

Does Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation Explain Contemporary Social Disaffection and Disappointment?

Written by James Boot

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JAMES BOOT, JUN 12 2008

Shortly after World War II, retail analyst Victor Lebow proclaimed that:

"Our enormously productive economy... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and using of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever increasing rate."

Lebow's assertion that human beings can reach spiritual satisfaction through ever increasing levels of material consumption is not supported by empirical evidence. Recent psychological research sharply contradicts his hypothesis. According to James, a twenty-five year old American is between three and ten times more likely to be suffering from depression today than in 1950. I will highlight compelling historical and contemporary evidence that identifies certain features of modernity as being responsible for man's alienation from himself. Rationality, reason and science may have facilitated unprecedented industrial and economic growth but at significant cost to the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of humanity and the environment we inhabit. Our philosophic and economic short-sightedness, a continuing refusal to accept the associated consequences and relative failure to take appropriate action will be the enduring legacy of current generations. Wasteful material consumption and inefficient production that ignores the value of natural capital has reached its nadir. Marx's warning in the materialist theory of history and other works has come to pass, the principles on which industrial capitalism operates remain in vogue amongst self-adulating post-industrial societies but these maxims are outdated, were constructed with an unacceptable bias and paid scant attention their operational environment. Once, when challenged with being inconsistent, the late economist John Maynard Keynes said: "When I get new information I change my position, what sir do you do with new information?" We have indeed become separated from our species-being.

Conceptual clarity is essential thus I begin with an assessment of the condition of modernity and its central tenets before moving onto a discussion of Marx's theory of alienation; this will inform theoretical arguments surrounding the nature of consumerism and therefore facilitate empirical analysis regarding the consequences of ever increasing levels of material consumption. The economic terminology of planned and perceived obsolescence will be explained; these will be related to the findings of contemporary thinkers who argue that neoclassical economic theory is fundamentally flawed because it does not factor in the value of natural resources. In conjunction with the external, environmental consequences of man's alienation it is also essential to discuss its internal features. Analysis will show that citizens in post-industrial western societies increasingly suffer from a condition that is correlated with development and material wealth. These findings have far-reaching consequences for human spiritual wellbeing. Although both Marx and interpretations of modernity reject religious dogma, I conclude by assessing its viability, specifically the spiritual aspects of Buddhism, as an effective mechanism for rejecting hedonistic materialism, encouraging ethical behaviour and offering guidance for sustainable living in the twenty-first century.

The concept of modernity is constructed from the English word modern, which linguistically borrows from the Latin term *modo* meaning 'of today' or what is current as opposed to earlier periods in history. Modernity is also differentiated from earlier epochs by civilisational characteristics that make it unique to human history. Cahoone

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identifies the development of new techniques for the study of biological, chemical and physics based sciences as of significant import. These contributed to the growth of new machine technologies and modes of industrial production, in turn facilitating an unprecedented rise in material living standards. Whereas previously, religion was utilised as a powerful explanatory tool for understanding the complexities of the physical and spiritual environment, scientific advancements began to call these assumptions into question. Consequently religious dogma used as a mechanism for social control became increasingly undermined as knowledge of alternatives such as Darwin's theory of natural selection spread throughout the consciousness of western societies. The spread of such ideas contributed to other traits: the growth of secular culture, the spread of liberal democracy and increasing notions of individualism, rationalism and humanism. Such features are said to be primarily associated with the development of modern western civilisation, however this assertion is contested by some who argue that a number of the aforementioned characteristics can be identified in earlier civilisations. Relating to this argument, Peter Berger asks, "Are we simply ancient Egyptians in airplanes... is the sole difference in the tools that humans use, rather than a difference in the human beings themselves?" I would contest his observation, highlighting assertions made by French philosophers of the 1960s who drew a distinction between efforts to interpret and define the experience and facts of human consciousness and their meaning for advancing our understanding of philosophy. Notwithstanding this criticism, there is general consensus amongst academics that it was the evolution and synergy of ideas that constituted a new period in human evolution which warrants the term modernity.

Antonio says of Marx "His advocates and critics alike contend that he personifies, for better or worse, modern social theory." Arguably, one of his most significant achievements was to develop a theory of history. Marx set out to explain human development, which he understood as inextricably linked to our relationship and interaction with nature. For Marx human progress can be seen in terms of the changes made to our physical environment in the context of material conditions. He made a distinction between modernity and previous forms of social organisation primarily through the way we satisfied the basic necessities required for man's existence. Radical changes in the mode of production created surplus, which, he argued was a significant departure from feudalism, broadly characterised by the immediate consumption of what was produced for survival. The material contrast from feudalism to modernity can be conceptualised as [the former] "separates the human being from his general essence, [and] turns him into an animal that is directly identical with its function [whereas the latter] separates the objective essence of the human being from him as merely something external, material." Therefore during preceding periods of history, human behaviour (species-life) bore many similarities to animals in that production and consumption were broadly in balance. With the advent of modernity scientific advances and production methodology fundamentally changed the way man interacted with nature (species-being). Concomitantly, it can be argued that animals are biologically programmed and by instinct provide for their material existence whereas Marx argued that human production was mindful; a process of conscious decision and purposeful action. As Antonio observes, for Marx, "our intelligent, deliberate labor frees us from our original, total subservience to nature, and makes possible liberation from our 'second nature', or domination of person by person." Marx was initially optimistic that advances in the industrial mode of production could leave man free to develop his creative potential and the productive surplus would be directed to those most in need rather than being used for private enrichment. Alas, as he feared, the latter has proved to be the case.

The mechanisation of industrial production was realised through the division of labour and the specialisation of machinery. Man was no longer producing simply to meet his basic needs thus capitalists, who owned the means of production, exchanged man's labour input for wages. Marx identified the transcendence of man's subjugation to man firstly in the context of feudalism between the serf and landlord, and subsequently, the proletariat and bourgeoisie – a relationship characterised by a system of labour/capital exchange. As Sayer argues "Far from abolishing the relationships of dependence, capitalism dissolves them into a general form. Personal dependency is replaced by universal dependency." His final words (universal dependency) refer directly to dual reasons for man's alienation: money and commodity production. But what did Marx understand alienation to be and why do the aforementioned reasons cause this effect?

The meaning of alienation is expressed by Marx in two German words *Entausserung* and *Entfremdung* they equate these words with reification and estrangement respectively. The former (*Entausserung*/reification) implies externalisation of aspects of self that there is a dual sense of identification and loss. Firstly labour becomes an

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external action as in selling oneself as a commodity, and secondly one no longer identifies with the product of one's labour as it has become an independent action. The latter term (Entfremdung/estrangement) was developed from a religious definition and subsequently used in a metaphysical sense, it is internal in its focus and understood as "a socio-psychological condition in which the individual has a feeling of distance or separateness from community and society." This condition becomes manifest within the industrial mode of production because man is producing neither for himself nor his immediate wellbeing. Moreover, his connection with nature and his fellow man is severed. Others confirm this interpretation of the concepts underlying Marxist understanding of alienation. As Meszaros observes "[Marx] is not simply talking about man's alienation from 'nature' as such, but about man's alienation from his own nature, from 'anthropological nature' (both within and outside man)." Thus with clarification of Marx's theory, discourse regarding the effect of capital and commodity production as a cause of human alienation can be discussed.

For Marx "Money is the universal, self-constituted value of all things. It has therefore robbed the whole world, human as well as nature, of its own values." The subject in control differentiates money from capital. The former constitutes wealth owned, invested lent or borrowed by a person or organisation, whereas the latter refers primarily to a means of payment. These definitions are revealing because money in the form of wages has become the dominant provision afforded to man in exchange for his labour. In contrast, ownership of capital – produced as the fruit of man's labour – transcends payment and becomes a locus of control and the means to reproduce itself. As Meszaros notes "money is the pimp between man's need and the object, between his life and the means of life." Furthermore, as Marx argued, by virtue of ownership, the capitalist also controls what is produced, when, how much and the intensity of man's labour. Thus he is able to ensure that production far outstrips that which he pays out in wages. Marx illustrates: "Labour produces its conditions of production as capital, and capital produces labour as a means of realising capital, as wage labour." As a consequence man's labour is understood by the capitalist as a commodity in and of itself – a means to realise greater profits and financial return on his investment. Reduced to a commodity, man finds himself at his most wretched, trapped in an endless cycle instigated by scientific progress, brought about through mass industrial production and controlled by bourgeois; he is divorced from his species-being. Thus man engages in a futile attempt to end his alienation through ever increasing material consumption.

Within Marxist conception a commodity has exchange and use value. The former is expressed as the rate or ratio of its exchange or equivalence in relation to other commodities, not an indicator of its true economic value. Rather an abstract expression depending on its relationship with other commodities in terms of availability and demand. The intrinsic properties of latter the can be conceptualised in terms of its potential to satisfy human needs. A consumer is understood as the subject or recipient of commodity production. Williams suggests that early use of the term (to consume) meant "to destroy, to use up, to waste or to exhaust." Scholars of consumer culture make a distinction between durable and non-durable consumer goods, this is significant as Marcuse argues the former has changed the way humans identify with nature and society: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home and kitchen equipment." In an organic and psychological sense this illustrates the basic human desire to connect with our physical environment. Nevertheless, as a consequence we have been spiritually and ontologically alienated by the institutionalised social constructions of modernity – characterised by mechanised industrial production the human species as mindless automatons – I consume, therefore I am. Moreover, can contemporary theories of consumerism and economics offer any explanations for this decline in the human condition?

Given the level of complexity and ideological competition involved in arguments about consumption behaviour one theory does not achieve primacy over the rest. Rather, there are features of each approach that offer useful insights into this period of human evolution. As Campbell notes "The act of consumption has profound socio-cultural significance... commodities have importance as signs or symbols and not merely for the intrinsic satisfaction which they might bring."

Moreover, within the Veblenesque perspective, which shares a Marxist dialectic, socio-economic distinctions are manifest in conspicuous consumption. Veblen that unproductive and wasteful consumption serves to reinforce the status of the leisure class (bourgeoisie). Moreover, it is not simply volume that is significant for Veblen but the nature and perceived value by others of the commodities themselves: "consumption of goods is honourable, primarily as a

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mark of prowess and a prerequisite of human dignity." Douglas and Iserwood have developed Veblen's ideas further arguing that consumption classification is characterised by three sets of goods and production sectors: staple/primary (e.g. foodstuffs), technology/secondary (travel and consumer's capital equipment) and information/tertiary sector production (information goods, education, arts, cultural and leisure pursuits). According to these complementary interpretations, the poorest groups are restricted to staple or primary commodity consumption. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that stratification exists within this lower echelon characterised by supermarket branding of non-durable consumer goods (Best, Finest, Taste The Difference – in opposition to – savers, value and basics). Arguably from a Marxist perspective, the development of a class structure in relation to commodities is to be expected given man's alienation from his species-being, an assertion supported by Marcuse cited in the preceding analysis. A significant feature missing from Veblen's theory is analysis regarding the role of advertising and marketing.

The theories of instinctivism and manipulationism place less emphasis on economics and primarily identify with the humanist conception of consumerism. They are orientated towards the psychological and emotional aspects of behaviour. Instinctivism argues that wants are inherent within individuals and pre-date expression through consumer goods. Maslow developed 'a needs/wants hierarchy' beginning with the need for oxygen and ending with esteem, self-respect and prestige motivational forces, but his contribution has been challenged and reveals this theory to be problematic. Instinctivism takes wants for granted assuming an inherent value, and in addition Maslow's hierarchy fails to adequately explain anomalies with regard to human agency. The desire to fulfil lower ranked biological needs and wants are often overridden by acts of self-sacrifice, love and issues relating to ethics or morality. Thus the foundations of instinctivism in explaining human wants as pre-programmed is of limited utility. Moreover it fails to address outside influence; this is at the core of manipulationist theory which Galbraith characterises as 'passive' want creation. Proponents argue that the consumer is besieged by clever marketing and advertising, an assertion with considerable merit given the growing relationship between collating market data, motivational research, and psychological analysis. As Campbell observes, "Activity under this heading [market research] is largely directed at discovering dreams, desires and wishes of consumers so that advertisers may build upon these when devising product messages." There is a desire to manipulate the consumer in an emotional context and has proved highly successful to the extent that commodities have taken on cultural association. Inanimate objects such as cars, beauty products and fashionable clothing transcend their objective nature with the promise of fulfilment and lifestyle enhancement through the use of romantic and exotic imagery.

Investment in research and development and advertising would be of limited efficacy without maintaining a ready market for material consumption. Packard's contribution is informative and remains relevant despite its age. He argues that political and economic pressure to expand production through increased consumption has created a 'hyperthyroid economy' and active encouragement of prodigal materialism: "It is assumed that any growth is good. Growth is fast becoming a hollowed word alongside Democracy and Motherhood." Particularly in the United States, consumption became synonymous with economic growth and stability. But as commodity production became increasingly automated and mechanised, warnings regarding a glut of overproduction forecast by Marx were realised, illustrated by the publication in 1936 of an article entitled: "Outmoded Durability: If Merchandise Does Not Wear Out Faster, Factories Will Be Idle, People Unemployed." Faced with potential economic stagnation and recession, Packard argues that industrial designers of durable goods were directed by capitalists to introduce obsolescence to stimulate consumption. In the field of non-durable goods, particularly agriculture, government subsidies were introduced to offset negative values caused by overproduction. Arguably, this resulted in a form of alienation as illustrated by one American producer: "Our farm prosperity is entirely artificial. There's surplus grain piled everywhere you look. It rather takes away from the joy of a good harvest for me. I'm sure the whole folly will come falling down around our ears – and soon perhaps."

Packard distinguishes between obsolescence of function, desirability and quality – the latter being most important because significant time, financial and human resources are expended to ensure that the product breaks down or wears out. He cites a memorandum to a General Electric licensee understood in terms of efficiency and progress: "The design life of the 2330 Lamp has been changed from 300 back to 200 hours...it is understood that no publicity or other announcement will be made of this change."

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Perceived obsolescence relates to product desirability and is seen to be a safer and more widely acceptable approach. Safer because consumers began to lose faith and trust in branded commodities that failed to meet basic standards of utility. According to one designer: "planned obsolescence of desirability – or 'psychological obsolescence' – was socially justifiable because it redistributes wealth." This also correlates with Veblen's theory of consumerism and its underlying assumptions highlight Marx's critique of industrial capitalism. However, the most vulgar aspects of perceived obsolescence can be seen in the fashion industry, particularly for women where experts deliberately set out to use psychology and emotional manipulation, as the Chairman of Allied Stores Corporation explains: "Basic utility cannot be the foundation of a prosperous apparel industry... We must accelerate obsolescence... It is our job to make women unhappy with what they have." This illustrates our alienation and influence of the material world over us. Furthermore, it demonstrates the extent to which we no longer relate to ourselves, instead seeking satisfaction from commodity acquisition and consumption. Although there is some tension in transferring his ideas into a contemporary context, in my understanding Marx would support this argument in that we essentially reduce our species-being to an empty shell when we give up so much of ourselves to material objectification.

Fishman et al. suggest that within the capitalist paradigm planned obsolescence should be understood as an engine of technical progress, specifically they argue "a pattern of rapidly deteriorating products and fast innovation may be preferred to long-lasting products and slow innovation." Utilising all available information this may appear accurate. However their assumptions are based on macroeconomic data that fails to take account of the true costs associated with raw materials used in commodity production. The mindset that excess durability leads to economic stagnation requiring a fundamental reconceptualisation and holistic approach to accountancy methodology. As Rowe indicates GDP measures market activity in capital terms and fails to distinguish between desirable and undesirable costs and gains. Economist Robert Repetto argues "Under the current system of national accounting, a country could exhaust its mineral resources, cut down its forests, erode its soils, pollute its aquifers, and hunt its wildlife and fisheries to extinction, but measured income would not be affected as these assets disappeared... The results can be illusory gains in income and permanent losses in wealth."

The concept to which he refers is the value of 'Natural Capitalism', so called because the rationale of proponents diverges from a significant proportion of environmentalists and other interest groups. Sharing the same concerns, they differ in strategic approach arguing that ecological degradation and resource depletion will force corporations to change their behaviour or lose competitive advantage. As production costs increase, institutional reform offers an opportunity to make significant savings and therefore increase profits, it is a question of changing perceptions to shift perspective.

For example, in 1995 Colombia University was spending \$10 million a year on energy consumption. A new utilities director was challenged to make a 10 percent saving; attempts to implement changes required significant investment thus he experienced bureaucratic resistance until he showed that delays were costing \$3,000 per day in lost savings.

Empirical evidence calls into question the underlying philosophy of industrial capitalism echoing concerns raised by Marx. "Humankind has inherited a 3.8-billion-year store of natural capital. At present rates of use, there will be nothing left by the end of the next century." Notwithstanding this observation, ever increasing levels of automation used in resource extraction threatens social and economic stability. Between 1980-94, the mining industry has increased productivity output by 25 percent whilst eliminating 55 percent of its workforce; this trend is uniform across developing states with job creation unable to keep pace. Rates of global unemployment and disemployment are rising steeply. The results are increasing lawlessness and general civil unrest, a sense of despair and growing apathy amongst those of higher socio-economic status. As Hawken observes "While increasing human productivity is critical to maintaining income and economic well-being, productivity that corrodes society is tantamount to burning the furniture to heat the house."

Given that contemporary scholars empirically support Marx's predictions regarding overproduction and alienation, the combined force of evidence strongly supports arguments for engaging in an open debate over the future of economic and political organisation in western society. Markets are a tool and means to an end, not simply an end: "they allocate scarce resources efficiently only in the short term... they make a good servant, a bad master and worse

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religion." On average, people are working one to two hundred more hours per year than twenty years ago and our obsession with the acquisition of material wealth is having serious consequences for our spiritual and psychological wellbeing. James argues the core political values of modernity (meritocracy, egalitarianism, female emancipation and democracy) have been hijacked by selfish capitalism distinguished by four features. Corporate and business success measured by share price; the privatisation of public utilities; increased de-regulation and tax relief for the rich; and growing consensus among the latter that consumption and market forces can meet all of man's needs.

Consequently, human worth is defined through possessions, earnings, appearance and celebrity. From a psychological perspective he argues these values are at variance with research into happiness and well being as they impede our fundamental needs. Thus he concludes, selfish capitalism has caused the spread of "Affluenza: a middle class virus causing depression, anxiety, addiction and ennui." The importance of friends, family and other relationships have come under pressure increasing alienation as the influence of affluenza encourages the individual to view social interactions in terms of opportunity for material gain rather than their ethical, emotional and spiritual value.

Ling and Fromm support James's conclusions, the former characterises materialistic values, consumption and the pursuit of hedonism as the acids of modernity; whilst the latter questions whether citizens can really be classified as sane in western society. As Ling observes "it seems almost superfluous to mention the follies of an economic 'system', where a particularly bountiful crop is an economic disaster, and where, although, there are millions who need what we have in abundance, we restrict productivity 'to stabilize the market.'" Adherence to current political and economic doctrine has left us morally bankrupt and as Fromm argues, we are in serious danger of becoming mindless robots living totally meaningless lives. Material progress assisting our physical being is significant, we marvel at our technological prowess but this has come at enormous cost to the planet we inhabit. The primacy of science over religion has rendered us spiritual refugees. The Buddhist practice of meditation offers an opportunity to explore the action-reaction of our behaviour and as Ling argues its growing appeal "is due at least as much to the defective quality of contemporary western culture as to the inherent strength of Buddhist thought." Although Marx rejected religion arguing it to be a smokescreen for subjugation and a cause of alienation, very little was known in the west of Buddhism, apart from a small number of 'experts' when Marx was writing. Therefore, his critique of religion is perhaps better described as a critique of nineteenth-century Christian theology; and unlike the religions of western society, there is a comparative lack of ecclesiastical and hierarchical authority in matters of belief for Buddhism.

Some may argue that there is little room for idealism and religion in the twenty-first century but as one German banker observes:

"We are entering the century of the environment, whether we want it or not. In this century everyone who considers himself a realist will be forced to justify his behaviour in light of the contribution it made to the environment."

In my view spiritual understanding, empathy, compassion and ethical behaviour towards others and the environment is as necessary today as it has ever been, otherwise perhaps we are little more than Egyptians in aeroplanes.

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*Written by: James Boot
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