

Dissertation Abstract – “Made Into Strangers: An Account of Social Alienation”

In my dissertation I offer a new and systematic 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 worthy of caring about for their own sake. 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.

However, according to the account of social alienation I develop, this deficient mode of relationship is not just bad individual behavior. Rather, we are *made* into strangers from one another by certain social forces—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. The significance of this concept of social alienation, I argue, is that certain social conditions are robbing us of an important social good of community: community in which people experience others caring for them as valuable for their own sake, and to be able to see themselves as directly contributing to the lives of others. Moreover, according to a Marxist intuition, when we relate to people as strangers, we experience those social bonds as constraining, a form of unfreedom.

In Chapter 1, I develop an interpretation of Marx’s early texts on alienation, arguing for a *social-relational* reading of the concept, based on Marx’s ideal of a democratic form of collective life. In Chapter 2, I defend a set of claims about alienation that Marx himself does not elaborate on or provide full arguments for. I argue that social alienation should be understood as the systematic absence of what I call “relational freedom,” an ideal of freedom within interdependence inspired by the socialist and feminist traditions. 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 racist and colonized world. I argue that his account illuminates the ways in which racism systematically makes us treat human beings as mere tools.

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 a specifically *political* dimension of the ills of social antagonism and interpersonal isolation. These ills are deeply felt by many people, but not much discussed in recent political philosophy. I also 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.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter 1, “Alienation in Marx’s Early Writings,” I offer an original interpretation of the concept of alienation in Marx’s early writings. Because of the inherent difficulties of these texts, the interpretation of the concept of alienation in them has long been uncertain. I argue that most interpreters have followed one general strategy, which I call “the human flourishing approach” to reading Marx on alienation. This approach involves taking “alienation” to be Marx’s general term for the failure of human flourishing. I argue against this approach that alienation is a narrower, specific concept that picks out a normative defect in the character of social relationships. Alienation is, as I have already previewed, the absence of a particular social-relational good, in fact, a kind of freedom within social dependence. On my interpretation, Marx does draw heavily on the political thought of Hegel (and Rousseau and Kant), but his ideas also depend less on Hegelian logic and metaphysics than has sometimes been thought. I therefore distinguish my interpretation from Hegelian readings who think that it is a special, ontological concept of *labor* that is the key to understanding alienation. But I also distinguish my interpretation from Aristotelian readings at the other extreme, who treat Marx’s concept of alienation as a grab-bag of disunified concerns and metaphors. Ultimately, I argue that what distinguishes Marx’s account of freedom, and therefore of alienation, from those of his predecessors, is that he thinks full social freedom requires that individuals fulfill a particular kind of relationship with their concrete social fellows—a radically transformative requirement.

In Chapter 2, “Social Alienation as Relational Unfreedom,” I defend a version of Marx’s conception of alienation independently of his texts. Most importantly, I offer an argument to back up a Marxist intuition that in Marx goes mostly unargued for: the intuition that regarding our social fellows and social institutions either indifferently or as mere tools is a form of unfreedom. The goal of the chapter is therefore to articulate, much more systematically and in much greater detail than Marx does, the conception of freedom that social alienation is the absence of. I argue that this kind of freedom, which I call “relational freedom,” is a way of being unconstrained *within* social ties, and that it is familiar to us from intimate personal relationships and relationships of communal solidarity. I then argue that it is an ideal of socialist and feminist politics that one extends the sphere in which one is relationally free as far as possible throughout society, beyond just one’s intimate associates. Overcoming social alienation, then, is the same thing as extending relational freedom as far as possible, which requires changing social structures. It is here that I pose my challenge to views, like neo-republican ones, which hold independence to be the only genuine kind of freedom.

In Chapter 3, “Fanon on Racial Alienation from Oneself and Others,” I give an original interpretation of Fanon’s account of alienation. I argue that Fanon is not only concerned, as commentators have tended to emphasize, with a form of *individual* racial alienation, or alienation from oneself because of one’s race. He is also concerned, I argue, with a *social* racial alienation—a development of the same Marxist concept of social alienation I have been reconstructing. Moreover, I argue that his concept of individual racial alienation can only be fully understood as a psychic internalization of racialized *social relations* of alienation. In a racist society, Fanon argues, racially subordinated groups come to be regarded as *necessarily*, rather than just contingently, worthy of being disregarded or treated as mere tools. And from childhood, Fanon argues this mode of relationship comes to mold and shape each person’s mental schema for how the self should relate to others, creating an inner model of human relations that is based on the alienated relationship between the white master or colonizer and the non-white servant or “savage.”