WHAT THE FIRE SEES

To each other.

CONTENTS

Relatable Alienation: The Logic and History of an Idea
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What do I mean by 'relatable alienation'? First we need to appreciate the ambiguity of the term 'alienation'. It's one of those terms that is overpoweringly tempting to use in the formulation of generalities, simply because it contains so many connotations and usages, both vernacular and specialised. To try and map some of these would be an undertaking that this essay (a lecture, lightly revised) couldn't possibly provide the scope for, so I'll have to adopt methods here which may seem rather crude, and work more indexically than genealogically.

We can say that the significations of 'alienation' are influenced by their relationship to either English- or German-language etymologies and conventions. In English, the term 'alienation' was historically close to contexts of jurisprudence and property law. Such traditional forms are evoked in legal-sounding but metaphorical expressions like 'the alienation of affection' (a charge against a third party in a divorce case) or 'the right to alienate', meaning to transfer the title to a property from one owner to another (also known as 'conveyance'). 'Alienation' in its broader sense thus develops out of technical terminology within legal codes that pertains to the circulation of property.

So there's this quite technical use of 'alienation', which perhaps we don't encounter that much anymore outside these somewhat archaic and arcane legal realms. The other

main use of 'alienation' in English is to refer to a psychological state that connotes distance or estrangement. To become alienated from your friends is to become distanced from them due to some kind of irresolvable conflict, like a drinking problem or a political disagreement, rather than due to a contingency, like moving to another country and not having Internet. The element of intention is less crucial than the scale of the break, with alienation from existing social ties being one of the repercussions that signals the severity of the initial conflict. Incidentally, the psychological dimension is captured well in the little-known English term for 'psychotherapist', used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the profession was emerging: 'alienist'.

This notion of alienation as a personal experience of social estrangement leads us to the German-language derivations of alienation, which also register in contemporary English uses, namely the more existential dimension of alienation, vis-à-vis, say, Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and the whole set of attitudes associated with 1950s existentialism. This is alienation, or unhomeliness, as the constitutive condition of human existence, something you get in psychoanalytic theory informed by Heidegger and Hegel (itself 'existentialised' by the teachings of Kojève), such as that elaborated by Lacan. For Hegel, alienation is a social ontology of separation and negativity, as in the 'master–slave' dialectic, which was influential for figures like Lacan. Alienation is thus a natural human condition borne of inequality and conflict. However, it is also the friction that creates the experience of distance and rejection of immediate reality, which for Hegel is indispensable for reconciliation between the individual and their world on a 'higher level' of Spirit. This casting of alienation as the severing of the self from the self is taken up and further developed by Marx, whose work serves as the principal source (besides existentialist writings) of the inflections that the term alienation has acquired as a topic in philosophy and contemporary social and cultural

theory. 'Alienation' is used to translate terms such as *entäusserung*, which can mean 'externalisation', and *entfremdung*, which is more like 'estrangement'. This conceptual and philological ambiguity is also often encountered in the discourse of theatre, aesthetics and art history when trying to disentangle Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* or Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie*. These terms are both often translated as 'de-familiarisation', but really likewise mean 'estrangement' (albeit literally rather than in the psychologically defined way English speakers would tend to read it): to suddenly find the usual world and its objects 'strange', perhaps through a novel use of language or artistic means.

What we can see already is that there are lots of different philosophical projects pursued under the banner of 'alienation', complexified by several etymologies, with the term itself being 'alienated' – that is to say, 'conveyanced', in the archaic English legal sense – across and between them. What we can do at this point is to divide these projects, again, very crudely, into 'materialist' ones and 'idealist' ones. For the purposes of this demonstration, any use of 'alienation' which primarily draws on the legal or psychological legacy of the term, and which does not explicitly focus on the historical and social context of the concept, goes over to the idealist side. On the materialist side, pre-eminently, we find Marx and his application of alienation to the conditions of labour under capitalist social relations, that is, under capitalist *property* relations. Here, alienation is neither the liberty of the object or the distance experienced by a subject, but the condition of persons dispossessed of access to any means of survival and thus obliged to look to the market for any prospect of the continuation of their existence. This is embodied, for Marx, by the concept of the worker's 'double freedom': the freedom *to* sell their labour power without any of the customary constraints associated with feudalism, and the freedom *from* any means of subsistence if they are un-

successful in selling that power. Translated into liberal political theory, with a nod to Isaiah Berlin, this is known as 'freedom to' and 'freedom from', or, as Berlin called it, 'negative and positive liberty'.

Of course it's the privative form of 'freedom from' which is of most interest to the liberal tradition, given this is the one most concerned with the protection of accumulation – of private property – *from* redistribution. We thus encounter alienation in the guise of freedom, and it is the deliberate confusion between alienation and freedom that forms the bedrock of liberalism. Consider the idea of the 'level playing field'. Everyone on the field starts with the same resources, the same aptitudes – the playing field is not tilted in such a way as to favour any person or group over another. It's solely what they go on to make of themselves that determines the outcome of the game. They have the freedom to fail or succeed, and the reason they come to have this freedom in the first place is that they are alienated *from* any causes for their achievement, save individual ones: *Homo economicus*, the self-seeking monad. This highly abstract scheme is informative (as are many of the schemata of (neo)classical economics) through what it excludes – through the elements it illustrates by putting them out of frame.

This mixture between alienation and freedom as characteristic of liberal ideology is perpetuated by the balance of forces in liberal capitalist societies, namely by the state and its regulatory-punitive institutions (police and prisons, as well as more diffuse, internalised, market-generated agencies of incitement, capture and control). In that light, it looks like alienation might not be psychological but rather structural. Ideology is after all not about what is hidden, but what necessarily appears and *how*, given the kind of society we inhabit. The stakes of a materialist analysis are therefore to show how the psychological (idealist) and the structural (materialist) cannot be held as separate but rather combine in daily experience and presuppose one another. This daily experience

is itself alienated insofar as the structural conditions that produce it are inaccessible or appear distorted, and certainly when they do appear, they do so at a scale and a complexity that seems to place them far beyond individual or collective intervention. The experience of alienation is itself an alienated one, because it is one of passive or resigned contemplation – alienation from the power to do anything about your alienation is its primary symptom.

Nonetheless, 'alienation' does have a history of being criticised in Marxist scholarship as precisely a non-materialist concept, as a leftover of Marx's debt to left-Hegelian and Feuerbachian humanism. This is because the concept appears to presuppose a transhistorical human subject who pre-exists a structure and may find itself lost, that is, alienated within that structure, but may also regain itself, namely in revolution or in communism, and hence no longer be alienated from its human essence. The 'not belonging to oneself', the subjugation to 'alien forces' shows the proximity between the concepts of alienation and of heteronomy (domination by external or hostile laws). This is rooted in the humanist, post-Enlightenment critique of religion as the displacement of human agency to imaginary divine powers, which keep society subjugated and static in mythic time rather than producing active and conscious subjects in historical time. This is an important point, less for the polemics emerging from the work of Louis Althusser and the theory of an 'epistemological break' between Marx's humanist-idealist and scientific-materialist sides, than for the way it draws our attention to the imperative of situating the role of the human in this debate. The human is a concept that plays a transitive rather than an identificatory or taxonomic role in Marx. For example, the concept of the 'human' is discussed often in terms of 'species being', which in fact functions more as 'species becoming' – the species which is capable of working on its own life conditions so as to change them, and change itself in the process. But the 'human' is a concept which still

allows us to open up what is, paradoxically, alienated *in* the formulation of the human in the Western thought and post-Enlightenment political philosophy drawn upon by Marx; that is: how the formulation of the human creates its own subhumans, non-humans and 'aliens'.

Though the human is a category and a concept replete with contradiction and plasticity, it cannot be denied that the notion of a human essence, and the corresponding capacity to be alienated from it, has restrictions placed upon it by technologies of race, gender and coloniality – all of which can potentially be elided by 'humanist' commitments. For the purposes of this essay, the important thing is that alienation is a certain social relationship – which may take the form of a non-relation – to the basic conditions of one's labour and, by extension, the (re)production of one's life and those of others. Defined in those terms, alienation is *not* a 'human condition' that takes different forms, depending on the nature of the government or the standard of living or the development of technology in a particular time or place, vaguely known as modernity or whatever.

Thus, most of the time when we speak of 'alienated labour', that is to say, when we are invoking a materialist use of 'alienation', we speak in a register that mixes the materialist and the idealist. To transpose this mixture into yet another light: alienation refers to a social ontology of *dispossession*. It is a lack of control and a lack of freedom at the same time; it is the constraint (the bedrock of being) of being alive as a human – this is the 'ontology' part, a theory of what it is to be. Alienation is basically about distance, and it is about constraint. Distanced from one's own desires and constrained to follow the desires of others, or constrained to fit into structures established by others without your participation, of which you are not the prime beneficiary, if you benefit from them at all. Alienation means you don't get to decide on anything. You are held at a distance from deciding, you are blocked, you cannot even begin to know what it might mean

to have control over your life *as a consistent form of life* shared with others, rather than as a personal issue. Alienation is not constitutive of some abstraction called 'human nature', it is the bedrock of social relations that take a particular form, the form that is dominated by the accumulation of capital and the extraction of value, and all the forms of slow and fast violence that determine this as either the natural or the socially optimal state of affairs.

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Nevertheless, over the past several years there has been movement in some quarters of critical theory to re-appropriate and, as it were, rehabilitate alienation as a concept and as a mode – even a politics – of experience. Alienation is taken up as a conceptual device to leverage subjectivity out of immersion in immediacy, and out of the politics deemed to spring from that immersion – horizontality, identity, localism, micropolitics, or what accelerationist writers call 'folk politics'. In the accelerationist view, rather than an ethics of the rooted and the particular – coded as conservative, whether left or right – we ostensibly need a macropolitics of large-scale social planning, the valorisation of technoscience and, crucially, the *separation* of the human from nature, which allows accelerationism to re-shape nature for its own social ends. The lacklustre witticism would be that this is 'species being + robots', but it's a bit more complicated – maybe. What theoretical formations such as accelerationism, Prometheanism, ecomodernism and xenofeminism – and I will provide a few relevant quotes in a second – want the concept of alienation to do for them is to help them wage a battle against a projected set of antagonists on the left, whether in activism or academia, who have deconstructed so much of the universe that they have lost all faith in the betterment of the human condition; which is to say, they have ostensibly given up all political horizons beyond

minor acts of sabotage and withdrawal. Hence the accelerationist's need for large-scale geo-engineering: in the conceptual field.

Alienation is brandished as a weapon against the perceived insularity of this projected left. It is used as a way to measure the distance between the potentialities and actualities of social existence today and, most of all, the capacity of mediating forms like states and parties to co-ordinate particular struggles into irresistible large-scale engines of social transformation. Alienation is the source of universalism, in this perspective, the key to humanity seizing its ontological destiny to modify 'human nature' and the other-than-human (I recently learned Prometheanism is a label shared with enthusiasts of geo-engineering). It's a bit weird, because there is a rejection of immediacy in the quest for collective self-determination, while the object of political desire for accelerationists is clearly mediation, that is, an engagement with reality through its existing institutions and infrastructures, rather than a sabotage of or exit from them. And yet it's alienation – which doesn't seem to have anything to do with self-determination, given what I've already outlined – that gets mobilised in this discourse.

This is just one of a few category errors we can look at in many of these accelerationist discourses (see also the pre-critical or pre-feminist critical use of simple abstractions like 'science' and 'nature'). The subtitle of the manifesto on xenofeminism is 'A Politics for Alienation'. There we read almost from the very beginning that:

> XF seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds. We are all alienated – but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given – and it's certainly not given by anything 'natural'. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labour of freedom's construction.

Okay. What comes out here is that alienation is a kind of Baron Munchausen-style seizing of oneself by the hair, removing oneself from one purported essence – the natural – and depositing oneself into another essence, alienation, which has never been anything other than the human condition. It's not clear what sense of alienation is being upheld here, except maybe some vague sociobiological notion, insofar as humans are a species not overdetermined by environment and instinct, which would constitute a genetic alienation. Alienation, like value production in a number of similarly hyperbolic discourses, is everywhere and thus nowhere.

Even in non-manifesto form, in its more extended theoretical articulations, there appears an odd normativity of alienation, used to mean something like 'mediation', in the service of striking a blow for ambitious social-democratic political programmes against retrograde anarchists and other radical riffraff who are not sufficiently enthusiastic about a certain undifferentiated notion of techno-science. Two more examples. One of the xenofeminism manifesto's authors, Helen Hester, wrote an interesting text ('Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism') about a year ago on the gendering of technology and the need to re-articulate social-reproduction feminism against this. She argues for a 'feminist Prometheanism':

> Nascent projects such as xenofeminism, for example, are seeking to articulate a technologically minded counter-hegemonic gender politics fit for an era of globality, complexity, and alienation, and as such, evince a commitment to the development of more systemic approaches to oppression (reminiscent of those Promethean 'perspectives of winning' which characterized strands of second-wave activism).

Hester encapsulates Prometheanism thus: 'it might, at its most general level, be characterized as a transformative, world-building, and technologically enabled emancipatory endeavor, oriented towards the future'. Programmes such as

Hester's advocate for more alienation, not less, repurposing it as a critical distance, as a willed dis-identification, you could say, as an enabler of future-oriented emancipatory endeavours, even if the cost is being chained to a rock and having a vulture nibble at your liver for all eternity. It's obvious that alienation sounds more striking than mediation, but what is again at stake here is evidently a politics of *mediation*, where the emphasis is on *externalisation* (engaging with external structures, 'changing nature'), pitted against a somewhat reductive notion of the politics of immanence. The alienation of alienated labour is nowhere at stake, however. Meanwhile, and I've had a look, the thinking around Prometheanism that Hester critically engages with here doesn't really deal with alienation at all. Nonetheless, alienation seems to be a key asset for xenofeminism, as we've already seen.

So what we end up with is a kind of 'solving' of alienation, which maybe does get at the eradication of at least the subjective affect of alienation in contemporary labour. Xenofeminism and accelerationism, in their use of alienation, can be viewed as something akin to the critical-theoretical equivalents of the current trend for microdosing psychedelic drugs in Silicon Valley. Both are 'solutionist' approaches, that is, they advance a technical fix for a social problem, and as such not only misrecognise the problem but exacerbate it. It is also solutionist in the sense that we are told that more science, or 'our' science, can 'solve' the patriarchy; more alienation, 'our' alienation, will solve the alienation of capitalist life and its institutions; and microdoses of LSD will expand our minds just enough for us to keep moving fast and breaking things. In a recent article on the phenomenon ('Ordinary Doses'), Emma Stamm writes that insofar as psychedelics are being optimised to deal with mood disorders, enhance efficiency, and so forth, they are no different to anti-depressants, except the whole point of psychedelics is that they should create a window, however ephemeral, into another way of being in the world, and thus into the trans-

formability of it. That was the political horizon claimed for psychedelics by the anti-systemic movements of the 1960s – the other and more compelling side of their current profile as an escapist lifestyle apparatus. Similarly, the solutionist approach to alienation is to an extent dictated by market imperatives – the imperative to foist ever-new critical commodities into a high-turnover academic market – and this includes the imperative to produce relatable alienation, which we can feel good about, as well as diagnose in innumerable situations of our everyday lives. Alienation thus is no longer a condition of distance or passivity; it's not frustrating, it's empowering. Its logic is no different from the nostrums of 'self-care' to which it would diametrically oppose itself rhetorically.

This manoeuvre submerges some of the complexities and involuntarisms – the structural and structuring dimensions of alienation – and also the critical insights that can be recovered from the project. For Hester, this is the importance of reading a gendered history and set of premises into the mantra, which has always accompanied capitalist social relations and is ever more ubiquitous: that technological innovation is progress. Given that an entire history of technology can be written purely in terms of devices and ways of organising production developed by capital to defeat and confine the working class (free or bonded), as Marx notes, this reflection on technology seems like a crucial extension of social-reproduction feminist critique. For there is an argument to be made – and it often has been made – that you need alienation to generate resistance, and that's why capitalist labour and social conditions are emancipatory compared to feudal ones. This was, incidentally, also an argument made against Wages for Housework: women can only become part of the revolutionary class once their labour is officially alienated, by wages, outside the home. (This was in many ways exactly like the argument made *by* Wages for Housework, except that for them the wage should be paid inside the home as well.) Unpacking that is a huge task, requiring a level of historical en-

quiry and a turn to dialectics, which Hester's simple re-valorisation of alienation as a politics adequate to a complex world doesn't really perform. Xenofeminism converts both the determinacy and the sociohistorical multivalence of alienation into a simple abstraction. And if there's one point to take away from my essay, it's the difference between the crude thought and the simple abstraction. There's a lot of simple abstractions out there and they are hard to avoid, but we shouldn't deliberately be making more of them. Like Douglas Huebler said: 'The world is full of *objects*, *more or less interesting*; I do not wish to add any more.'

There are at least two ways to make alienation disappear: one is to turn it into a *positive*, even positivist, concept, the other is to identify so closely with your alienation that it is cancelled out because you are doing what you love. The latter is certainly what is often attributed to artists – I knew I'd get back to artistic labour somehow! – and more generally to the becoming creative, flexible and auto-entrepreneurialising of all work, especially under the sway of social algorithms. In my book, *Speculation as a Mode of Production* (2018), I spend a lot of time trying to engage this problematic of alienation. There I suggest that the 'granularity of alienation' needs to be engaged in its profusion and expansion rather than its disappearance. Insofar as platform capitalism, the gig economy, etc., are about the extension of accumulation and commodification, as well as the weird resurgence of pre-modern master–servant relations, packaged in apps, inevitably there is alienation of and from labour. This hypothesis of course entails a resistance to thinking of alienation chiefly as a psychological or psychic category. It is a tendency embedded at all levels of objectively reproduced social relations.

Perhaps, in counter to this elision of the psychological, you could make the argument that no one is more psychically alienated than people who believe – i.e., choose to believe – themselves to be performing voluntarily what they are actually coerced into doing structurally.