in the so-called “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844” (hereafter, EPM44). Their references to Marx’s later elaborations on the concept remain extremely limited and superficial.

Jaeggi almost completely ignores Marx’s critique of political economy even to the extent that it was advanced in the EPM44 and, even there, focuses only on the philosophical aspects. While taking issue with Marx’s essentialist and determinist approach to alienation and its overcoming, Jaeggi draws two insights from the EPM44: the importance of linking appropriation and alienation, hence relating meaninglessness and powerlessness; and the importance of the problem of reification. The crucial piece missing in such an interpretation of the EPM44, as Musto shows, is Marx’s attempt not just toward widening the problem of alienation from the “philosophical, religious, and political sphere to the economic sphere of material production” but also that “the economic sphere was essential to understanding and overcoming alienation in the other spheres” (p. 6). However, what remained unclear in the early writings of Marx was the relation between alienated labor and private property, which was addressed in a theoretically sophisticated and more politically demanding manner in Capital and its preparatory manuscripts.

Jaeggi’s brief comment on the later writings of Marx on alienation interprets Marx’s critique of political economy as “a ‘denaturalizing’ critique that reveals the social character of what presents itself as a natural relation” (p. 16). But what is fascinating about the later writings of Marx is not so much that he presented his critique of political economy as a denaturalizing
critique, something which he had already firmly committed to from early on even though he later widened and deepened it by radically reformulating the essentialist categories he had previously used. It is much more that he progressively enhanced his theoretical analysis of capitalist social relations all the while deepening his critique of why “free individuality,” which he saw as the marker of an unalienated future society, is unachievable under the intensifying conditions of alienation in capitalism.

Hailwood reduces Marx’s theory of alienation to a critique of private property that, Hailwood argues, might have some merits, but only with respect to the landscape. When it comes to nonhuman nature, Hailwood condemns this approach as epistemologically flawed since it focuses “entirely on the project of making that as homely an expression of humanity and epistemic security as possible” (p. 56). This reading allows Hailwood to corner Marx’s theory of alienation largely to one of the three senses of alienation that he outlines—that is, “property alienation”—and there only to one of the three senses of nature—that is, “landscape.” From there, Hailwood’s progressive de-emphasis of this aspect of alienation in critical environmental philosophy and the ideologically charged qualifications of the critique of property relations even within the landscape entail a marginalization of Marx’s theory of alienation in particular and his critique of political economy in general.

Marx’s later elaborations on the notion of alienation in Hailwood’s reading are articulated mainly in a recognitional paradigm. For example, he interprets Marx’s use of alienation in the sense of reification as the “mistake” of taking human relations as given things (p. 32), as if Marx were concerned with the processes of misrecognition. He also interprets Marx’s notion of the “fetishism of commodity” as a matter of delusion or ignorance, which in turn transforms the overcoming of alienation into a question of the “recognition of the human social origin of such
processes and their re-appropriation as such” (p. 56). Instead, as Musto correctly points out, “Marx conceives of fetishism not as an individual problem but as a social phenomenon, not as an affair of the mind but as a real power, a particular form of domination, which establishes itself in market economy as a result of the transformation of objects into subjects” (p. 34).

Indeed, a careful reading of Marx reveals precisely not only the essential connection between alienation and capitalist social relations but also between the latter and what he called the “metabolic rift” that has fundamentally altered the relationship between the “landscape,” to use Hailwood’s vocabulary here, and the “natural world.” As Marx developed his ecological critique of capitalism both theoretically and empirically, he progressively strengthened the theoretical links between alienation and nature, therefore making the vision of an unalienated society beyond capitalism inseparably connected to overcoming the antagonism between humans and nature ecologically while avoiding both the productivist path toward the domination of nature and the romantic path toward becoming one with nature.

But why should a careful engagement with Marx’s concept of alienation matter? Marx’s concept of alienation is arguably the most influential elaboration of the concept due not just to its theoretical preeminence but especially to the sociopolitical consequences of its reception after Marx’s death. Even though Marx did not invent the concept of alienation, nor did he always refer to it explicitly in his writings, it played a central role in his critique of capitalism and his vision of an alternative socioeconomic system throughout his life. The history of the reception of Marx’s concept of alienation after his death is perhaps as fascinating as its evolution during his life. Indeed, it is perhaps only upon such recognition of the contentious history of the concept that we can appreciate what contemporary scholarship on Marx’s theory of alienation, despite
continued controversies, has been able to achieve and how these make his conception ever more relevant.

The new anthology by Musto, one of the leading Marx scholars in the world, on Marx’s writings on alienation is an indispensable resource that seeks to draw attention on the centrality of this concept for Marx and its contemporary relevance by highlighting underappreciated texts in relation to the concept of alienation and challenging some of the most entrenched orthodoxies on the subject. Looking at the format and style of the book, one might be tempted to think it is aimed mostly at students and perhaps young researchers: it is a relatively short anthology with a relatively long introduction. But given the appalling poverty in the existing literature on Marx’s concept of alienation that largely confines the discussion to his early writings, this book benefits a far larger audience.

Musto’s introduction to the anthology focuses less on the reception of the concept before Marx, a rather familiar theme that has been discussed by many other scholars, and instead explores its ebbs and flows in the twentieth century both within and outside the Marxist tradition. The intellectual history of the concept is presented not as scholastic debates between various theorists, but as complex processes embedded in the sociopolitical contexts within which they operate. While his critical overview of other conceptions of alienation outside the Marxist tradition shows the general strength of the Marxian approach to the concept, Musto remains strongly critical of the Marxist tradition in either ignoring the centrality of the concept for Marx, often for political ends, or in rendering partial and superficial readings, for those who cared to deploy the concept.

It is only after his overview of the reception of the concept of alienation that Musto comes around to examine the evolution of it within Marx’s corpus. While qualifying the
originality of Marx’s early elaborations of alienation in relation to the existing debates at the
time, Musto highlights their limitations, which were substantially improved upon as Marx
continued his rigorous studies in preparation for his magnum opus, Capital. This approach
projects an essential continuity in Marx’s conception of alienation while emphasizing its
centrality throughout his intellectual life. Musto shows not only the relevance of the concept of
alienation to Marx’s critique of capitalism but also its indispensability in understanding Marx’s
vision of an alternative socioeconomic model. The structure of the anthology indeed reflects
these discussions. The selections from the three volumes of Capital, the Grundrisse, and the
Theories of Surplus Value occupy more than five times as much space as the selection from
Marx’s writing on alienation in the 1840s. As such, this book facilitates new approaches to the
concept of alienation informed by its complex history and its neglected dimensions.

Reading Marx’s theory of alienation along these lines can help us address the core
concerns of Jaeggi and Hailwood while avoiding the pitfalls in their analyses. Even though
Jaeggi’s conception highlights the existentialist aspects of alienation as a central part of her
social philosophy, her dismissal of political economy decouples her approach from the concrete
reality and form specificity of a historically unique social relation in which the meaninglessness
and powerlessness that she underscores reach a class-structured generalization. Similarly, even
though Hailwood’s conception underscores the nonanthropocentric dimension of alienation as an
indispensable part of his ecological philosophy, his suspension of a critique of political economy
and, even worse, his effective support for some of its constitutive elements prevent his approach
from having any real bearing on the dynamics of a system that has created the ecological crisis.

The fundamental connection between alienation and an ecological critique of capitalism
centered on a fundamental concern for “free individuality” is precisely what a careful study of
Marx’s theory of alienation along the contours outlined in Musto’s book can offer to a critical theory of alienation. Offering critical analyses of contemporary capitalism on the basis of such a connection is urgently needed at this time of the existential threat of climate change amid heightened conditions of alienation. This would also help to critically examine and actively avoid the colossal failures of twentieth-century actually existing socialism in its visions of alternative socioeconomic models.