

## Dissertation Summary – “Made Into Strangers: A Marxist Account of Social Alienation”

In my dissertation I offer a novel account of *social alienation*, rooted in a reading of Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon. Social alienation is a deficient mode of relationship in which people systematically regard one another as “strangers” in a particular sense. That is, they regard one another either indifferently or as mere tools, rather than as having intrinsic value. In modern societies, I argue, we view most others as “strangers” in this way. On a daily commute, one sees many people who contribute to the fulfillment of one’s needs—transit workers, builders, grocery workers. But commonly, one doesn’t value these strangers as in themselves important to one’s life—that is, beyond what one gets from them, or for the unwanted moral duties they impose. In other cases, this indifference shades into hostility: for example, the long-time working-class resident in a neighborhood has to interact with developers and gentrifiers who are undermining their ability to live in their home.

This way of regarding others prevails despite the fact that we are deeply socially intertwined in contemporary societies—we are utterly dependent on those we don’t know for the fulfillment of both basic and complex needs. When we relate to people as strangers, however, we experience those social bonds as constraining, a form of unfreedom. Moreover, on my account, this deficient mode of relationship is not just bad individual behavior. Rather, we are *made* into strangers from one another—this mode is actually baked into our patterns of social interaction. One example (from Marx): competitive market arrangements pit us against one another in pursuit of livelihood and desirable work. Another (from Fanon): racist social conditioning trains us to unconsciously treat certain people as *worthy* of being instrumentalized.

In Chapter 1, I present my novel account of social alienation. I argue that it is the systematic absence of what I call “relational freedom,” an ideal of freedom within interdependence inspired by the socialist and feminist traditions. In Chapter 2, I develop an interpretation of Marx’s early texts on alienation, arguing for a *social-political* reading of the concept, based on Marx’s ideal of a democratic form of collective life. In Chapter 3, I reconstruct Fanon’s account of a particular form of alienation—racial alienation—and argue that it is a necessary innovation if Marx’s concept is to have any use in a colonized world. I argue that his account illuminates the ways in which racism systematically makes us treat human beings as mere tools. In Chapter 4, I give an account of *solidarity* as the mutual regard that overcomes alienation. Drawing on philosophers from 20th century liberation movements like Huey Newton and Selma James, I argue that the instability of solidarity is why liberation movements attempt to create dependencies between movements, rather than independence from one another. (A longer chapter summary can be found on the following page).

In the dissertation, I make both historical and contemporary contributions. I offer a novel reconstruction of the concept of alienation fit for contemporary use, and I give new readings of Marx and Fanon on alienation. My contemporary reconstruction is significant because it explains the specifically *political* dimensions of an ill that is deeply *felt*, but not much discussed in recent political philosophy. I salvage the concept as resource for understanding how forms of structural domination and antagonism like race and class operate in our own context. Recent literature—most notably, Rahel Jaeggi’s masterful *Alienation*—has focused on individual alienation from oneself. But my work fills a gap by focusing on pathologies *in relation to others*. Within historical scholarship, my project is significant because there is surprisingly little agreement on the meaning of “alienation,” despite its influence. Moreover, it is often treated as a series of metaphors or mere Hegelian jargon. I fill this gap in the Marx and Fanon literatures by offering a systematic and approachable reading of the concept.

## Expanded Chapter Summary

In Chapter 1 of the dissertation, I systematically present the ideal of freedom, which I call relational freedom, that alienation is the absence of. I argue that this form of unfreedom and its opposite are familiar to us from intimate personal relationships. I then argue that it is an ideal of socialist and feminist politics that one extends the sphere in which one is relationally free to all social relations of dependence. I argue that the ideal is superior to republican conceptions of freedom for critiquing the conditions of contemporary labor (as Elizabeth Anderson has recently argued), while sharing their concern for equal social dignity.

In Chapter 2, I continue my goal of reconstructing a Marxist concept of alienation by giving a textual exegesis of Marx's early texts where he most explicitly discusses alienation. Here, my main contribution is to distinguish Marx's view from those interpretations on which the concept of alienation is merely what picks out whatever blocks human needs from being fulfilled. Rather, on my *social-political* reading of the concept, alienation picks out the deficient character of social relations I outlined above. I argue that Marx's concept of *species-being* [*Gattungswesen*] is not an account of individual human flourishing, but rather an ideal of a democratic form of collective life.

In Chapter 3, I reconstruct Fanon's account of a particular form of alienation—racial alienation—and argue that it is a necessary innovation if Marx's concept is to have any use in a colonized world. I argue that for Fanon, racism subsists not just on racist ideas in people's heads, but depends causally and constitutively on forms of structural domination and antagonism arising from colonialism. Fanon, I argue, thinks that racism makes all of us treat one another as mere tools—racially dominant and racially subjugated alike. I argue that the highest ideal of freedom for Fanon does not consist in subjugated people's merely becoming independent from their dominators, but in eventually abolishing the entire categories that divided them, and in establishing mutual regard. Fanon's account is also important, I argue, for the way it sheds light on how a structural and materialist analysis of oppression can incorporate cultural and ideological factors while remaining structural and materialist.

In Chapter 4, I give an account of the mutual regard involved in *overcoming* alienation—the ideal of solidarity. Solidarity is an attitude extended to those others with whom it is *possible* to create non-alienated social relations. However, solidarity is unstable because it is based on the merely possible. Drawing on theorists from 20<sup>th</sup> century liberation movements like Huey Newton and Selma James, I argue that the instability of solidarity is why liberation movements attempt to create dependencies between movements, rather than aiming for complete independence from one another.