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# Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory

ALEX LAW



# Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory

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ALEX LAW

# Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory



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For Daniel



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This textbook owes a great deal to students on my classical social theory module over many years. Social theory can be daunting at the best of times and its study demands perseverance. In this I have been fortunate to work with a group of academics deeply committed to teaching social theory. At one time or another 'the classical social theory team' has benefited from the very different teaching styles of colleagues and friends, Norman Gabriel, Peter Kennedy, Wallace McNeish, Mick Smith and Hazel Work. Drawing on her vast teaching experiences, Jan Law has over the past few years brought classical social theory alive for our students in her own inimitable style. I personally don't know what I'd do without her.



# Introduction: Classical Social Theory

Not many books begin with such gloomy material as 'Alienation' and end with 'Suicide'. Strictly speaking, neither does this one (it ends with the concept of *Verstehen*). The point is that any list of key concepts from classical social theory is necessarily selective. In the main, I focus on the key concepts that appear in the writings of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, as well as a couple from outside this select group. These are essential to any understanding of how social theory emerged in its 'classical' phase.

Concepts group together like family relations. Some just seem to belong together like brother and sister. Key concepts tend to be strongly inter-related, especially within the particular theoretical traditions that they are associated with, such as Marxism, Weberianism, Durkheimianism, or Critical Theory. Towards the end of each concept a number of related concepts are listed to allow you to cross-reference 'the family' of concepts and get a sense of how they belong together in a larger theoretical framework.

Some concepts sit more uneasily together. They are the cranky uncles still causing a bad atmosphere at family reunions many years after some long-forgotten family quarrel. Classical social theorists were unable to agree between themselves on precisely which concepts and methods should be considered the most 'valid' or 'scientific'. Key concepts were, and still are, 'essentially contested concepts'. Each entry takes account of this mixed legacy.

Many key concepts are highly congenial, if a bit out of fashion, rather like an absent-minded grandparent. These concepts have perhaps not enjoyed the kind of predictive or logical success often claimed for the natural sciences. Nevertheless, our task is neither to dismiss nor to celebrate the aging concepts of classical social theorists but rather to learn what we can from them.

There also exists a range of more senior members of the extended conceptual family, such as conservatism, culture, evolution, history, individualism, nation, nature, science and society. Such concepts are a lot more general than the more limited areas of social theory demarcated by our key concepts.

Some of their assumptions rankle. Much to the distaste of our more sensitive language, they always spoke in terms of masculine nouns and pronouns – man, him or he – when they meant a typical human being.

## WHY THESE CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORISTS?

‘Classical social theory’ refers mainly to writings from ‘the canon’ of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Sometimes Simmel is included, but more often he isn’t. Selection for the classical social theory canon is partly a result of translation, partly textual interpretation, partly academic consensus, partly what is going on ‘out there’ in society itself. In 1920s America the canon included Simmel and Durkheim, but not Weber or Marx. Durkheim’s place in the canon was assured by a conservative interpretation of his theory of moral solidarity as a normal function of an organic social order. Weber was taken up in the 1930s because he provided an alternative explanation of capitalism in terms of ethical values against Marx’s explanation in terms of crude material conditions. As well as making a profound contribution to social theory, Weber’s canonization was, in part, ideologically inspired against what were seen by ruling elites as the dangerous doctrines of Marxism. Marx was excluded from the canon at that time because his name was closely associated with a revolutionary movement that threatened the vested interests of capitalist society. Marx only joined ‘the canon’ of classical social theorists after the revolts of the 1960s (Bratton et al., 2009).

The classical social theory canon emerged rather slowly. For instance, Robert Nisbet’s *The Sociological Tradition* in the mid-1960s covered a diverse range of social theorists, including Rousseau, Hegel, Comte, Austin, de Toqueville, Tonnies and Le Play, as well as today’s canon (plus Simmel). The ‘Marx, Weber, Durkheim’ canon was arguably consolidated by a truly impressive work of theoretical exposition, Anthony Giddens’ *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, which has never been out of print since it was first published in 1971.

Since then the canonical threesome have dominated classical social theory. As feminists and sociologists of ethnicity frequently point out, the three ‘founding fathers’ of social theory are all white men. A case has been made more recently for recognizing Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) as a prominent female classical social theorist. Gilman was concerned to develop a socio-biological theory in order to explain and address gender inequalities. Socio-biological explanations of gender and ‘race’ are fiercely contested ideas today.

## PRECURSORS OF CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Historically, classical social theory can be dated from around the 1840s, with Marx’s early writings, to around the 1920s, by which time all of today’s canonized theorists were dead. Of course, the major classical social theorists didn’t just have a brainwave one day which then made

them famous for all eternity. They all enjoyed intellectual precursors, whose legacy they built on through critique, revision and innovation.

All concepts have a history. Some concepts can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy, some to early religious thinking. The classical social theorists were influenced by the scientific revolution that the West passed through in the shape of figures like Copernicus (1473–1543), Galileo (1564–1642), Issac Newton (1642–1727) and Charles Darwin (1809–1882). This intellectual ferment flowed into the movement known as ‘the Enlightenment’ of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From Edinburgh to Paris, Berlin to Naples, Amsterdam to Philadelphia, social and political thinkers tried to put reason in charge over irrational beliefs and superstitions.

By the time of classical social theory the ideas of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment were being refashioned. New social and political doctrines mushroomed with the spread of democratic and revolutionary ideas that followed the French Revolution (1789–1799). Some classical social thinkers wanted to put the genie of modern ideas and practices back into the bottle of history. This has led certain critics to view classical social theory as essentially conservative in nature (Zeitlin, 1990). Or at least this was the case until ‘the watershed’ in social theory represented by Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–1895).

## WHO ARE THE CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORISTS?

### Karl Marx

Karl Marx was raised in a middle-class, Jewish German household. He seemed to spend a lot of time drinking and sword-fencing while at university in the mid-1830s. After dabbling in Romantic poetry, dedicated to his future wife Jenny, he eventually wrote a doctoral thesis on some obscure aspects of Greek philosophy. Becoming more politically radical, Marx moved to Paris and was greatly influenced by the left-wing workers he met there. In the 1840s Marx wrote a series of (mostly unpublished) works, including the ‘Paris Manuscripts’ (1844) and the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (1845). He also met and collaborated with his lifelong supporter Friedrich Engels on *The German Ideology* (1845–6) and the (in)famous *Communist Manifesto* (1848).

After a stint in Belgium, Marx was forced to flee to London for political reasons. There he became involved with the International Workingmen’s Association and ended up spending long periods between political activities studying in London’s British Museum. Based on notes he took from a wide range of sources, he worked furiously through the

night in his cramped home to write a large number of preliminary critical notes, known later as the *Grundrisse*, or 'Outlines' (1857–8).

Marx rarely produced finished versions of any of his ambitious studies. The exception to his legendary under-achievement is the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Marx's masterpiece of critical analysis of the relatively new capitalist society. Two other volumes of *Capital* were later edited and published by Engels only after Marx's death in 1888.

### Where to look

A riveting and irreverent account of Marx's life and works is given by Francis Wheen in his *Karl Marx* (2000). More concisely, David McLellan cuts to the chase in his hugely informative and impossibly brief introduction, at a mere 80 pages, to *Marx* (1997). As a leading authority on Marx, David McLellan has also written a longer definitive account in *Karl Marx: A Biography* (2006). Werner Blumenberg's *Karl Marx: An Illustrated History* (1998) has plenty of pictures of the Marxes, their friends and associates, and the various places where they lived. Current debates over Marx's legacy can be found in a wide range of scholarly and political journals, including *New Left Review*, *Historical Materialism*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Critique*, *Capital & Class*, *International Socialism* and *Monthly Review*.

### Friedrich Engels

Engels not only supported Marx materially, politically and emotionally but was also a considerable social theorist in his own right. Before ever meeting Marx, Engels, the son of a wealthy factory owner, produced one of the great early sociological surveys, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844). This book remains a powerful indictment from Engels' own personal observations, as well as official sources, of the mass human suffering in the heartlands of urban capitalism.

Despite producing a number of other studies of gender, housing, warfare, Darwinism, technology and colonialism, Engels was eclipsed by the grandeur and depth of Marx's vision. His reputation also suffered badly through an association with the discredited Communist regimes that appeared first in Russia in the 1930s. A much more sympathetic, if humanly flawed, Engels emerges in Tristan Hunt's enthralling (2009) biography *The Frock-Coated Communist*.

### Where to look

Engels' own contribution is often subsumed under that of Marx. As well as Hunt's (2009) biography of Engels' life and work, Terrell Carver's

*Engels: A Very Short Introduction* (2003) outlines the main developments in his thought, while Pete Thomas discusses Engels' scientific method in *Marxism and Scientific Socialism* (2008).

## Max Weber

Max Weber (1864–1920) came from a middle-class family in Germany and was surrounded from an early age by liberal intellectuals and businessmen. Weber was a precocious child. Much has been made of the role of an overbearing and religiously pious mother in his intellectual and emotional development. He married his distant cousin, Marianne Weber, who would play a central role in promoting Weber's intellectual importance after his death.

Like Marx, at university Weber got mixed up in male-only drinking fraternities and duelling societies. Unlike Marx, Weber was bitten by German nationalism, opposed the immigration of Polish labour, and served for a time with the German military. He also developed a rather ambiguous attitude to capitalism, the state, modernity and even Berlin, the city of his youth.

At the age of 26, Weber wrote his post-doctoral dissertation on 'The Agrarian History of Rome' (1891) and produced 'at lightning speed' a very lengthy official study of rural labour in east Prussia (1893). Weber soon became an established academic and campaigned for social and political reform from the top of the German political system.

With his father's death in 1898, Weber became even more neurotic. He suffered a nervous breakdown and for almost four years was unable to work. Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) represented a spectacular return to the centre of intellectual life. Although unable to teach, Weber enjoyed another burst of intellectual ferment, writing a wide range of material that was collected and published posthumously by Marianne Weber as *Economy and Society*.

## Where to look

Weber's troubled life and theoretical achievements are detailed in Joachim Radkau's monumental intellectual biography, *Max Weber* (2009). Dirk Kasler's *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (1988) considers the relationship between Weber's life and work. Reinhard Bendix's *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (1992) and Arthur Mitzman's *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber* (1985) provide more detailed and equally fascinating accounts of the tensions in Weber's life, theory and politics. Frank Parkin has far less to say about Weber's psychological state of mind but is incisive on his



social theory in an admirably short introduction to his *Max Weber* (2002). The continuing vitality of Weber scholarship can be gleaned from the specialist journal *Max Weber Studies* as well as *Journal of Classical Sociology* and mainstream sociology journals.

### Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) grew up in a Jewish family against a background of political turmoil. French society was rocked by a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, which anti-Semites blamed on Jews. This was closely followed by the experiment in popular working-class democracy of the Paris Commune in 1871, which was crushed by the authorities with terrifying levels of violence and brutality.

Durkheim's family life was austere and modest. They particularly valued hard work, humility and merit. After repeated attempts to pass the entrance exams, Durkheim left the provinces to attend one of Paris's top schools, the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, to study for a teacher's degree in philosophy and a doctorate. There the serious Durkheim shone among a brilliant group of young intellectuals. He encountered the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and the sociological writings of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Combined, these influences later led him to work out a systematic form of 'sociological Kantianism'.

After a short spell as a school teacher he spent a year in Germany studying the university system, where he admired 'the hard working habits' of both students and teachers. Durkheim was mainly excited about German developments in the new subject of sociology.

Back in France, Durkheim was appointed the first ever lecturer in social science and education in 1887 at the University of Bordeaux. Durkheim approached his workload with methodical vigour, writing numerous articles, founding and editing perhaps the most influential social science journal ever, the *Année sociologique*, and still managed to write three classic books: *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), and *Suicide* (1897). He also intervened as a public intellectual to defend civic republicanism against the anti-Semitism stirred up by 'the Dreyfus Affair' in 1898, when Captain Dreyfus, a Jew, was falsely accused by the authorities of treason.

In 1902 Durkheim was elevated to a post in education at the Sorbonne in Paris. Sociology had not yet been established as a respectable academic discipline. Durkheim saw it as his job to win recognition for sociology by placing it on a more systematic and less speculative footing than his predecessor Comte. He used his position to attract a group of talented 'young Durkheimians'. After encountering William Robertson Smith's

(2002[1894]) comparative history of religion Durkheim experienced a 'revelation', which culminated in perhaps his most brilliant study, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim's health faltered from overwork and the severe grief he felt at the loss of his only son during the 1914–18 war, which he had supported as a patriotic duty 'against the German mentality'. In 1916 Durkheim died at the age of 59, with his grand ambition for sociology still incomplete.

### Where to look

Durkheim has been well served by Steven Lukes' brilliant historical account of his life and work, *Emile Durkheim* (1992). There is no shortage of effective introductions to his work. Robert Alun Jones' *Emile Durkheim* (1986) examines carefully Durkheim's four major works. Kenneth Thompson's short introduction *Emile Durkheim* (2002) ranges a bit more widely over his life and politics. Anthony Giddens' *Durkheim* (1978) is concise and critical. Frank Parkin's short book *Durkheim* (1992) goes straight to the heart of the key issues raised by Durkheim's social theory: science, law, religion, socialism, and the state. Current Durkheim scholarship is ably represented by the journal *Durkheimian Studies* and more broadly across social theory journals.

### Georg Simmel

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) has not always been, but is increasingly, recognized as a highly original voice among the classical social theorists. Simmel grew up in the centre of Berlin, then rapidly developing into a modern metropolitan city. His urban experience stimulated an individualistic intellectual outlook. He never fitted neatly into the mould of a specialized sociology defined by systematic scientific methods.

He came from a Jewish background but was baptized a Christian. Although widely recognized as a gifted intellectual and lecturer, Simmel continually met with anti-Semitic discrimination, which prevented him from securing an established academic position, despite the personal support of luminaries like Max Weber. He was supported financially by a friend of the family after his father died, allowing him to complete his studies and live as an independent scholar.

Simmel was nothing if not prolific. By the time of his death in 1918 he had published 25 books and around 300 articles, reviews and other pieces. His range of interests was wide and varied but never superficial or trivial. He studied psychology, philosophy, culture, music and history, and was awarded a doctorate in 1881 for a dissertation on Kant's philosophy. This allowed him to teach at the University of Berlin, but only on a freelance basis.

Simmel was often concerned with problems of social psychology and saw himself foremost as a philosopher rather than a professional sociologist. His first major work *On Social Differentiation* (1890) drew upon evolutionary ideas in social theory. An intense interest in social theory lasted about two decades, from the late 1880s to 1908. In that time he produced two further landmark studies in social theory: *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) and *Sociology: Inquiries Into the Construction of Social Forms* (1908).

His book on money is a quite brilliant analysis of its positive and negative effects on subjective experience, value and culture. His huge *Sociology* brought together Simmel's wider reflections on sociology over 20 years. While the book was well received, many criticized Simmel's lack of an overarching theoretical system. But this is exactly what Simmel argues in the book cannot be done since his object – society – no longer possesses inner cohesion or stability. While a number of scholars later detected certain underlying principles in his *Sociology* – form, reciprocity, distance, dualism, number, space, processes – Simmel himself never singled these out as holding everything else together.

### Where to look

Unfortunately, Simmel has not been made the subject of an extended English language biography in the manner of McLellan on Marx, Lukes on Durkheim, or Radkau on Weber. The best, almost the only, coherent available introduction to Simmel's life and work remains David Frisby's lucid *Georg Simmel* (2002). A more specific consideration of Simmel's life and work is offered in Frisby's *Sociological Impressionism* (1992a). Simmel's monumental *Sociology* has only recently been fully translated into English (Simmel, 2009). Nicholas J. Spykman's *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (1925) was an early attempt to pull together the disparate threads of Simmel's life and work for an Anglophone readership and stood alone as an overview of Simmel until the 1980s. Ralph Leck's *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (2000) situates Simmel within the contemporary cultural currents of modernism, while Gary Jaworski's *Georg Simmel and the American Prospect* (1997) discusses Simmel's reception in the United States. Simmel is regularly the subject of social theory journals such as *Theory, Culture & Society* and *Journal of Classical Sociology*.

### WHERE TO GO NEXT

In this book I set out the main ideas associated with each key concept and the kind of problem it has tried to address. Wherever possible, I have closely

followed the author's own words and tried to convey how vivid and fresh much of this writing still reads today. An all too brief discussion at the end of each entry points to some of the critical debates and developments in response to the concept.

My basic outline of each concept is intended to encourage you to read the original authors for yourself. At the end of each concept suggestions are made for further reading. The language used can sometimes seem a little strange at first. You may be put off by the reputation of classical thinkers as particularly 'difficult' to digest. In fact, if read with a little care and concentration the original works are often far more accessible and better written than some of the later books that comment on them.

Introductory readers and commentaries in classical social theory are often restricted to Marx, Weber and Durkheim. In this vein, Ian McIntosh's *Classical Sociological Theory* (1997) includes a number of the key original readings from the classical trio. A much wider compass is included by Craig Calhoun and colleagues, whose *Classical Sociological Theory* (2007) takes in writings by Rousseau, Kant and Smith in the seventeenth century through to Critical Theory and Structural-Functionalism from the 1930s and 1940s. Scott Applerouth and Laura Desfor Edles' *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era* (2009) provides both original readings and supporting commentaries.

In terms of secondary commentaries, Ken Morrison's *Marx, Durkheim, Weber* (2006) comprehensively outlines the main ideas. Covering similar ground, John Hughes, Peter Martin and W.W. Sharrock's *Understanding Classical Sociology* (1995) is a model of clarity. Of course, Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971) set the bar here. John Bratton, David Denham and Linda Deutschmann have appropriated Giddens' title and his concern with the wider context of capitalism for social theory in their *Capitalism and Classical Social Theory* (2009). They also incorporate Simmel into the canon and bring out the relevance of classical social theory for capitalism today in an engaging way. In his *Classical Social Theory* (1997), Ian Craib has produced one of the most stimulating introductions to the ideas of our four main protagonists in a sweeping discussion of the core themes raised by their respective social theories.

Still more inclusive are the essays in Heine Anderson and Lars Bo Kaspersen's *Classical and Modern Social Theory* (2000). Bryan S. Turner's *Classical Sociology* (1999) also spreads the net of classical social theory more widely, although Weber is treated as the pivotal figure. George Ritzer and Douglas J. Goodman's *Classical Sociological Theory* (2007) extends the canon to include a number of female sociologists. Two ambitious recent attempts to escape from the canon are Alex Callinicos'

*Social Theory* (2007) and John Scott's *Social Theory* (2006). Callinicos sets the development of classical social theory within a long prehistory and its afterlife in more recent post-war social theory. Less chronologically, Scott ranges across the terrain of social theory according to shared themes in a highly stimulating manner not unlike Robert Nisbet's 'unit-ideas' of 'the sociological tradition' as he understood it in the mid-1960s. A healthy range of journals regularly discuss classical social theory including *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Sociological Theory*, *Theoria* and *Journal of Classical Sociology*.

## ..... Alienation .....

The word 'alienation' implies a hostile force or impersonal environment against which we feel separated from or resentful towards. However, Marx's concept of alienation is not primarily a psychological one about personal feelings or cognitive dissonance. It is more concerned with the workings of unseen social forces that diminish what it is to be truly human. Alienation provides a key to much of Marx's substantive analysis of capitalism, class and commodities. Although he rarely used the actual term by then, it is woven throughout *Capital* (1867) and was a central idea in his preparatory notebooks known as the *Grundrisse* (1857–58).

### ALIENATION IN 'EARLY MARX'

Marx developed the idea of alienation in a series of notes he produced in 1844 at the age of 26. These writings by the 'early Marx' were drafts of ideas never intended for publication. Marx saw the '1844 Manuscripts' (also called the 'Paris Manuscripts' or 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts') as part of a process of self-clarification, not as a final statement intended for a public readership. When they were first published in 1932 they were immediately hailed as an outstanding work of lasting insight into the human condition under capitalism.

Running through these early writings was the influence of the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel was concerned with the way that 'self-alienation' is experienced as a circular process. First,

consciousness alienates or objectifies itself in an external object. This is followed by a subsequent process of 'de-alienation', in which self-conscious agency returns to the subject once again. Marx accepted Hegel's point that human activity involves the loss and recovery of subjectivity. However, Marx rejected Hegel's notion that alienation is exclusively concerned with the loss and recovery of consciousness. For Marx, alienation involves an 'estrangement' from practical, sensuous, embodied activity, which both shapes and is shaped by consciousness.

Alienation for Marx refers to the separation of human capacities from their original source in creative, social individuals. A sustained capacity for practical problem-solving, Marx argued, is intrinsic to what it is to be truly human. Marx's concept of 'human nature' is not a fixed or essential nature but one that changes as the world around it changes. In some respects this separation of human powers has always accompanied the activity of human beings. All human societies must produce the basic preconditions for their own survival and reproduction, like shelter and food. It only becomes 'alienation' when both the *object* produced and the *means* of labour, the final product and the means of production, are systematically separated from the direct producer. This forcible separation of the products and the means of labour fully emerges only with the development of capitalism as a mode of production.

Marx's starting point was a terse critique of classical political economy, which assumed what it ought to be explaining. Marx accused the thinkers of classical political economy like Adam Smith of proceeding from the bald 'fact of private property' as naturally rooted in human selfishness. Marx (1844: 78) called this idea of natural human greed 'an imaginary original state of affairs'. The idea of natural property rights allowed the depredations of capitalism to be explained away by eternal human greed and selfishness instead of being the result of a concrete historical process.

Under capitalism, human beings not only produce objects as commodities. They also transform themselves into commodities. Human labour has less value than the object it creates. The devaluation of the human world 'progresses in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things' (1844: 78). Marx seeks to understand this inversion of value through 'the essential connection of private property, selfishness, the separation of labour, capital and landed property, of exchange and competition, of the value and the degradation of man, of monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection of all this with the money system.' Human devaluation has four intertwined aspects:

- 1 Humans become alienated from the *products* of their labour.
- 2 Humans become alienated from their own *work* activity.

- 3 Humans become alienated from their own *life* activity.
- 4 Humans become alienated from *each other*.

### Alienation from products

First, wage labour produces objects that take on an alien existence separate from the direct producer. Marx argues that the final product ‘congeals’, ‘objectifies’ and ‘realizes’ the human labour undertaken to produce it. As commodities, ‘congealed labour’ is separated from the worker and sent to circulate in the market. In practice the worker suffers a three-fold ‘loss’ – a loss of reality, a loss of object, and a loss of selfhood: ‘this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of the object or slavery to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation’ (1844: 78). The products of human labour enter an ‘alien objective world’ as independent entities. In *Capital*, Marx would later give a memorable account of this as ‘commodity fetishism’. By alienating the product and placing it above labour, the worker is doubly deprived. Labour produces spectacular objects of consumption for those that can afford them – palaces, beauty, intelligence – but produces for themselves only slums, deformity, and stupidity.

### Alienation from work

Second, this separation of labour from its product merely ‘summarizes’ the alienation inherent in the labour process. Carrying out work in return for wages under the control of others is not work carried out freely. It represents a form of ‘compulsory, forced labour’. Without this compulsion work ‘is avoided like the plague’. At work, the worker

mortifies his body and ruins his mind. Thus the worker only feels a stranger. He is at home when he is not working, and when he works he is not at home. (1844: 80)

Paid work is not an *end* in itself but only a *means* – to earn money. Only through consuming food, drink, clothing or shelter outside of the workplace does the worker feel any sense of freedom. However, mere consumption without creative effort, Marx believed, reduces the worker to basic animal appetites rather than truly human subjectivity.

### Alienation from nature

Third, labour is estranged from its own nature, or what Marx termed ‘species-being’. ‘Species-being’ does not refer to some fixed properties

that all individuals share in common like selfishness. Instead, beyond certain elementary functions like eating, sleeping, dying and so on, Marx suggests that human nature is rather malleable and open-ended, shaped by changing historical conditions. Conversely, historical conditions are produced by people themselves. Life activity always involves productive activity to procure socially the means of reproduction from nature.

Human society is not external to nature. It is always a distinct part of nature. As nature is turned into a mere *means* of production, so also the human part of nature becomes a mere means. Unlike animals, life activity for humans is *conscious* life activity, self-aware, reflexive and imaginative. Forcible separation from the work process and the end products doubly wounds Marx's sense of human nature.

### Alienation from each other

Fourth, under the blows of self-alienation individuals become separated from each other. What is torment and misery for the worker turns into the satisfaction and pleasure of someone who is 'alien, hostile, powerful and independent' – the owner of the commodity. Marx arrives back at his point of departure: private property is the necessary result of alienated labour, not the other way round. Private property appears to be the *cause* of alienated labour but it is actually its *consequence*, just as the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of human mystification.

Only later, Marx argues, does private property appear as both the end product of alienated labour and the means by which labour alienates itself. Access to the necessities for both life and work is only possible through alienating oneself as a commodity producing other commodities in order to consume still other commodities. And so begins the cycle all over again. This vicious cycle of compulsion can only be broken by ending alienation itself, not simply by abolishing private property or wages. 'Wages are an immediate consequence of alienated labour and alienated labour is the immediate cause of private property' (Marx, 1844: 85).

## CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Marx's concept of alienation has been criticized on a number of counts. It has been contrasted to the supposedly more 'scientific' approach of the 'later Marx' in *Capital*, most famously by the French Marxist Louis Althusser (1918–1990). The younger Marx was too impressed by the ahistorical idea of a perfectible human nature while the later Marx was much more scientifically precise in analysing social structures, historical shifts, economics and the ideological superstructure. Because of its



vagueness, some have likened the young Marx's concept of alienation to 'mere gibberish' (Wood, 2004: 6). A further criticism is that empirically the concept is out-dated and reflects the widespread destitution and poverty of labour in the nineteenth century. Today, it is often argued, many workers are affluent and work itself has been made more humane, creative and interesting.

On the other hand, thinkers like Herbert Marcuse (1941) and Henri Lefebvre (1972; 2009) revived the concept. Since the 1960s, Marx's concept of alienation has been seen as illuminating the experience of a society increasingly dominated by commodities and consumption. This condition is now global. Moreover, the extent to which work has been enhanced is a matter of considerable dispute. Harry Braverman (1974) noted how previously skilled work becomes degraded and simplified, as in more recent service sector jobs like call-centre operators. More fundamentally, alienated labour continues to be expressed in the form of money wages and accumulation.

## RELATED CONCEPTS

Anomie; Capital; Commodity Fetishism; Division of Labour (Marx); Money

## FURTHER READING

The obvious starting point is the short section 'Alienated labour' in Marx's '1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', available online in the Marx-Engels archive: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/index](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/index). The best introductory text on the place of alienation in Marx's system remains Henri Lefebvre's *The Sociology of Marx* (1972). An engaging account of the young Marx's discovery of the concept can be found in Francis Wheen's biography *Karl Marx* (2000).

# Anomie

Anomie represents for Durkheim an enduring and deepening danger for modern society. Pessimistically, anomie expresses 'pathological' tendencies at the heart of the 'crisis' of modern society. Anomie refers to the unhappy,