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## Anxiety in the Capitalism of Late Modernity

Toyo Kawabata

*Independent researcher, toyo0815@gmail.com*

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## Introduction

The logic of capitalism affects both individuals and society. At the individual level, an increasing number of people suffer from anxiety, in countries where neo-liberal capitalist policies are advanced (James 2008). Indeed, neo-liberal economic and social policies in capitalism, such as deregulation, privatization, and minimal public spending, have contributed to expanding economic inequality and social insecurity and to mainstreaming materialism, individualism, and competitiveness, all of which have led to increased diagnosis of mental illness (Zeira 2022).<sup>1</sup> The structures of capitalism induce anxiety, to which individuals can respond in several different ways. While one way to mitigate mental distress and recover self-identity would be to pursue self-growth and achieve success within the capitalist system, intensive competition under capitalism brings success to only a limited number of people.

At the societal level, I argue anxiety at the individual level collectively increases social risks, which are derived from industrialization such as nuclear technology and climate change (Beck 1992). Feeling anxiety by pressures to do well in capitalism, most individuals have no choice but to pursue maintaining and growing their income. This collectively contributes to economic growth, expanding material throughputs supported by advanced technologies. However, the excessive use of advanced technologies without proper assessment may cause resource exploitation and environmental degradation. Climate change is among the examples of the current global crisis as the excessive material throughputs triggered the increasing greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. Individuals make efforts to perform well in their work and survive in job markets. They eager to acquire skills and qualifications to improve their performance, contributing to their companies' productivity and economic return. However, this results in increased material throughputs and economic outputs, which in turn generate more carbon footprints than before.

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<sup>1</sup> Anxiety and mental distress have risen as one of the most challenging problems over the course of recent decades. It is recognized that poverty and economic inequality are associated with mental disorders, as represented for instance by the inclusion of a mental health target in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 3. Further, the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 brought sharp increases in mental health issues, especially among people experiencing a sudden drop in income, according to research in the UK (The National Centre for Social Research 2021)

Such a link between individuals and society, however, has not been clearly elaborated. The concept of alienation would be a key starting point to look into the situation where both individuals and society are risked by capitalism. It sheds light on the capitalist logic structured in the socio-economic system which separates the people from their social ties and self-recognition. Individualism, materialism, and consumerism are too excessive in capitalism to keep mutuality and solidarity in society and continuum between nature and human being, augmenting the existential anxiety of individuals. Losers in capitalism aggravate their anxiety whereas even winners may keep being anxious in the never-ending competition in capitalism. In any case, as long as people are kept engaged in capitalism, the pressure of competition leads to a vicious cycle that keeps inducing anxiety, which signifies the precarity of capitalism as it is triggered by the nature of capitalism - competitive pursuit of profits (Azmanova 2020). In the end, existential anxiety leads to growing social risks since growth will lead to increasing economic activities that expand material throughputs and affect the environmental and social situation. Facing such a situation, reconsideration of individuals' awareness and socio-economic priorities would be a way to escape from the vicious cycle, mitigating existential anxiety and risks in society. To that end, it is important for individuals to value themselves in a personalized way and shift away from the pursuit of growth in competition, which collectively lead to the adjustment of profit-oriented capitalist system.

With this background, the remainder of this paper builds an argument that existential anxiety augmented by the reflexive monitoring of self leads to the expansion of social and environmental risks. It first looks at the concept of alienation suggesting that our entire social and economic world is constructed on a logic that is counterproductive for ourselves as part of nature (McBride 2022). Alienation augments existential anxiety in the current precarity capitalism, which keeps urging competition among individuals to survive in capitalism and grow their capacities to earn more. It further extends the argument of individuals' existential anxiety to the societal level to consider the increased contemporary social risks. Lastly, it argues that reconsideration of socio-economic priorities would be a way to address the existential anxiety and risks in society. Individuals would need to shift away from a growth-oriented mindset towards being as part of the ecosystem and the world. This perspective would be compatible

with posthumanism's perspective at the societal level. The emerging discussion on post-capitalism and degrowth would give hints as to how we could shift from the competitive pursuit of profits in current capitalism.

### **Anxiety as alienation in capitalism**

Anxiety appeared in early Greek and Roman philosophy, and closer to the modern era, in Kant's philosophy. Anxiety was seen as a nervous illness in the 18th and 19th centuries, and it can be said scientists generally think that anxiety is a basic emotion that affects humans' ideas, emotions and behaviours. Reflecting on their debates, Bargo (2020) argues that anxiety is something eminently polymorphous as it is simultaneously an affect, an idea, a sign, or a symptom, and as occupying a spectrum of intensities that span sensation and emotions. For Neuman (2017), the discussion of anxiety should be open to all disciplines as anxiety impairs the freedom of decision, which can be applied to analyse broad domains of science beyond philosophy. From an economic point of view, for instance, poverty and economic inequality in capitalism are positively associated with anxiety in the form of mental disorders and depression. The privatization of public goods and services, as well as the excessive reliance on the market logic in financial services and the labour market, prevent people from meeting fundamental human needs, risking their mental health (James 2008).

Hence, anxiety is caused not only by biological conditions but also by structural sources of mental distress, such as the socio-economic situation in capitalism, while anxiety still tends to be more often regarded as a biological symptom.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have argued that the psychological conditions of individuals are worsened by capitalism,

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<sup>2</sup> Even though psychological states are influenced by individuals' socio-economic situations and also interpersonal relations, Marxists argue that biological explanations remain dominant in psychology. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) has combined forces with the pharmaceutical and health care industries in mainstreaming a biological explanation. The DSM is mostly used by mental health care professionals as a guideline for diagnosing mental disorders, although the diagnostic criteria of the DSM are largely influenced by the pharmaceutical industry, which is driven by sales of medicine as a foremost solution to correct mental disorders (Cohen 2016). Apparently, their motivation is primarily driven by the capitalist economic system. Neo-liberal capitalism has medicalized human feelings, through which the pharmaceutical and health care industries earn a profit (Fisher 2009). Such ideas from psychology mainstream the individualized way of reality, leaving out the social reality (Robert 2015). As such, the current practice of psychotherapy has rather stayed away from the socio-economic interpretation of anxiety and mental illness. Mental health problems, however, cannot be explained only through biological and medical conditions as this paper argues.

elaborating on mental distress in relation to alienation (Robert 2015 and 2018; Cohen 2016; Matthews 2019 and 2020). Moncrieff argues that mental health troubles are the unintended outcomes of the socio-economic conditions of late capitalism (Moncrieff 2022). Laingian also criticized the behaviourist model of psychology, which is based on stimulus-response conditioning and learning. Psychological states can be socially influenced by individuals exposed to the external world, as the Freudian left argued before the First World War (Matthews 2020). Foucauldian thinkers argue that mental health should be analysed as part of the neo-liberal model of capitalism (Schmitt 2017). As profit became a deep structural goal in the capitalist economy, the interests of profit-making firms have come to override most other social goals, including human well-being (Brown 1984). Building upon the arguments of Marx and Lev Vigotsky, Ratner demonstrates that socio-economic structures unleashed by capitalism cause psychological ruptures in individual lives as mental conditions are socially constructed historically and culturally (Ratner 1991).

One of the possible arguments to explain anxiety as an issue of socio-economic problems would be the concept of alienation. Since the era of Hegel and Marx, Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers discussed alienation as a structural problem that estranges individuals. Marx described alienation as the situation where individuals are estranged from their human nature and life-affirming possibilities of existence while living in a society based on social classes (Marx 1971). The economic relations of humans determine other relations in society: situated within a Marxist framing, the forces and relations of production constitute the status and social-class position of individuals (Cohen 2016). For Marx, alienation has been typically argued as a consequence of the relationship between the ruling classes (capitalists) and working classes (workers), which inspired the diagnosis of alienation and the corresponding forms of reification by thinkers later on, such as Fromm, Marcuse, Lukács and others.

While Marx's elaboration on alienation is rather limited during his lifetime and essentially absent from Marxism from late 1889, several thinkers expanded the concept of alienation. Later, Lukács says that an ethics based on rules and formalities in modernity leads to the alienation of individuals due to an ironic situation where rules were set to maintain a social life in the first place but ended up keeping people from

having a human relationship (Lukács 1911).<sup>3</sup> Marcuse sees alienation in the externalization of human existence in the labouring activity itself, instead of Marxists' critique of capitalist relations of production. For Marcuse, human emancipation could be only possible through the abolition of labour and the affirmation of libido and play in social relations (Marcuse 1955). As he has a solid reputation for addressing the problem of our dealings with nature, Marcuse saw the potential of human emancipation through the environmental movement as a revolutionary force against the capitalist system (Marcuse 1972; Favier 2022). Closer to the current age, Postone finds alienation, or what he calls the treadmill dynamic, in which individuals' abstract labour ceaselessly increases just to exist and produce the same amount of value (Postone 1993; Postone, Murthy and Kobayashi 2009).<sup>4</sup> For Postone, such a ceaseless increase in productivity, as well as labour, entails the accelerating destruction of the natural environment since the treadmill dynamic is associated with increased levels of biophysical throughput and resource exploitation. As argued in this paper later, individuals' limitless efforts for economic activities lead to the environmental crisis as part of social risks.

Non-Marxist thinkers consider the concept of alienation from a philosophical perspective. For Horkheimer and Adorno, in contemporary capitalism, even free time when people play outside work is absorbed into the mechanism where invasive social control and manipulation by the media occurs (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944; Musto 2010). From another perspective, while Marx highlights objective alienation, Hannah Arendt saw subjective alienation or world alienation. Arendt referred to world alienation as the socio-economic system in the modern age, as unprecedented efficient production and consumption deprive society of an intersubjectively constituted world of experiences and actions (Arendt 1958). She argued that the human subject loses the world if they lose their capacity for joint, creative political action (Arendt 1958). Similarly, Heidegger argued the rapid technological revolution would lead to alienation or

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<sup>3</sup> Lukács described reification as the phenomenon where human activities are confronted by labour activity as something objective and independent (Lukács 1923).

<sup>4</sup> Postone's argument implies that abstract labor is the source of alienation. Abstract labor is a homogenous substance specifically in capitalism as it is the function of concrete labor that transforms material in a determined fashion (Postone 1993). The productivity increase in capitalist's mode of production decreases the value of individual commodities since the average necessary time to produce them decreases.

uprootedness of humans because the world becomes an object that was to be away from humans through the exploitation by humans for development (Tijmes 1998). As such, the historical-social factors of alienation are absent from the arguments of non-Marxist thinkers. This is the case with American sociology which sees alienation as a phenomenon of individual maladjustment to social norms (Musto 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Further, psychoanalysis also looked into the concept of alienation. In particular, Fromm's development of the concept of alienation has many implications for the increasing anxiety in capitalism. While Marx's concept of alienation was primarily concerned with working classes in industrial production, Fromm extended the concept of alienation to broader social classes such as civil servants, priests, and others (Fromm 1961). According to Fromm, although all individuals originally possess their nature as human beings, their nature is largely dependent on a social context (Matthews 2019). The surrounding environment of individuals determines their psychological states as part of their human nature. Fromm argues that capitalism ruins personal and social relations, eliminating norms of mutuality and solidarity from humans (Fromm 1941). Instead of reciprocal human relationships, being instrumental in the market has become the priority to survive in the capitalist economy. In this way, for Fromm, alienation is prevalent in a capitalist society, causing mental and social problems. Further, Freudian political psychology sees anxiety in the context of alienation. Neumann (2017) analyses alienation as a multidimensional phenomenon including economic, political, social, and psychological aspects. The growth of modern industrial society leads to the alienation of the ego, which produces anxiety. When individuals are threatened by a loss of status in capitalism, their anxiety is further intensified even up to the point where they are inclined to the rejection of the political system.

In short, Marx found the relations of production in capitalism as what deprives humans of their intrinsic nature. Although he meant to apply this perspective to investigate historical social factors that shape society, his arguments on alienation gave

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<sup>5</sup> From a sociological perspective, in the same era as Marx, broadly speaking, sociologists such as Durkheim, Simmel and Weber argued the growing impersonality in social institutions where individuals are embedded in part of the production processes, and especially for Durkheim this brings the norms guaranteeing social cohesion into crisis (Musto 2010).

large implications to the psychological influence of capitalism at the individual level. While the sharp criticisms of the capitalist mode of production are lost in the application of the concept of alienation in some thinkers after Marx, individuals' suffering due to capitalism has been increasingly captured.

As discussed earlier, a handful of current thinkers share a perspective that capitalism has caused growing anxiety and mental illness, as the social and economic relations of individuals influence one's psychological state. Individualism, a prevalent moral characteristic of neo-liberal capitalism, has weakened social ties with communities, and consumerism and materialistic values have filled this void. Humans have been increasingly construed as material objects but not embodied as social and historical agents (Robert 2018). In capitalism, the priorities and practices of mental health are significantly shaped by capitalistic goals (Robert 2015; Cohen 2016). In capitalist social relations, all things, including the intrinsic value of humans, are transformed into things based on the value that can be consumed. In the workplace, human workers become ancillary to industrial products and processes such as machines. Such alienation from the self undermines notions of freedom and the responsibilities of individuals. As such, the psychological conditions of individuals are interrelated with capitalism (Fisher 2009; Taylor 2013).

### **Existential Anxiety in Precarity Capitalism.**

Such a form of alienation can be captured as increasing existential anxiety. I argue that alienation typically occurs because of the augmented reflexivity in late modernity since around 1980, which causes existential anxiety in individuals. Such existential anxiety is reinforced in precarity capitalism which drives individuals across social classes into competition based on the growth-oriented mindset that is driven by fear. Despite the fact that social structures influence psychological states, this has not received enough scholarly attention.

Modernization up to now gives a clue to look at the process of how existential anxiety is augmented. Historically, according to Max Weber, modernization and



rationalization were originally driven by religious anxiety.<sup>6</sup> In early modern society, individuals had a general anxiety about the lack of knowledge about their future salvation. To palliate the religious anxiety over salvation, individuals tended to be absorbed in unremitting work, which eventually helped the capitalist economy to take off (Kateb 1997). What is more, asceticism, which had originated from religious anxiety, vastly extended rationalism to the extent that humans have the logic of capital as the core of their life. While religious traditions faded away as modernization advanced, religious anxiety turned to existential anxiety. Here, existential anxiety, or ontological insecurity, is a sense of instability in regard to one's economic and social life and experience in a rapidly changing late-modern environment (Giddens 1991; Nakamura 2014).

As Max Weber argues, the modernization process has mainstreamed rationalization in the socio-economic structure (Whimster and Lash 1987). Formal and bureaucratic procedures replaced traditions, or pre-modern beliefs and behaviours, with intellectual and rational rules to develop modern societies. This coincided with industrialization, where productivity is extended through the enhanced efficiency of production and technologies. While for Marx this modernization process leads to alienation in the capitalist economy, Weber and subsequent sociologists captured individualization as a phenomenon that increasingly emerged in capitalism. The separation of individuals from communities and social relationships is often emphasized in a sociological discussion about contemporary society (Riesman 1961; Putnam 2000; Beck 2002). Every aspect of life—human relationships and others—was restructured to pursue rationalization in economic production. While in the pre-modern era traditions

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that anxiety among Calvinists is a source of the spirit of capitalism (Weber 1958). Although profit-seeking had been traditionally seen as greed, Protestantism rather transformed the pursuit of profit into an ethos that values economic success. Such a new ethos built the foundation to expand the economy or capitalism, as the Protestant ethic does not associate profit as morally suspect, unlike conventional Christianity. Calvinists' asceticism and predetermination doctrines played a key role in setting a favourable environment for capitalism to set out and scale up. For the Calvinists and their emphasis on asceticism, in a nutshell, a hard-working and non-materialistic life, which eliminated laziness, was regarded as a key to salvation. At that time, people believed that God had already decided who would experience salvation, according to the predetermination doctrine, and economic success is a clue to this predetermined success.

and routines kept giving reasons for individual behavior, the lack of these in modern life expanded existential anxiety among individuals.

Existential anxiety is also often perceived when individuals cannot sense their inclusion or integration within society—a situation where individuals cannot associate their identity as meaningful agents belonging to society. Therefore, self-recognition of one's identity as an agent in society is important to maintain mental health. If we apply Marxist terminology, a meaningful member of society ensures life-affirming possibilities of existence without being estranged from society. To seek self-recognition, individuals monitor and evaluate their actions to reflect on the contexts and outcomes of those actions, which feed into the consideration of their next actions. This is what Anthony Giddens calls reflexive monitoring of actions. At the individual level, reflexive monitoring of actions has been augmented in late modernity, compared with pre-modern societies, due to the separation from the traditions and communities, or individualization, as argued above.

However, a vicious cycle is embedded in capitalist society as consumerism and materialism are likely to cause lower self-esteem in the end (James 2008). The self-recognition of identity has been increasingly limited to people who are economically stable in modern capitalism. Alain Touraine, a French sociologist, argues that economy, politics, and society were still interrelated where policies intervened to support people's welfare in reconciliation with the expanding logic of capitalism before the late twentieth century (Touraine 2000). Individuals were connected with society through relatively favourable policies and public spending that ensured opportunities for education, cultural experiences, and social connections. However, since the late twentieth century, the extended neo-liberal logic of capitalism amidst globalization has increasingly destabilized such interrelations between the economy, policies, and society. Decreased public spending and neo-liberal policies led to increased economic inequality, social insecurity, and worsened working conditions. The neo-liberal economic system replaced social cohesion and cultural experiences with consumerism and materialism. According to Jock Young, increasing economic inequality and excessive consumerism have generated frustration among individuals, triggering loneliness and anxiety among individuals detached from society (Young 1999; 2007). Working-class and economically

poor people are excluded from the materialistic lifestyle due to this expanded inequality. Nevertheless, extensive social media and communication tools have made the materialistic lifestyle of others visible and triggered the reflexive self-monitoring of actions and lifestyles in comparison with them. Economically marginalized people easily compare their lifestyles with economic elites and feel disappointed at the gap between them. Perceptions of being deprived of a materialistic lifestyle lead them to make up for the lack of social approval through socially deviant behaviour—in the worst cases through drug use and violence.

As such, it has become challenging for many individuals to retain self-recognition in late modernity amidst the exclusion from society. Giddens argues that the reflexive awareness of individuals was extended to the level that one builds self-identity in the reflexive process to adjust the identity in accordance with societal changes (Giddens 1991). However, self-identity built through reflexive self-monitoring does not give a sense of stable identity, as society evolves and changes.

Further, precarity capitalism in the current century augments fear of economic insecurity and pressures of competition among individuals. Azmanova describes capitalism as “the competitive production of profit” (Azmanova 2020, p.41). Precarity capitalism is the latest articulation of the modalities of capitalism up to now since the 21st century, following neoliberal capitalism in the late twentieth century. Precarity capitalism is characterized by fear-based motivation to engage in the system while it is also featured with the generalization of precarity across social classes and active redistribution of resources to powerful economic actors from weak economic ones. The competitive production of profit constitutes social relations in late modernity in a way that individuals are forced to compete in a market to maintain their jobs and perform well to gain. As public support is given to only a limited fraction of groups in precarity capitalism, individuals are forced to take charge of their own life. The individuals must fearfully engage in competition to earn their living. Therefore, individuals need to continuously develop their capacities and skills in line with the needs of the market so that they can retain job security in a meritocratic society that keeps evolving. In sociology, meritocracy is a social system where one’s success relies on individual capacities, skills, and efforts. The capacities and skills are inevitably attached to self-

identity in the heightened reflexivity of meritocracy in late modernity. Driven by fear, individuals have few choices but to pursue self-growth in line with market needs for the sake of keeping their earnings, regardless of their true desire.

This situation is in contrast to Marx's view of labour as the essence of individuals. Individuals should be freely expressive both physically and intellectually, in interaction with nature and others (Matthew 2020). In Hegel's social philosophy, reflexive self-monitoring should be a process for individuals to reach self-creativity and self-discovery, rather than a process to feel estranged from their human nature (Debnath 2020). However, existential anxiety is augmented in a negative way since as described above, individuals are embedded into the vicious cycle of the capitalist economy due to their heightened reflexive monitoring of action. Due to the reflexivity in late modernity that augments existential anxiety, individuals are increasingly relentlessly developing their capacities and skills to do well in the capitalist system. However, in precarity capitalism, only limited groups are likely to win, and most individuals cannot escape from the vicious cycle, which supports limitless competition. This eventually creates a situation where technologies are overdeveloped due to competition while individuals' lives do not improve in general.

All in all, existential anxiety has been among the driving forces for the capitalist economy to grow, but as competition is the foundation of the capitalist system, it makes winners and losers. This creates a situation where individuals reflexively and fearfully monitor their capacity and self-identity so as not to become a loser but to be a winner in the capitalist system. However, endless reflexive self-monitoring tends to lead people to experience relative deprivation from others in terms of abilities, possessions, well-being, and other aspects. Consumerism-oriented thinking urges people to invest in goods and services that constitute their identity in the capitalist system. This triggers existential anxiety in individuals. As argued earlier, individuals have nowadays been able to be exposed to the comparison of their lifestyle with others due to advanced communication tools, which keeps stirring an appetite for material desires, but such an appetite cannot be often fulfilled, Advertising featuring unrealistic role models and impossible standards with respect to both physical and psychological well-being may induce internal self-surveillance in people and lead them to see themselves as imperfect (Robert 2015). In

this context, Mark Fisher (2012) argues that depression is the shadow of entrepreneurial cultures, as failure in a capitalist system provokes anxiety.

### **Society Risked through Existential Anxiety**

Earlier I borrowed Giddens' term of the monitoring of actions and reflexivity to capture the existential anxiety in precarity capitalism. I further argue that existential anxiety is not only a problem of individuals' psychological states but also it is a trigger of contemporary social risks. As per Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens 1984), the social system is constituted through the social relations of structure and agents, including individuals, who collectively shape society. Further, social practices and institutions are continuously reviewed and adjusted in consideration of the incoming information about those practices and institutions, thereby constitutively altering their character (Giddens 1990). These adjustments are driven through individuals' heightened reflexive monitoring so as they felt relentlessly urged to shape their society in the best way for them.

The self-growth mindset driven by fear prevails at the individual level in late modernity as one form of the alienated figure in precarity capitalism. I argue that this mindset with capitalism's excessive rationalization collectively constitutes contemporary risks in society. As argued earlier, existential anxiety in reflexive meritocracy has triggered limitless passion, or fear, to develop modern and improved technologies. Extended competition in labour markets urges individuals to build their capacities, skills, and experiences to succeed in earning a living and obtaining desired jobs. Making achievements is important for individuals to grow their careers. As individuals' achievements in the capitalist economy are largely associated with their contribution to the improvement of production and the expansion of profit, individual achievements collectively lead to the advancement of the capitalist economy and technologies at the societal level. Hence, the existential anxiety of individuals in capital markets is a driving force to advance the capitalist economic system, thereby contributing to mainstreaming the rationalization and efficiency of the socio-economic system.

Institutions are reflexively reviewed and reformed for the sake of more efficient and foreseeable social development. Economic growth is the most important thing in a

capitalist society, and everything is rearranged for employing resources towards growth. Rationalism lies behind the alienated society and individuals in the modern age. Individuals relentlessly pursue rational thinking and behaviours for their self-growth and success in a capitalist society, as being instrumental in the market is essential for these objectives. Similarly, rationalism is believed to improve society by producing innovative technologies.

However, as society is excessively rationally arranged, contemporary social risks are rather augmented. The motives limitlessly pushing rationalism are no longer rational but irrational and inhuman (Kateb 1997). Perfect estimation of the evolution of technologies and social environment is hardly attainable in late modernity; rather, uncertainty is prevalent. Nevertheless, it is as if rationalism were the end in itself rather than the means to attain objectives. It is such irrationality that establishes and keeps modern technology in motion. Such irrationality tends to be invisible because it has the basis of fear. Martin Heidegger associated excessive technological development with madness. A blind belief in technology may end up inducing destruction, as technology brings not only efficient production and lifestyles but also risks to society (Heidegger 1977). As Arendt and Heidegger argue, economic and technological advancement has stemmed not from resourceful practicality but from the excessive and irrational passion for growth. As a result, both individuals and society are alienated by a limitless growth-oriented mindset that originally derives from existential anxiety.

Ulrich Beck's arguments of the risk society capture such a society exploited by exceedingly-developed technologies that are beyond human control, direction, and knowledge. Although people tend to think it is possible to control social and economic development through the use of advanced technologies and rationality, it is inevitable that an industrialized society generates unintended side effects and risks to society, as history has proved (Beck 1992). Nuclear power plant accidents are among the examples where technologies were not entirely controlled by human rationality.

Environmental problems and climate change which are caused by excessive resource use and limitless industrial development are also issues that humans are facing as such a risk. Economic growth since the industrial revolution has been

accompanied by the extensive use of energy and other natural resources, intensifying greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Climate change is a contemporary risk in society, and scientific understanding has been drawn into political and social debates about policy formulation (Bulkeley 2001). The scientific understanding can be politicized in a reflexive process to consider the solutions, which could bring unintended risks and consequences to society. Brulle and Dunlap (2015) warn that although the issue of climate change is deeply embedded in social structure, cultural values, ideologies, and social practices, neo-liberal economic policies have been a near-hegemonic belief when considering solutions to climate change. Similarly, John Urry (2011) is also sceptical about the dominance of neo-liberal economic solutions to climate change. Even though excessive capitalist logic may bring instability to society as well as individuals' ontological security, as argued above, capitalist logic does not seem to stop. As Mark Fisher says "there is no alternative" to capitalism (Fisher 2009).

### **Altering the Capitalist System**

As discussed earlier, anxiety was among the major forces that drove capitalism: religious anxiety provided the momentum for capitalism to take off and existential anxiety keeps capitalism flying. Anxiety among individuals has collectively encumbered society with modern risks, and altering awareness at the individual level would be necessary to address the challenges associated with excessive capitalism, including both individuals' mental risks and larger societal, economic, and environmental risks. Changes in individuals' awareness would be an enabling factor to eventually shift the priorities of the socio-economy. If we again take an example of environmental problems, it would be necessary to underscore the debates on Anthropocene that declared humanity has profoundly impacted planetary conditions: climate change is not just something we are facing as a change of nature but changes that humans triggered in the environment (Chakrabarty 2009). Nature is no longer separated from the political discussion as the environment is the world into which we are embedded but also which we impact through our activities. Similarly, the society surrounding us should be considered not as something humans can control but as the world which we are experiencing and cannot fully control since it is a continuum of humans and non-human matters.

### *Individuals' awareness*

To think about individuals' awareness, going back to the arguments of Erich Fromm gives some hints. Fromm says that the revitalization of human nature, or self-realization, is essential for emancipation from alienation. His understanding of human nature reconciles those of Marx and Freud. While Fromm rejects Freud's idea of human instinct theory based on libido, he accepts the view that society is constituted by the unconscious repression of individuals (Fromm 1962). Shifting away from a biological and sexuality-based understanding of human nature, Fromm views cultural and personal relations as unconsciously constituting society. Although this view is closer to Marx, Fromm does not fully support Marx's notion that the economic relations of society builds the basis for the societal superstructure, such as ideology, policies, cultures, and philosophies. Rather, Fromm views the human condition as relatedness to the external world, the sense of belongingness to the world, and the sense of identity in the world, while Marx argues that the true nature of humans can be realized only in relation to social, economic, and historical orders. Rather than individualism, a sense of belongingness in social communities influences mental conditions positively, such as providing a sense of happiness (Hari 2019).

Further, Fromm contrasts two fundamental modes of existence: humans' being mode and having mode (Fromm 1957). The being mode of existence is the attitudes of individuals in relation to the world as a whole (Robert 2018). The being mode is concerned with the properties and abilities of humans or linked with the qualities of human life. In the having mode of existence, material possessions are the primary driver of individuals. The having mode is associated with the consumption and acquisition of material values in the market. Capitalism creates humans in the having mode of existence, mainstreaming individualistic and materialistic values into the human mind instead of offering connectivity to the world. Similar to Fromm, Heidegger classifies the types of human thinking into two very different modes: calculative and meditative thinking (Heidegger 1966). While calculative thinking looks at a relatively immediate functional utility, meditative thinking focuses on the meaning behind actions and decisions instead of utility. On the one side, calculative thinking is closely associated with the having mode of existence, as functional utility leads to the production and



acquisition of material values. On the other side, meditative thinking looks at the long-term properties and qualities of life rather than short-term material satisfaction. Claiming that the world is dominated by the former mode of thinking, Heidegger encourages people not to rely on calculative thinking but rather calls on us to engage in meditative thinking. Due to the extended reflexive monitoring of actions, individuals tend to end up in a loop of calculative thinking in capitalism to pursue a materialistic lifestyle. And society, as a collective of this mode of thinking, would plunge into the technologies that assure a more materialistic alignment with the logic of capitalism without contemplating the global risks.

Capitalist society leads to excessive individualism and materialism, weakening the norms of mutuality and solidarity in the relationships between humans, society, and the world surrounding humans such as nature (Fromm 1941). Individuals are imperatively searching for a good life, and in a capitalist society, the good life depends on their equipment with resources (Rosa 2017). The logic of competition installs the fear of losing out, and if they do not increase and improve the resources they have compared with others, they tend to fail in gaining self-affirmation. Such a social character of capitalism keeps people reflexively and anxiously monitoring their actions and material possessions in comparison with others, preventing them from focusing on what they are. Our desire is so tied to the acquisition of economic and cultural, social, symbolic, and bodily capital (Bourdieu 1984)

In the homelessness of humanity in the modern age, nature is regarded merely as an energy source for modern technical and industrial exploitation (Heidegger 1946; Tijmes 1998).<sup>7</sup> Heidegger already saw the forthcoming ecological crisis to be caused by the exploitation of nature through industrial development and shared the concern that humans were not ready for the change of situation through the technical development driven by calculative thinking. As argued in this paper, such materialism, which partly

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger's concept of homelessness in modern man describes the world as an object of calculative thinking, sourcing the concept from Marx's alienation in capitalism (Heidegger 1946). According to Heidegger, Marx argued that human nature should be harmonized with the totality of natural material and economic needs.

derives from existential anxiety, urges individuals to not be content with their lifestyles and possessions.

Hence, shifting the focus of life is necessary. Similar to Fromm and Heidegger, Rosa (2017) argues the good life is not a matter of material possessions and capabilities but rather a particular way of our being relating to the world such as self, people, places, ideas, and nature. He brings a concept of resonance as a dual movement of being touched and affecting others. Resonant relationships in friendship, romantic relationships, and even democratic citizenship are essential in ensuring self-efficacy in social relationships. Resonance is also important for the material level. Individuals establish a resonant relationship with certain objects such as artifacts, arts, and tools and they see the values in their own way. The personalized value and attachment are tied to the material where its economic exchange value is ignored. These resonances are not something consumed, rather they are historically and culturally constructed and rooted in everyone.

#### *Altering the way of relating to the world*

The way of relating to the world in resonant relationships has the potential to collectively alter the priority of society. As discussed earlier, as socio-economic risks in late modernity derive from the existential anxiety of individuals, among other factors, the shift from the having mode to the being mode is also important for sustaining society and for the prevention of contemporary global risks.<sup>8</sup>

I earlier discussed climate change as an increasing global risk. If we seriously consider the resonant relationship between nature and human beings, our way of relating to nature can be different. The post-humanism and post-anthropocentric approach stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of being part of an ecosystem, which affects the human condition (Ferrando 2016). Although human-centric economic development has damaged the environment since the industrial

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<sup>8</sup> Still, seeking the solution based on the conventional capitalist way of thinking exists. Some thinkers in accelerationism and ecomodernism argue that rapid technological revolution may address the crises made by capitalism, but it would be exceedingly techno-optimistic to consider relying on the technologies that have not been in the market. Geoengineering against ecological crisis would be an example of such discussion (Chaudhary 2022).

revolution, or Anthropocene, increasing literature looks to more ethical and moral humans in post-humanism that underscores establishing a continuum between posthuman bodies and non-human matter as well as between subjectivity and ecology (Braidotti 2006 and 2013). For post-humanism, humans are an intrinsic part of the physical world, and all matter regardless of the difference between humans and non-humans should be equally treated without considering the environment as the context for humans. As the environmental and climate crisis is the outcome of human and political choices, mitigating and preventing the further crisis is a matter of making and implementing new political decisions guided by ethical, moral, and ontological principles aligned with the planetary real (Pereira 2021). There have been arguments on the alternative economic system such as post-capitalism and de-growth paradigm, which may give implications for altering the priorities of capitalist systems.

From the post-capitalism perspective, Erik Olin Wright underscores an alternative to capitalism that builds more democratic, participatory, and egalitarian economic relations to displace neo-liberal capitalism from its dominant role (Wright 2019). To do so, what Thomas Piketty advocates as participatory socialism is the gradual shift to the increased worker representation on the board members of corporations and a basic income contributed through wealth taxation (Piketty 2019). In earlier times, Postone (1993) also raised a relevant argument that technological advancement would eventually delink the competitive pursuit of profit from society. The exploitation of labour could be displaced in the long run due to the advanced technology, which makes human labour unnecessary and makes capitalism obsolete. For Postone, such a displacement of capitalism does not naturally occur out of the growth of capitalism, but a political push that negates the link between historical time and abstract time (Postone, Murthy and Kobayashi 2009). Huber argues that standard models of class struggle should actively engage in correcting the ecological crisis in capitalism because workers are at the centre of economic production (Huber 2020). As such, the competitive pursuit of profit in capitalism can be replaced with a more deliberative and democratic social system, which would help exit the capitalist mode of production and mitigate social harm and environmental destruction (Azmanova 2021). The deliberate mode of running a

socio-economy would replace our way of relating to the world, shifting from the competitive pursuit of profits to the priorities people want.

Moreover, the recent development of Marxists' discussion proposes a paradigm of economic de-growth as an alternative to a growth-oriented capitalist economy. The paradigm argues that since the growing material throughput does not meet the global goals of abatement in greenhouse gas emissions, a transformational shift from the logic of growth is necessary to guide the decrease of the material throughput through policies and measures (Busk 2022). In the face of a planetary ecological crisis, the de-growth paradigm suggests a voluntary reduction of the size of the economic system since it is impossible to keep reconciling economic growth and environmental sustainability (Foster 2011). According to Marxian de-growthers, economic de-growth will help manage the socio-economy in a cooperative way with more evenly distributed decision-making and power relationships, dismantling the current growth-oriented models of business ownership and management under capitalism and thereby transforming divisions between workers and capitalists (Büchs and Koch 2019).

Importantly, de-growth is understood as an equitable downscaling of production that not only enhances ecological conditions but also improves human well-being. The de-growth perspective is aligned with community psychology, which aims to promote individual quality of life and social well-being through an ecological and justice-oriented perspective (Natale et al. 2016). Reducing inequality is a prerequisite for degrowth and sustainable development with an aggregate decrease in material throughput (Hickel 2020). De-growth could be a potential way to mitigate existential anxiety in capitalism, prioritizing ecological and human well-being over economic and material satisfaction at the individual and social levels. Decreasing material throughput requires a change beyond the level of actions of individuals and corporations: it necessitates the shift of the structural logic of accumulation in the capitalist system (Busk 2022). To that end, mainstreaming the being mode of existence based on meditative thinking at the societal level would be necessary to sweep away the having mode of existence based on calculative thinking. Still, the de-growth paradigm is not actionable enough to concretize the steps to make it happen. De-growth is still like a slogan for a critical intervention against the ideological hegemony of capitalist growth as an unquestioned good

(Chaudhary 2022). It needs translation into actionable programs and plans to implement the measures to realize the paradigm.

## **Conclusions**

The concept of alienation criticizes the logic of capital that structures capitalist society. Many scholars criticized the alienation of individuals that affects their psychological states. The capitalist system makes people reflexively monitor themselves to earn a living and survive in the market. This increasingly leads individuals to perceive existential anxiety as one form of alienation in growth-oriented capitalism. Reflexive self-monitoring in modern capitalism has embedded individuals within a meritocracy, where the qualifications and material values that people possess are supremely important for their survival in a competitive economy, building their anxiety into the socio-economic structure. Growth is key to doing well in this system, and it collectively leads to the advancement of the economy and technologies in society. However, excessive advancement leads to risks: unintended negative outcomes such as social and environmental risks. Capitalism is the source of the current climate catastrophe (McBride 2022) since the logic of capitalism, or the competitive pursuit of profit keeps urging humans to develop their capacities and skills for the purpose of reaching the maximum but limitless material throughputs, representing a precarity of the current capitalism. The risks of climate change and even broader socio-economic and environmental issues could not be separated from the increasing existential anxiety as a source of social risks.

Altering our priorities, therefore, would be a necessary corrective to palliate alienation at the individual and social levels, thereby transforming what people value in their lives. At the individual level, shifting away from the growth-oriented mindset, our way of relating to the world would need to be reconsidered so that we value ourselves, our surroundings, and nature in a personalized way rather than based on the pursuit of growth and profit. Such a shift at the collective level would lead to sweeping away the capitalist system that is deeply embedded in current society. The posthumanism paradigm gives a hint at this as it stresses that humans are only part of an ecosystem. Post-capitalism argues that a more deliberative and democratic social system is

important to raise the momentum to shift away from the competitive pursuit of profit. In addition, the de-growth paradigm is one such potential approach to let humans downscale growth-oriented activities and reduce the material throughputs in the world. These perspectives would be among the ways to transform people's calculative thinking into meditative thinking, leading them to improve their well-being and mitigate existential anxiety in late modernity. To do that, concrete steps forward would need to be further elaborated so that the logic of society stops augmenting existential anxiety, which in turn would mitigate the growing social risks.

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