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Coherent Notion of Alienation**

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Human Nature and the Joint Social Project: Towards a Coherent Notion of Alienation

GABY BECKLEY

Introduction

In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx flips Feuerbach's criticism that religion alienates us, and instead claims that the economic system alienates us first, and religion is the response to this as ideology distracts us from our miserable alienated existence.¹ Thus this new view that capitalism causes humans to suffer some kind of severe estrangement forms a significant reason to criticise capitalism, which remains a useful tool to criticise capitalism today.² However, 'alienation' can be used in a variety of ways to describe the ills of society, to refer to any sort of isolation, detachment or estrangement, e.g. the alienation of the British public from the democratic system; class A alienates class B because they always talk about their rich lifestyles which B cannot relate to. But what was the core of the concept as Marx *specifically* understood it? Part of the issue is that there is no consensus on what he meant, and how alienation operates. In fact, some thinkers, such as Allen Wood, have said that Marx used the term in such a variety of ways that there can be no proper theory of alienation – it is perhaps just an emotive word that applies to a lot of situations, not a meaningful theory of a distinct class of problems. I plan to argue against this sceptical view of alienation, and defend an interpretation of alienation posited by Gregory Mason which helps us understand exactly what conditions something must satisfy to count as being alienating.³

Reasons to be Sceptical

I will begin by outlining the reasons why people have doubted there can be a coherent theory of alienation. Allen Wood is doubtful about the chances of expounding a coherent theory of alienation from Marx because he thinks the phenomena which Marx describes as

¹ K. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Gregor Benton Trans., 1974); K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction* (Paris, 1844), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> (Accessed 26/6/17).

² F. Pappenheim, 'The Alienation of Modern Man', <https://www.marxists.org/subject/alienation/pappenheim.htm>, (Accessed 09/06/2017).

³ G. Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*, (Nottingham, Unpublished, 2016).

alienated are too varied.⁴ Marx talks about workers being alienated from their products, from their labour, from the state, and from the environment in which they work.⁵ He also speaks of the economic system of capitalism being alienating as a whole, by splitting people up into classes, and engaging people in activities which alienates them from each other and themselves.⁶ According to Marx, the economic and social structure alienates people from each other even further by setting them up in competition with each other, with their interests in direct opposition to those of others, so that they become concerned only with their own needs and not those of other people.⁷ According to Wood, Marx also views Christianity as an alienating illusion because it extracts all the best qualities from humanity and nature, and re-conceives of them as properties of something outside of nature, a being which cannot be shown to exist.⁸

Wood thinks that the only obvious link between all these cases of alienation is that they involve some sort of 'unnatural separation or hostile relationship'.⁹ Wood claims that this is not sufficient to formulate a full theory, because this vague commonality alone is not enough to think there is a true connection or a common cause between all these different phenomena. Wood doubts that the defects of human and social existence which count as alienated could be classified as a distinctive class in contrast to other types of dysfunction.¹⁰ For example, in contrast, substances which are gold seem to form a distinct and non-arbitrary category compared to other materials. There is a specific and naturally occurring feature which makes something gold – namely, the number of protons. So if we are given a substance we can work out if it is gold or some other material by looking at the number of protons. In contrast, the various phenomena Marx points out as alienated do not seem to have some clear feature in common which determines them as alienated in the same way. It seems there is not some fundamental property that all and only alienated dysfunctions have, in the same way that substances which are gold form a clear class because they have the common feature of having a particular number of protons. Consider two different examples of alienated dysfunctions given by Marx for example: the process of human labour, and religion. They do not count as alienated in the same way; the explanation given for why labour is alienating is different from the explanation for that of religion.

⁴ A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (Abingdon, 2nd Ed., 2004), p. 3.

⁵ Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 3-4.

⁶ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 3.

⁷ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 3.

⁸ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 4.

⁹ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 4.

An alternative way to understand alienation is that alienated objects are human creations which dominate or enslave their creators. Marx mentions this feature several times in the 1844 Manuscripts, for example saying that ‘the relationship of the worker to the product of labour [is as to] an alien object that has power over him’ and ‘the worker becomes a slave of his object’.¹¹ This is more specific, but Wood still rejects it, on similar grounds.¹² Again he says that because of the varied phenomena Marx picks out, we would have to apply this idea of alienated created objects to a range of human creations too broad and varied, including material objects such as cars, social institutions such as the state, and even ideas such as religious illusions.¹³ These are human creations in very different senses of the word, and as a result the way people are dominated by these is very diverse. So again, he thinks that this notion of an object which dominates its human creator is not the kind of description which picks out a distinct class, therefore does not count as a sufficiently unifying factor.¹⁴

Wood is certainly right to criticize those who claim that Marx presents a rigorous theory of alienation.¹⁵ Marx does mention varied phenomena, and moreover certain readings of Marx do suggest it will be hard to find a common element in the various phenomena of alienation, or to establish that alienation is a naturally and specifically definable class of dysfunction. For example, because Marx says that people are alienated from their labour, the product of their labour, each other, and themselves, it initially seems that that Marx presents four different types of alienation. But this understanding will not be very useful for a theory of alienation as it does not define the element common to each. This approach is also inconsistent with Marx’s claim that proletarian and capitalist are alienated in the same way.¹⁶ On a simple reading it seems that capitalists might experience alienation from other people and themselves, but they are not engaged in labouring activities in the same way as proletarian workers are, who will experience alienation from their labour and the products of their labour. If we want to make sense of Marx’s claim that capitalists and proletarians are alienated in the same way, we need to find a single, coherent concept of alienation, with these four descriptions being different aspects of one complex condition. What this core concept might be is not forthcoming in Marx’s writings, as Wood notes. Hence it appears that assuming four separate types of alienation does not meet Wood’s challenge. To vindicate

¹¹Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

¹² Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 5.

¹³ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ K. Marx & F. Engels, *The Holy Family* (Richard Dixon Trans., Moscow, 1956). Also see Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

the claim that there is a coherent theory of alienation underlying Marx's works we must find a common feature or cause which explains how each instance of alienation counts as such.

Problems with Wood's Scepticism

Explicating a theory of alienation based on Marx's writings is challenging and the way forward is not immediately obvious. However, I will argue that Wood is unjustified in claiming it to be impossible, that his scepticism is too hastily arrived at, and that there are other ways to provide a coherent theory of alienation. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx clearly means to say something important about the world using his theory of alienation. As Wood concedes, 'Marx's early writings are...rich in both social and philosophical insights'.¹⁷ Certainly, alienation has historically appealed to and inspired ideas and understandings of the world.¹⁸ It may be that contemporary scholars have missed Marx's insights about alienation, and will continue to do so if they remain too sceptical about the possibility of explicating a theory of alienation consistent with his writings.

Wood's scepticism about explicating a full theory of alienation in terms of human creations dominating their creator leads him to re-define alienation in terms of psychological wellbeing. Wood thinks the most effective use of alienation is to describe it as experiencing a lack of self-worth or meaning in our lives, or needing illusions to experience meaning and self-worth.¹⁹ However, as Wood is aware, this is not what Marx intended as it puts the emphasis on psychological feelings at the expense of material reality, and Marx criticized Hegel and Feuerbach for characterising alienation as essentially about consciousness. Marx believed that life determines consciousness, not the other way around.²⁰ If Wood's conception of alienation, which is not the one Marx had in mind, is the only coherent notion of alienation we can extract from Marx's works, then we have probably missed something valuable and insightful about Marx's understanding and meaning of alienation. Wood thinks this is our only option as Marx's use of the term is too varied and vague, but, as I shall show, there are other options open for formulating a coherent theory of alienation based on Marx's ideas.

Distinguishing Causes, Alienation Itself, and Symptoms

¹⁷ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 5.

¹⁸ E.g. See the focus on alienation and the ideology which serves to distract us from alienated existence among many Neo-Marxists – Samuel Freeman, 'The Headquarters of Neo-Marxism', <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/03/23/frankfurt-school-headquarters-neo-marxism/>, (Accessed 15/03/2017).

¹⁹ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 8.

²⁰ K. Marx, *The German Ideology* (London, 1932).

Wood also fails to distinguish between the causes, constitution and symptoms of alienation, both in his reformulation of a concept of alienation and elsewhere in his argument.²¹ One of the main reasons Wood thinks a coherent theory of alienation is impossible is because of the varied phenomena that Marx counts as alienated. Yet some of the things Wood names here would probably more accurately and coherently be described as *manifestations* of alienation, rather than defining alienation itself, analogous to the symptoms of a disease. The fact that a disease has an array of different symptoms does not render impossible a coherent theory about what actually constitutes the disease (alienation), and how this leads to a variety of symptoms.

For instance, it seems likely, especially given what I have already said about Marx's disagreement with those who prioritize consciousness over material reality, that Marx would consider a loss of sense of self-worth or meaning in life to be a symptom of alienation, rather than constituting alienation itself. Similarly, the illusions Wood talks of such as religion are actually a reaction to unpleasant psychological states, and are not part of what constitutes alienation.²² As Marx expressed when he famously wrote that religion is the 'opium of the people', we create these illusions to distract ourselves from the alienated reality of our existence:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature... It is the opium of the people... The demand to give up the illusions about its conditions is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion.²³

Marx makes very clear his belief here, that religion is a response to alienation. Hence, Wood does him a disservice to consider it part of what constitutes alienation. Marx also says elsewhere 'the gods were originally not the cause but the effect of the confusion in men's minds'.²⁴ Illusions may be a symptom or signifier of living in an alienating world, but are not (at least initially) objects which themselves alienate and dominate us, so are not part of what constitutes alienation.²⁵ Marx goes on to say that the relationship later becomes reciprocal, but this need not undermine the fact that initially religion is an *effect* of alienation, rather

²¹ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

²² Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

²³ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*.

²⁴ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

²⁵ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

than *constituting* alienation. It is reciprocal in the sense that religion helps people accept the alienated state as normal by making the conditions more tolerable, so that they continue to live with it –this is Marx’s meaning of religion as ‘the opium of the people’. For this and other reasons, the disease analogy is not perfect as a parallel to alienation, but it sheds light on the kind of mistake Wood is making. Wood mischaracterises Marx when he considers religious consciousness as constituting alienation, rather than being an effect (and/or cause) of it. The complex idea of feedback effects that Marx seems to work with at various points in many of his writings should not lead us astray here.²⁶

Moreover, Wood’s reasoning from a core idea he recognizes in Marx’s use of alienation, to his idea of alienation consisting in psychological states may be misguided. Wood says ‘a central application of [Marx’s] image of ‘unnatural separation’ is that alienated individuals are in some sense separated from, at odds with, or hostile to themselves’.²⁷ He then moves directly to, in the next sentence:

These considerations motivate a provisional suggestion that alienation might be seen as the condition of a person who experiences life as empty, meaningless and absurd, or who fails to sustain a sense of self-worth²⁸

Wood then reformulates alienation in terms of this concept, since he thinks that explicating a theory of alienation based on Marx’s own views is a lost cause. Wood moves from recognizing alienation as involving separation from the self, to focusing on psychological states which, I argue, is an unjustified leap. While I grant that we might reasonably expect these psychological effects to often or always accompany being separated from or hostile to ones-self, clearly this would be a further effect of the condition of alienation, and not what constitutes alienation itself. It seems to me that a simpler approach will address how alienated individuals might be separated from themselves in some way, instead of focusing on the psychological effects that may or may not accompany this. I will now outline a theory which, I contend, is a more promising line of argument, and one which is directly applicable to contemporary social phenomena.

A More Promising Theory

²⁶ G A Cohen has addressed the importance of feedback effects in Marx, and has theorised it using the device of functional explanation. Religion then, might also require a functional explanation.

²⁷ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 8.

²⁸ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 8.

Unlike Wood, Mason argues that a theory in terms of dominating objects may be possible, and might pick out some property or essence in the activity of labour which would explain what Marx considers consequences of alienation. Mason focuses on a wider reading of products dominating their creators.²⁹ We can say that we are all engaged in a type of labour, namely the joint human venture of shaping our world, and the world we create is at odds with what is needed for human flourishing.³⁰ This form of labour is alienating because we are involved in shaping a world where our human needs cannot be met, and the labour causes the multitude of varied effects Marx mentions because the societies we form and sustain are at variance with the conditions required for human flourishing.

Marx is relying on implicit norms about requirements for human flourishing for his theory of alienation, as the key idea is that in alienated existence these requirements are not fulfilled.³¹ Marx is noticeably relying on such norms when he says of the alienated capitalist class that they experience 'the semblance of a human existence' whereas the proletariat experiences 'the reality of an inhuman existence'.³² The use of these terms 'human' and 'inhuman' has normative implications, as Marx surely does not mean that alienated people are not living in a *biologically* human way.³³ He seems instead to be referencing some implicit norms about what counts as a *properly* human existence. For example, in the 1844 Manuscripts Marx hints at one of the specific norms for human flourishing, since he criticizes alienated labour for the fact that the worker 'does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind'.³⁴ This implies that work should develop the body and mind of the worker, which would seem to be one of the norms that Marx holds constitutes a properly human existence. Marx's conditions for human flourishing seem also to involve things like living a creative life, and honouring our nature as social beings, thus being involved in joint ventures that will benefit humans as a whole.

The 1844 Manuscripts contain a recurring focus on human nature and the creation of the world, and how these relate in man's labour. For instance, the following section communicates that in producing something not focused on or fitted to our human nature, we tear ourselves away from our human nature, and experience alienation. It is, therefore, in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being. Such production is his active species-life. Through it, nature appears as *his* work and his reality.

²⁹ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

³⁰ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

³¹ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

³² Marx & Engels, *The Holy Family*, p. 51.

³³ Mason, *The Concept of Alienation*.

³⁴ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, pp. 326-7.

The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of the species-life of man: for man produces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created. *In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.*³⁵(My emphasis)

This quote and others suggest that it is the production of something at odds with human nature which is central to Marx's concept of alienation. This quote also refers to man's role in creating the world he lives in – not just consciously but in the actual, physical world. So the world can be seen as the product of man's labour. Therefore alienation may well have a common core, namely being involved in the production of something at variance with our human needs which comes to dominate existence (and so engenders an 'inhuman' existence) – i.e. the joint venture of shaping the social world. It may now be possible to arrive at necessary and sufficient conditions for alienation: i.e. people are alienated if and only if they are involved in the creation or maintenance of a society which is at odds with human nature and hence inimical to human flourishing. Note that it is joint activities which are important here, so someone in a capitalist society who works for their own human flourishing, according to Marx's norms, is still alienated because their involvement in the world (their creative and productive powers) serves to sustain a world at odds with human flourishing. Everyone in a capitalist society is involved in sustaining such a world, because the system itself ensures that they cannot escape doing so when they engage with the world. Jonathan Wolff notes that it is an 'unintended consequence' of the system we have created that capitalist and proletariat alike have no choice but to engage in this system; the capitalist cannot just stop competing with others and the proletariat cannot refuse to work. In such a system, oppressive structures are reinforced and act as barriers to human flourishing.³⁶ Thus society is constantly in the process of alienating labour because a) a system which is at odds with the conditions for human flourishing is constantly reinforced and b) this labour is alienating because human flourishing requires involvement in joint ventures which *benefit* rather than *harm* the human species as a whole.

This theory therefore also makes sense of the fact that capitalists are alienated in the *same* way. Both classes have a role in the joint creation of the human world, so both are alienated through this joint venture. To illustrate further, one implicit norm for human flourishing that

³⁵ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 61. (See rest of 'estranged labour' section for more supporting quotes).

³⁶ J. Wolff, 'Karl Marx', <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/marx/>, (Accessed 08/12/2016).

might be teased out from Marx's work requires that people should live as social beings enjoying what Marx calls community. Capitalists, instead of being able to live flourishing lives as social beings, must engage in competition with other capitalists and with their workers. The capitalist must directly compete for a source of income in profits with other capitalists, by trying to get maximum business for herself. Also, according to Marx's theory of exploitation, the capitalist makes a profit by extracting surplus labour from the proletariat, who has little choice but to take the exploitative employment since capitalists own the means of production and thus exercise greater power. Hence capitalists sustain a world which makes them unable to live a flourishing life according to Marx's implicit norms, since they sustain a world where they are unable to fulfil the norm of cooperating to help others flourish, because they sustain a world that involves competition with others, and the exploitation of the proletariat. Just like the proletariat they are part of a society which cannot encourage true human flourishing and they have taken part in the creation and maintenance of a world which is at odds with human nature.³⁷ So in sustaining the system of capitalism, capitalists and proletarians alike are involved in sustaining a system where the proletariat class is exploited for the gain of the capitalist class, and so they sustain a world directly at odds with certain conditions necessary for human flourishing such as living as a social animal.

This approach represents a true attempt to understand Marx's intentions as it does not interpret psychological conditions as constituting alienation, although this aspect can still be seen as an effect of alienation. Mason's theory, in contrast to Wood's, need not rely on psychological states to explain that alienation involves separation from the self in some way. This approach understands the 'self' we are separated from in alienation as not constituted by the vision of myself I personally hold, but rather by a kind of 'core self' that I am, in virtue of being human, no matter what I think of myself. Since Marx implies that there are norms for living a proper human existence, this core self may constitute the natural class of 'being human' which involves core values that are necessary for flourishing human existence. If a society cannot fulfil those norms, for example if it does not facilitate engagement in social relations, then human nature is denied, and the process of making such a society is alienating. Thus alienation involves separation from the self, by being separated from living a properly human existence appropriate to the core self or natural kind as a human. Such a theory does not require psychological states as the only way to recognize and define a separation from the self.

³⁷ For her part, the proletarian must compete with others for employment in order to feed herself, due to her lack of bargaining power. This example serves to show *how* both classes can be said to be alienated in the same way, since often there is confusion over how capitalists can be alienated in the *same way* as the proletariat, if they are accepted as alienated at all.

Mason's theory is also more explanatory than many of the other options Wood dismisses. In particular, the alienating feature of this joint labour can explain why it produces an alienated product, as the 1844 Manuscripts suggests a theory should.³⁸ Namely, society is engaged in the alienating process of creating and reinforcing a world which itself is unfit for human flourishing and is thus alienating from human nature. This represents a common theory of alienation which explains all the phenomena Marx refers to as alienated. The product of joint human labour (societies etc.) is alienating because it does not fulfil human nature e.g. it pits people against each other so is at variance with human nature as social beings. The labour involved is alienating because it is an activity not aimed towards right human fulfilment, and takes place in a society already at odds with the requirements for human flourishing. People are alienated from each other and themselves because they are not working to attain human flourishing for themselves and others, because they are sustaining a system where they are not able to fulfil their complex creative and social needs. Thus, under this theory, alienation from product, from process of production, from species being, and from other people are all different aspects of a core concept of alienation, rather than different types of alienation. This reading of Marx fits well with his texts and also grants more interpretative charity than that of Wood.

I argue that Wood is unnecessarily sceptical about the chances of explicating a theory of alienation based on what Marx says. There are other possibilities for providing a theory which preserve Marx's insights and explain why a whole range of phenomena are cases or manifestations of alienation. Mason's theory is promising in this respect, and fits in with the varied nature of Marx's comments about alienation. Mason argues that the core concept of alienation involves being dominated by the product of joint human venture, where this product is a world at odds with the requirements of human flourishing. This offers a coherent concept of alienation which explains what distinguishes it from other types of dysfunction.

I will now consider applications of the term 'alienation', as explicated by Mason, to modern phenomena.

Contemporary Application

As discussed, Mason concludes that people are alienated if and only if they are involved in the creation or maintenance of a society which is at odds with human nature and hence inimical to human flourishing. This offers a clear concept of what Marx means by alienation, which allows us to apply it in a meaningful way to modern phenomena.

³⁸ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 326-7.

Social Media

I argue that, for example, social media may be considered as alienating, if it contributes to society being at odds with human nature.³⁹ For instance, dating apps like Tinder seem likely to increase or promote superficiality. If this is something considered at odds with human nature and flourishing, then both the effects of and engagement in modern social media could be deemed alienating. Our improved understanding of alienation means that if social media has these effects, which contribute to society being at odds with flourishing, then the experience of engaging in social media is itself alienating. Swiping left or right based on superficial consideration of an individual's appearance may be considered alienating, because it promotes in society a tendency towards superficiality obsession with appearance. One of the benefits of Mason's explication of alienation is that something is alienating if it contributes to a world at odds with human nature. If you think superficiality is inimical to human nature, you can use the core definition of Marxist alienation as explicated here in your own way, because what constitutes human nature for you is a separate matter and may go beyond what Marx says or implies about human nature. Using Marx's term in this way becomes a specific and powerful criticism based one's own view of human nature and the effects of social media.

Another sense in which social media might be alienating is that it further undermines the privacy of individuals. The amount of personal information we make available online, both knowingly and unknowingly, makes private details vulnerable to businesses, governments and hackers. Employers can view aspects of one's 'private life' which were not intended to be made available beyond selected and trusted friends; businesses can purchase personal information to target individuals with specific advertising according to profile (e.g. age, gender) and interests; governments can potentially gain access to even private conversations between friends or family. Such aspects of social media seem inimical to human flourishing. Again, if the consequence is a society more at odds with human nature, then the experience of aiding in this process is itself alienating. The whole experience of supporting and giving more information to websites, which then profit from private information and interactions, becomes an alienating experience. This would mean making available such information online in the first place, both intentionally and not, through the act of engagement, is an alienating experience because it contributes to an alienated culture.

³⁹ Note that I am not saying any of the problems listed below are new ills – the argument stands so far as social media increases or even sustains existing features of society which are at odds with human nature.

The controllers of businesses, governments, or social media websites who engage in these practices experience alienation in their work life, because they create a society at odds with human flourishing. Such relationships to other humans is at odds with their human nature too, so in promoting a lack of privacy they are engaged in the alienating process of creating a world at odds with our human nature. Thus, using Mason's definition, we can see how these negative effects of social media mean that in engaging with social media in the first place, we are alienated because we contribute to the creation of a world at odds with human flourishing.

Scepticism: The New 'Opium of the People'?

Marx famously said that religion was the 'opium of the people'.⁴⁰ By this he meant that it distracts people from their alienation and oppression, by feeding them a beautiful lie. Marx claimed that people use religion and the false consciousness it offers as a drug to escape their miserable reality, by believing in myths such as 'we are all equal in God's eyes' or 'I will get my reward in heaven'. As noted earlier, religion seems to be an example of a 'feedback loop' in Marx's work. It is initially an effect of alienation, but then it contributes to alienation by keeping people unaware of their alienation and making their life more tolerable so that they do not seek to change things.

The idea here is one of false ideologies arising from and then contributing to alienation. This function is not limited to religion, and may be fulfilled by political beliefs, for example a secular belief that we are all equal as often espoused by liberalism may distract its believers from the reality that people are not equal in the real world – people face varying degrees of challenge with varying degrees of resources, and moreover capitalism is necessarily a system of inequality.

I briefly want to suggest that an increasing scepticism about truth might function as a modern opium of the people. A degree of scepticism is certainly not novel among philosophers, where many doubt that there are objective moral facts, or think there are or might be moral facts but that can never be known. In any case, whether moral facts are unknowable or morality is simply subjective, it seems a natural conclusion to think there is little profit in pontificating about 'the truth'.

In the recent political climate, it has become increasingly hard to know which, if any, news-sources to trust. There is also an increasing acknowledgement that even supposedly reliable or fact-focused news sources like the BBC are not without bias – even news sources which

⁴⁰ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique*.

make a conscious effort not to favour a particular political or moral view inevitably are biased in the way they report the news and the words they use. In part, increased acknowledgement of racial and religious prejudice in news reporting has brought to attention how the pictures chosen and the words used ('student' vs. 'thug', 'terrorist' vs. 'lone wolf') frame otherwise identical stories and facts in different ways.

In addition, Harry Frankfurt raises a concern that certain politicians, using Donald Trump as an example, seem to not to be liars, but 'bullshitters'.⁴¹ Liars are people who purposefully say something they believe is untrue, but remain aware of and concerned with the actual truth of the matter. In contrast, bullshitters are unconcerned with whether what they say is true or not. They are wholly focused on shaping the beliefs of their audience, e.g. rousing support. For example, politicians and others may make dramatic and often unverifiable statements, designed to illicit a specifically desired reaction. In those instances, such individuals appear to be unconcerned as to whether their statements are true or not – such issues become a matter of no concern, as conveying truth or otherwise is beside the point.⁴²

Increasing awareness of untrustworthy and biased reporting; lies, and, even worse, 'bullshit' from politicians, might all make us increasingly sceptical about truth. As people acknowledge how hard, or even impossible it is to determine the truth of social and political matters, and grow accustomed to politicians not only distorting the truth but deciding it is beyond their concern, it is increasingly tempting to give up on the idea of any knowable truth. Arguably, while certainly people should not readily believe everything they hear, not least because they may fall prey to ideologies which serve as 'opium' in Marx's sense, ceasing to believe in the possibility of 'truth' at all also serves to distract people from their alienation. If all is 'meaningless', if there is doubt as to the ability to categorize actions, events, and ideas as morally wrong, then the existence and prevalence of the lived condition of human alienation may appear not to matter. People may give up on seeking truth in any form, or trying to affect change, because all appears meaningless, impossible and therefore pointless. Certain forms of extreme scepticism might therefore serve as 'opium', as an effective tool to silence potential rebellion.

Conclusion

In introducing Greg Mason's alternative theory of alienation, I have shown that Wood's scepticism need not be accepted and scholars need not give up on explicating a coherent

⁴¹ Frankfurt, H., 'Donald Trump Is BS, Says Expert in BS', <http://time.com/4321036/donald-trump-bs/>, (Accessed 27/04/2017). For more, see H. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (London, 2005).

⁴² Frankfurt, 'Donald Trump Is BS'

concept of alienation from Marx's work. Instead alienation can be understood as arising from the joint social process of creating a world at odds with our human nature. I hope to have shown how alienation may be specifically defined, and how it might then serve as a powerful and distinct tool to critique capitalism. For instance, one can use the term 'alienation' to signify a particular and distinct harm related to one's own view of human nature. Criticisms on the grounds of alienation can remain powerful, even for those who do not share Marx's view that all people are social beings, or those who hold a theory of human nature with extra conditions that Marx never implies. In those cases, phenomena which people consider as alienating, or the reasons why they consider them to be so, may differ from Marx's interpretation. Using alienation in this way may offer a powerful critical tool to consider modern phenomena, such as social media and extreme scepticism.

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