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Alienation and the task of geo-social critique

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the concept of alienation should be mobilised in order to develop a ‘geo-social’ critique of the generic forms of life that sustain contemporary capitalist societies, in a time when the stability of the Earth system is increasingly at risk. I contend that retrieving the full heuristic potential of the concept demands engaging the fields where it has been traditionally discussed (notably social philosophy and environmental philosophy) in order to demonstrate how their insights on alienation can be fruitfully combined. By putting greater emphasis on how society and nature are mutually embedded, this new approach to alienation highlights the anthropocentrism that critical theory has long conveyed, and indicates how it could be at least partially corrected.

Keywords: Critical theory, Alienation, Social Domination, Environmental Destruction, Forms of life

Introduction

Attempting to outline a comprehensive picture of alienation – one that simultaneously encompasses estrangement ‘from society’ and ‘from nature’ is the main purpose of this paper. I suggest that this effort can intellectually clarify ordinary life situations: in a time when the pursuit of economic growth is increasingly recognized as a catalyst of the global environmental crisis, people often talk about ‘being alienated’ without feeling the need to delineate the categories that could help them specify the precise determinants of this experience. The question of whether they are estranged ‘from society’ or ‘from nature’ seems strange, because they tend to take the world in which they actively participate as a continuum in which human and nonhuman parts are deeply intertwined. In this context, talk about alienation often appears thus vague and imprecise. The genealogy of the concept reflects this ambiguity: although Marx gave alienation a pivotal role in his early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1988 [1844]), its analytical potential was soon revealed to be insufficient for a cornerstone role in a thorough critical theory of society – in fact, the concept actually disappeared from his mature economic writings. It is only later, in the 1960s-70s, that the concept of alienation returned to usage: Lukács’s (1972 [1920]) long-ignored works were rediscovered, and Sartre’s (1957) and Marcuse’s (1972) parallel efforts to bridge gaps between Marxism and phenomenology/psychoanalysis (respectively) gave young Western generations a new language through which to express their existential frustrations (Haber

2007). Precisely at the same time, however, Althusser (2010 [1965]) insisted that the concept of alienation could be nothing but a “pre-Marxist ideological concept” forged during Marx’s early romantic period – i.e., before achieving his “epistemological break” and starting to develop a scientific critique of political economy. Althusser explicitly lamented that “many Marxist philosophers [still] seem[ed] to feel the need to appeal to alienation” (2010: 239). Other observers underscored the ambivalent effects of a widespread use of alienation by student movements: Ricœur (1968) went so far as to qualify as “flawed” a concept he considered subject to both a “semantic overload” and “proliferating ambiguity” – a diagnosis that would anticipate a later critique by Schacht (1971). According to both Ricœur and Schacht, the polemical use of the concept and its general imprecision had definitively compromised its heuristic potential. The question, however, whether this diagnosis still holds today remains open. I suggest that this is not the case, and I contend that recent debates in philosophy and the social sciences allow us – and, in fact, they *encourage* us – to retrieve and consolidate the critical resources traditionally associated with the concept of alienation. The theoretical framework that I mobilize to defend the concept of alienation employs a dialogue between two subfields (i.e., social philosophy and environmental philosophy); this favors a nuanced interpretation of the concept, one that stresses its inherent plurivalence. Although such an open-endedness could be deemed as a deficiency, I maintain that it should rather be viewed as an advantage. This shift in the interpretation of alienation is, I argue, necessary given the growing awareness of the unprecedented impact of human interventions on the Earth system – and the need to unmask (and possibly undo) the relations of domination that structure them. In this context, it is indeed increasingly clear that our self-realization as free persons cannot be sought at the expense of the more-than-human natural world, which appears increasingly fragile and exhaustible. Elaborating a more balanced and decentered (i.e. less anthropocentric) conception of alienation can demonstrate this concept’s capacity to play a central role in a principled geo-social¹ critique of existing human forms of life.

In the wake of this introductory section, I develop my discussion of the concept in three successive steps. In the second section, I analyze the two mutually-constitutive facets of social alienation, and put into perspective the recent attempts to recast a relational (rather than substantial) interpretation of the concept. I argue that although the achievements attained by contemporary social philosophers are significant, they remain ill-equipped to take into account the current global environmental crisis. In the third section, I emphasize the need to consider the advances of environmental philosophy in the effort to remedy this shortcoming, and I provide an up-to-date interpretation of alienation – i.e. one that resists both the temptation of human exceptionalism that pervades modern philosophy, and the symmetrical temptation of dismissing altogether the idea of human distinctiveness. In the fourth and final section, I argue that the ‘unstable’ conception of alienation that results from this discussion strengthens – rather than undermines – the commonsense intuitions that surface in ordinary language: by recasting these intuitions on firmer theoretical grounds, the concept of alienation thus provides the heuristic resources agents need to develop a more robust geo-social critique of the forms of life they are engaged in.

Social alienation in contemporary capitalist societies

In this section, I seek to delineate the contours of social alienation. However, the variety of phenomena that this expression subsumes is potentially so vast that an initial point must be clarified. In what follows, I presume that the alienation of human labor that is coercively institutionalized through the capitalist wage system has been (and still is) the most efficient catalyst of social alienation (*lato sensu*) in contemporary society – and that as such, it deserves close attention. However, I do not attribute an *a priori* foundational status to the alienation of human labor in the overall picture of social alienation. In other words, I do not contend that every manifestation of social alienation is unilaterally caused by the alienation of human labor: such a claim would mobilize a simplistic, one-sided account of the modernization process. However, I also presume that the continuous deployment of the wage system has had a crucial structuring role in the consolidation of social alienation in general.

In what follows, I propose an interpretation of the concept of social alienation that demonstrates its composition of two mutually-constitutive facets (one subjective, one objective): highlighting both aspects of this concept indicates how it can be harnessed to introduce analytical distinctions that help to describe and interpret a fluid, entangled reality. After having delineated the characteristics of each facet in the first two subsections, I contend that social alienation is not a purely descriptive, normatively-freestanding concept – but that it inevitably bears an evaluative dimension.

The objective facet: congealed forms of value

Most accounts of social alienation place their exclusive focus on individuals, that is on *who* is subject to alienation and *how* this phenomenon is manifested in the life of those who experience it (whether consciously or not). However, this approach is incomplete: it insufficiently attends to *what* actually generates alienation. Haber (2013) provides a thorough account of alienation in which its objective facet is explicitly unpacked. Of course, Marx's (1992a) landmark analysis identified the commodity form as the ultimate (objective) recipient of the (subjective) alienation experienced by a constellation of atomised private producers. However, I contend that in a world where the global division of labor has reached unprecedented levels of scale and complexity, entities (e.g., machines, algorithms, organizations, markets, etc.) that are teleologically oriented towards the production (and circulation) of commodities can appear as *intermediary moments* of objective alienation. This is the case when these entities come to fetishize the productive relations that constitute them, thus presenting themselves as emancipated powers gifted with their own self-consistency – thereby acquiring a kind of transcendence over social life. Individuals tend to take for granted the apparent autonomy of these entities, and let the sense of their own agency, as well as its scope (both individual and collective), be modified accordingly. I contend that the objective facet of alienation points precisely towards these entities *insofar as agents, in their subjective*

mind states, target them as objects external to themselves and relate to them as such, thereby establishing their false objectivity behind their back².

Since the dawn of industrial capitalism, there has been a continuous effort to circumscribe more precisely the concrete instantiations of this objective facet – and these have differed significantly over time, though always pointing to entities generated through capital accumulation (and being, for this reason, ‘congealed forms of value’, or ‘dead living labor’). The steam engines in industrial England were probably among the first entities in modern capitalism to be attributed (mistakenly) such an independent life. As Malm’s (2016) study suggests, their swift introduction into factories hugely affected laborers’ working conditions by dictating a ceaseless acceleration of production rates and an unprecedented intensification of discipline. In this context, the demonisation of steam engines quickly became an integral part of British working-class culture: this propensity of laborers to personify machines indicates that these were *not only* perceived as material, inert, spatially-circumscribed devices being imposed to them – *but also* as epitomes of deeper patterns of exploitative social relations, of which they were the concrete manifestations (Malm 2016, chap. 10). Although machines (often constituted of a hardware ‘basis’ with an additional software ‘layer’) continue to instantiate this objective facet of alienation, the unprecedented integration of the world economy in recent decades has enabled a multitude of other segments of social life to instantiate it too. This is notably the case of business firms, which have been, since the Industrial Revolution, the vectors of a deep, uncontrolled transformation of public life (Pettit 2015): the organizational growth of these private bureaucracies was notably made possible by the consolidation of private property rights, the structuration of corporate law, and the gradual lifting of constraints on the creation of limited liability corporations (Ireland 2010). When compared with machines, firms, when they are construed as objective facet of alienation, appear even more evidently dynamic, spatially-unbound, and gifted with a form of agency – and not without good reasons (List et Pettit 2013). Furthermore, staying with examples on a macro-scale, other entities than firms also embody objective alienation: markets are a notable case in point, for they often appear superficially to have a substantive or ontological density that they are deprived of in reality. Yet markets differ from firms in several ways – their internal coordination is much looser (if it exists at all), their spatial inscription is more fragmented, and they lack any sort of group intentionality.

All this being said, it is important to note that the three examples I have developed – machines, firms, markets – are not mutually exclusive; rather, various patterns of objective alienation tend to overlap in social life, but by doing so on different scales. For example, if I sell my labor force to a company, I can experience the machine with which I am working, and/or perhaps the corporate department to which I belong, and/or even the whole organisation of the firm as a whole – as each retaining a certain kind of autonomy and simultaneously exerting constraints over my agency (discussion on the resultant forms of subjective alienation will follow). This is made possible by the fact that all of these entities ultimately owe their “ghostly objectivities” (Lukács 1972) to a generalised, continuous appropriation of human labor that includes the appropriation of my own labor force, which

only accounts for an infinitesimal fraction of social labor. In this case, the fact that I end up targeting some entities as if they were self-consistent (and thus relate to them accordingly) ultimately derives from the structural properties of wage relation in which I am engaged – which implies that I put my labor force at the disposal of my employer, and hence accept that the flow of activities that I deploy as a worker is directed towards heteronomous ends³.

In *Capital*, Marx (1992b: 953) consciously used the word ‘capital’ as an expedient, for he knew that this single term encapsulated a diverse array of social relationships, which, far from being frozen, constantly evolve in the never-ending flux of production. The word is thus a consolation prize but aims to indicate the diaphanous reality that lies behind it: ‘capital’ is neither a subject, nor an object, but rather a bundle of relations whose dynamism is predicated, as I have said, on a relentless appropriation of human labor (Ollman 1976: 188). It is precisely when individual agents fail to interpret the social world through this relational lens (and to act accordingly) – e.g. when they are unable to construe their private labors as always already entangled with a totalised social labor – that entities oriented towards the production and circulation of commodities (and commodities themselves) gradually solidify as they conceal the networks of inner relationships that constitute them, and eventually ‘throw away the ladder’, thus falsely appearing unshackled and autonomous to individual agents – even if the working activities that the latter deploy remain the ultimate drivers to the reproduction of social structures (and of their corresponding ecological niches)⁴.

The subjective facet: estranged human activity

In this subsection, I return to the more commonsense meaning of (social) alienation by focusing on the concrete ways in which individuals experience it. Before going into greater detail, I would like to emphasize that the following description of the subjective facet of alienation will be clearer if we consider it against the backdrop of a self radically immersed in the world, with this relational embedding being the individual’s inescapable condition. In other words, the beliefs that individuals can abstract themselves from the world to find refuge in an inward, pre-social self, or that they can lose (or retrieve) an authenticity that predates the social relations in which they are engaged, are both equally impossible. As Jaeggi (2014: 217) states it, “if the self emerges only in relation to *something* [...] [then] this world is always a social world.” In her perspective, alienation can no longer refer to the loss of a *substance*; rather, it is better interpreted as the unfortunate transformation of a set of *relations*. In what follows, I demonstrate that this approach has reached a consensus in contemporary social philosophy. To this end, I scrutinise how three philosophers (Fischbach, Haber and Jaeggi) have followed this line of reasoning, each giving evidence of how alienation denotes an experience of estrangement.

By suggesting that alienation *characterizes the experience of “de-objectified beings”, who have somehow “lost [access to] the world”*, Fischbach (2009) is the only one of these philosophers who still mobilizes the semantic field of ‘loss’. A careful cross-reading of Marx and Heidegger underpins his neo-Arendtian diagnosis, for both philosophers emphasized that

the emancipated subjectivity that modernity so praised had remained abstract, formal and unable to give an account of individuals as beings with needs. According to Fischbach, this is the case because the emergence of this subjectivity rested on a primal dissociation between the subject and objects, which the deployment of technology and capitalism continually fuelled. Overcoming alienation presupposes that individuals oppose the social processes that accentuate this deprivation from the world. This implies that they elaborate new ways of objectifying their own being – or, in other words, that they develop meaningful, de-reifying links in their social life.

Although they display different accents, the accounts by Haber (2007) and Jaeggi (2014) converge in several important ways and, more specifically, highlight the shift from a substantial to a relational conception of alienation. Using a diachronic analysis, Haber stresses that, from the early developments of psychoanalysis down to postmodernism, the intellectual achievements of the 20th century have dealt the decisive blow to ‘naïve/easy’ conceptions of subjecthood. Far from being self-sufficient, one needs to understand the individual subject as “always-already exposed to alterity” (Haber 2007: 211); as such, her consistence is constituted through an openness to herself (*Selbstwelt*), to the other (*Mitwelt*) and to the world (*Umwelt*) – with these three instances unfolding simultaneously. Haber suggests that alienation *refers precisely to the alteration of those very relationships that concretely instantiate this openness*. A reconstruction of the concept thus entails “going through a symptomatologic study of how these relational distortions are manifested” (Haber 2007: 238), by focusing successively on the three aforementioned ‘worlds’.

Though constructed in a very different way, Jaeggi’s (2014) baseline argument shares many of Haber’s insights. Drawing on both the analytical and continental traditions, the German philosopher develops a thorough theoretical framework that aims to supersede essentialist interpretations of alienation by a robust recasting of the concept in relational terms. Conducting such a conceptual renovation opens new perspectives for critical theory : it confers on alienation a pivotal role in the production of an “immanent critique of forms of life” (Jaeggi 2015) that does not need to appeal to ultimate ethical values. Building on an in-depth analysis of four empirical cases that each shed light on specific facets of alienation⁵, Jaeggi concludes that if “self-alienation is also alienation in and from the social world [a hypothesis she defends], then the problem, understood as a disturbed relation to self and world, can be solved only in, not beyond, the world of social practices” (2014: 217). Alienation thus points towards *the very experience of the individual who fails to relate proactively to the social practices in which he or she is ineluctably engaged* (be it in her family life, at the workplace, etc.). Conversely, this suggests that self-realization is “to be understood not as a realisation of something [...] but as a way of being active”. Jaeggi (2014: 206) continues by underlining that “we realise ourselves insofar as, through this externalisation, we emerge out of the ‘night of possibilities’ into the day of reality (Hegel).” Her argument that self-realisation is only possible through activity in (or contact with) the world underpins her critique of other influential “contemporary ‘worldless’ accounts of self-

realisation”, which tend to focus exclusively “on the realisation of individual uniqueness [and] on originality” (2014: 209), as well as conceiving of deliverance from alienation in terms of self-invention. According to her, such a Rortyan conception of self-realisation is unsatisfactory, for it implicitly suggests that the self “invents itself as something new, and that it is free and unhindered in this fashioning process” (2014: 188). Against this seemingly demiurgic model, she defends her view that self-realisation is best clarified when framed in terms of self-appropriation, as a process “in which finding and inventing, constructing and reconstructing, are equally primordial. [...] The process of appropriation [thus] always reckons with the existence of something prior that it takes over and transforms” (2014: 188). Jaeggi’s attempt to anchor alienation in a renovated, explicitly Hegelian framework enables her to develop a ‘thick’ understanding of the concept, which draws on an embedded and comprehensive image of the self-in-the-world that does not overemphasize cognitive reflexivity. In this respect, her project resonates with the work of Dreyfus and Taylor (2015). From what precedes, it thus seems quite clear that Jaeggi’s overall schema is largely compatible with the arguments that both Fischbach and Haber deploy.

Description and evaluation

I have outlined above a two-sided approach to social alienation, arguing that an analytical distinction between its objective and subjective facets (i.e., congealed forms of value *and* individuals estranged from their own activities) sharpens our perception of how certain relational patterns structure the social world. I also argued that this inquiry should presume against the realist hypothesis that there is not a clear-cut line between the self and the social world, but that the two are inescapably entangled in the same continuum. From this point of view, social alienation is a descriptive concept that can be deployed in order to enhance our understanding of the mediations that dialectically constitute the social world. As Ollman remarks, the concept of alienation effectively allows to shed light on how

“people acquire their conception of reality from what they experience (they reify the forms of value because of what occurs in the metamorphosis of value), and [how] their conception of reality helps determine what they experience (the metamorphosis of value only occurs through the reification of the forms of value)” (1976: 204)

Yet at the same time alienation can serve the function of an evaluative concept: for the case of the alienation of human labor, for example, I consider, along with the Marxian tradition, that it is bad and to be overcome⁶. To demonstrate the analytical value of social alienation we can therefore apply both its descriptive and evaluative functions to the particular context of the workplace.

First, this concept appears as a heuristic tool that allows to emphasize connections between the working activities deployed by living individuals on the one hand, and ossified, thing-like social formations on the other. As these two opposite poles are re-described through the prism of alienation, they do not appear rigidly opposed, but rather mutually constituted in a fluid process. This does not mean that they symmetrically co-emerge in an ever-flowing present:

rather, it is more accurate to describe their intertwined genesis as occurring through desynchronized, differentiated temporalities, in a morphogenetic process (Archer 2007). Since the objective facet of alienation points towards parcels of congealed labor (i.e. crystallised *past* social activities), these constitute an always already present context that is a decisive condition to the continued reappearance of its subjective facet, i.e. individuals actually experiencing an estrangement from their own activities. This observation resonates with Haber's claim that there is something like a "methodological primacy of subjective alienation, which is experienced as such [and so can therefore be subjected to phenomenological inquiry], over objective alienation [congealed value forms], which is rather understood as a sociological phenomenon" (2008) (see also Hetzel 2015). The foregoing reasons thus suggest that harnessing the concept of alienation enhances the clarification of this subject/object divide.

However, and this is the second point, the very existence of this divide signals an uneven distribution of power that favours some while discriminating against others, depending on the position they respectively occupy in the social matrix. Considered in this perspective, the alienation of human labor appears *normatively* questionable – for it is predicated on (while accentuating in turn) a distortion of social relations that fetters the practical progression towards a horizon of autonomy (Honneth 1982; Cohen 2001). This horizon takes the free cooperation of individuals in the sphere of production as an egalitarian ideal of workplace relations (Anderson 2017), and conceives every concrete step taken towards the superseding of the wage relationship as a desirable intermediary objective.

All of this being said, I thus argue that it is therefore justified to consider that since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the generalisation of the alienation of human labor has significantly contributed to accentuating social alienation in general, by increasing the prospect that individuals would fail to find themselves 'at home' (or fail to experience themselves as autonomous beings) in a world more and more intensely depersonalized by market forces. In this light, social alienation thus appears to be an obstacle to the development of free personality – and as such, it should to be overcome.

Alienation from nature: to be overcome, or not?

In this section, I seek to outline a more precise definition of 'alienation from nature', and to demonstrate that it is by no means reducible to social alienation, although neither can it be entirely disconnected from it. In this endeavor, I first stress the important contribution of environmental philosophy to these debates, before turning my gaze to social philosophy. After having expounded the connections existing between these two fields, I offer a brief explanation of why critical theory has lagged behind in appreciating the era-defining character of the global environmental crisis.

From environmental philosophy...

An important insight from contemporary environmental philosophy suggests that alienation from nature can, under certain conditions, be considered as a qualified good. In this respect, Hailwood's (2015: 16) proposal to disentangle three distinct ideas of nature is helpful: *the natural world* refers to the all-encompassing sense of nature ('all that exists'); *nonhuman nature* obviously denotes the parts of the natural world that are not human, but also those that have not been (materially) shaped and (semiotically) interpreted for human-oriented purposes; and *the humanized environment*, or *landscape*, designates the parts that have been shaped/interpreted. Against this backdrop, Hailwood suggests that an appropriate participation in the natural world requires both drastically limiting the reifying effects of human 'landscaping' activities while so endorsing some estrangement from the nonhuman. The latter task requires recognizing the inescapable otherness and difference of nonhuman nature – a perspective that has been extensively explored by biocentric and ecocentric philosophers (for the former, see Rolston 1989; for the latter, Callicott 2014; Leopold 1968). The concept of 'alienation from nature' thus conveys contrasted normative evaluations depending on the idea of nature that is evoked. For the examples, if by nature we mean 'landscape', then 'alienation from nature' will often be valued negatively (e.g., human communities being confronted with undesirable transformations of the material world – see the example in the following paragraph); but if by nature we mean 'nonhuman nature', then 'alienation from nature' will be, to some extent, valued positively (i.e., recognising that orchids, albatros and even whole biomes flourish in forms of life that are beyond our grasp; this offers us an insight into the uniqueness of our human experience).

As Hailwood states it, "landscaping is the ongoing historical process through which humanity physically shapes its environment [and] fills it with symbolic meaning" (2015: 41): by this definition, relations between persons are thus mediated by the humanized environment. In this context, estrangement from the landscape often signals a lack of justice (both distributive and recognitional) that derives from uncontrolled and/or unintended anthropogenic transformations of nonhuman surroundings. These transformations can be propelled by the deployment of human forms of life marked by an uneven distribution of power; this deployment shapes not only social contexts but also (and simultaneously) natural ones (Boonstra 2016), thereby generating 'diffracted' forms of violence that can jeopardize livelihoods (Nixon 2011). Following the Marxian tradition, it seems that the diffusion of this form of estrangement derives, to a large extent, from a generalisation of the alienation of human labor – there is thus a close connection between alienation 'from society' and 'from nature' (when 'nature' stands for 'landscape'). We can take the case of people living in the Niger Delta, for example, where coastal landscapes have been destroyed by oil extraction: the scale of human interference in more-than-human ecosystemic processes has reached such levels there that local communities no longer recognize themselves as part of their native habitats. Symmetrically, Shell's employees working on offshore platforms also experience estrangement: being under the authority of their corporate hierarchy, they engage in activities that subject nonhuman parts of the natural world (e.g. remote hydrocarbon deposits located

deep beneath the seabed) to practices of rational landscaping. In this case, the implicit endorsement of a form of human exceptionalism reduces nonhuman constituents of the natural world to the status of inert matter (crassly, stuff) – and thus presupposing that they can be manipulated at will according to human instrumental needs. In both cases, this experience of estrangement from the landscape is negatively charged. The situation of Nigerian communities is, of course, worse: their capacity to engage in virtuous landscaping activities and to feel ‘at home’ is obstructed by the enormous scale of an industrial pollution generated by others. Shell’s employees, on the other hand, may certainly feel at odds with the transformations that their collective work imposes upon the nonhuman environment – but the fact remains that most of them have chosen this job, and that they earn a comfortable wage from it. Thus these two positions, while sharing a slight family resemblance, differ in significant ways. More fundamentally, what makes this landscaping process normatively questionable (both for those who generate it and for those who suffer from it) is that it can alter the prospects of persons experiencing some form of *positive* estrangement from nonhuman nature. Returning to our first example, with the disruption of the ecosystemic processes that supported their livelihoods in the Niger Delta, Nigerian communities have thus lost the traditional landscapes that had long been vehicles of recognition for their members; these landscapes had indeed shaped and imagined in ways that valued some forms of estrangement from nonhuman nature (traditional animist cosmologies conceive of the world as saturated with deities and spirits – all of them enmeshed in vegetal and animal forms of life). As far as Shell’s employees are concerned, the failure to endorse some estrangement from nonhuman nature derives from the full-scale instrumental agenda that constitutes the normative horizon of their landscaping practices. In this case, the idea of an inescapable ‘otherness’ of more-than-human nature is completely eclipsed, and a wholly utilitarian perspective has been mobilized to justify extraction.

...to social philosophy back again

All this considered, it is clear that ‘alienation from nature’ can receive either a negative or a positive appreciation depending on the context of its use. This challenges the widely-received idea that alienation is inherently a bad thing that should be overcome; it also points towards the necessity to develop more decentered and modest conceptions of human agency. Among critical theorists, Adorno was certainly one of the first to explore this avenue: from the 1930s onwards, his bleak appreciation of the historical trajectory of Western societies led him to reject Marx’s conviction that the advent of classless society would coincide with a rational (and therefore harmonious) mastery of nonhuman nature. Around the mid-20th century, the global environmental outlook was already quite sobering: most human societies were embarking on the path of industrial development, and it appeared blatant that the pursuit of economic growth implied a violent subordination of the nonhuman natural world to mercantile interests. Although Adorno viewed human history and nonhuman nature as dialectically entwined, he considered it was utter non-sense to fully absorb the latter into identity-thinking – that is, to

subject it compulsively to the unifying impetus of human thought (Adorno 1984, 2015). In this perspective, he interpreted the Western world's proclivity to environmental destruction as a marker of its cultural decadence – itself marked by an irrepressible, deeply-buried temptation to negate otherness (Cook 2011; Cassegård 2017). Schmidt, one of Adorno's former students, famously suggested that the mature Marx had abandoned the utopian aspirations of his early writings about a resurrection of the whole of nature, and dismissed on this basis the prospect of a reconciliation between human history and nonhuman nature through socialism. He hinted that man's wrestle with the elements would probably have no end – which did not necessarily imply, of course, that this wrestle would inevitably take the form of a ruinous antagonism (Schmidt 1971). Around that same period, Marcuse's (1989) position revealed more ambiguous. On the one hand, it bore evident traces of Adorno's non-identity thinking, making clear that the emergency to renounce exploitative relationships with nonhuman nature implied to surrender to “the impenetrable resistance of matter”, and hence to recognize that “nature is not a manifestation of ‘spirit’, but rather its essential limit” (1989: 69). On the other hand, its overarching framework still seemed to be imbued with instrumental, strongly-anthropocentric values (betraying the persistence of some sort of identity-thinking): Marcuse could thus start a chapter on “nature and revolution” by asking “what is involved in the liberation of nature as a vehicle of the liberation of man?” (1989: 59, emphasis added).

Fifty years later, it is possible to consider that Rosa's (2019) recent reconstruction of the concept of ‘resonance’ has certainly contributed to clearing the last remnants of identity-thinking that were still ingrained in the theoretical apparatus of critical theory – thus giving it the robust normative horizon it needed to deploy a principled critique of alienation. Influenced by the Romantic tradition, Rosa contends that developing resonant relationships with nonhuman nature requires dismissing the idea (frequently associated with (post-)modern formulations of the ideal of autonomy) that it is, as such, essentially disposable for human ends. Reminiscent of Adorno's intuitions on non-identity, Rosa's proposal is quite unprecedented in the Hegelian tradition: it explicitly conditions the realization of free personality to the possibility of experiencing nonhuman nature as a realm that essentially *transcends* our existence, and that ultimately retains an irreducible heteronomy – regardless of any modifications we could make to it through practices of landscaping. This experience of resonance, Rosa contends, cannot be socially organized: if its spontaneous appearance often arises in environments characterized by limited human interference (rather than in landscapes destroyed by human activities), its triggering remains uncontrollable. Although Rosa's contribution on this point could be deemed as minor, I argue that it is decisive: by favoring a ‘weak’ rather than a ‘strong’ anthropocentrism (the latter having long been championed by modern Western culture), it confirms a shift in the wider political imagination that inspires critical theory, and prepares the stage for an in-depth dialogue with environmental philosophy and empirical Earth system sciences.

Connecting the dots

Although the previous developments suggest that ‘alienation from nature’ can be adequately captured by critical theory, it is worth highlighting the shortcomings that have blunted the po-

tential of this school of thought – up until today. When Horkheimer created the so-called Frankfurt School in the early 1920s, he laid the foundations of an interdisciplinary research program that initially aimed to connect philosophy and the social sciences: Foster and Burkett observe that as a result, “most Marxian theory in the West became associated with a social science that was divided off from natural science” (2016: 225). Over the long-term, the persistence of this blindspot led to an “eclipse of material reflexivity” (Charbonnier 2020): even though later critical theorists showed increasingly eager to denounce the destruction of natural habitats, it remained unclear whether the actual realisation of their normative commitment to human flourishing (which, in the case of Marcuse, nearly takes the form of a ‘fully automated luxury communism’) could pass the stress test of bio-geo-physical planetary constraints. In other words, critical theorists have tended to lack a robust empirical understanding of the deep-seated connections existing between modern images of the good life and their underlying ‘metabolic’ premises (e.g., a significant consumption of fossil fuels). This lack of ‘material awareness’ is indubitably a severe weakness: in what follows, I seek to clarify how it could be addressed, and I suggest some avenues for future research.

Alienation as the yardstick of a principled geo-social critique

In this section, I contend that a rearticulated concept of alienation (i.e., combining alienation ‘from society’ and ‘from nature’) is useful not only to develop fine-grained descriptions of the ethical experience of individuals in contemporary societies, but also to help them develop a normative analysis of the forms of life they inhabit – by scrutinizing both their social structure and their relational insertion in the wider natural world. Employing this concept in this unified way allows, I suggest, the intellectual bolstering (and recasting on more solid theoretical grounds) of commonsense intuitions that have become widely shared in a time of global environmental crisis – e.g., about the wrongness of our relationship to nonhuman nature. Upon further reflection, many will also see how this wrongness derives from unjust, coercive social-economic dynamics that shape our lives are themselves blind to the ecosystemic macro-processes into which they are built.

I have suggested that the concept of alienation can be used heuristically as a way of ordering and interpreting dense empirical material with appropriate analytical categories (e.g. in our case, the ‘social’, the ‘natural’) (Hornborg 2017), so as to help individuals to improve their sense of agency. This effort of disentanglement, far from being straightforward, however, proves rather challenging – indeed, the flow of experience that it aims to elucidate essentially presents itself as raw and indiscriminate. Individuals experience the ‘social’ and the ‘natural’ as fundamentally enmeshed, and thus any attempt to analyze their own situation of alienation will require sorting the ‘wheat from the chaff’. This exercise, however, will help them assess the extent to which these forms of alienation should be overcome – or just simply lived with. Consider the alienation of human labor, for example. Although it is often described as the pure expression of social domination, this domination is never purely freestanding: its effectuation is always mediated by infrastructures (for a discussion of this term, see Carse

2017) that are made of non-human components. The day-to-day use of these infrastructures by embodied individuals shapes collective participations to the wider natural world. From this perspective, the ‘social’ is therefore *built and maintained through* the ‘natural’ (Adorno 1984). The status of these infrastructures is ambiguous, however: take the case of a manager working in the glass and steel skyscraper that hosts his corporation’s headquarters. In this highly-technological landscape, the managers’ immediate nonhuman surroundings can be interpreted as embodiments of human agency and intentions that exert a diffuse control upon his action. In this (Marxian) perspective, “[the manager’s] ‘coping’ in or with this environment consists in simply acting out the ‘appropriate’ habitual behaviours the artefacts are designed to enable with ‘convenience’.” (Hailwood 2015: 225) A significant part of the alienation that is structured by the wage relation is therefore actualised through a constellation of things (big and small – from the reinforced concrete structures of the building to the architecture of its IT systems) that have been arranged notably through the investment of wealth gained from previous cycles of accumulation. Insofar as infrastructures enable structurally unjust social activities and relations *from the past* (‘dead alienated human labor’) to ‘cumulatively crystallise’ and radiate back onto the *present*, the alienation they convey can be deemed negative – and thus sought to be overcome. But insofar as they retain an irreducible nonhuman component (sand, cement, water, iron, coke, copper, plastic, etc.), this alienation must also retain a residual positive value – as long as we consider that estrangement from nonhuman nature is a qualified good. In this case, however, the possibility of experiencing this ‘inescapable otherness’ positively (i.e. as a source of resonance, as Rosa would have it) is significantly obstructed by the fact that the nonhuman component is rendered nearly invisible by its reification to serve human purposes.

At this junction, I wish to make the following crucial point: the geo-social problems raised by this inertial resistance of material infrastructures have been largely underestimated by critical theorists in the last two centuries. This blindspot can be at least partly explained as a deep-seated legacy of Hegel’s system, a system that Voegelin (1987) considered to be a perfect epitome of the renaissance of gnosticism in modern times⁷. According to Voegelin, Hegel’s dialectics reflect the belief that human beings can transform the fundamental structures of reality through knowledge and action, thus positing that the world is both available and transparent, entirely malleable to human will. This emphasis on the world-making potential of the human will reflects the modern conviction that it is ultimately possible to achieve rational mastery over (human and) nonhuman nature. As European countries embarked on the Industrial Revolution, this conviction gradually sedimented into a generalised Saint-simonian productivist bias that construed industrial and technological development as ultimately subordinated to social and political ends – and thus, as entirely controllable (Audier 2019). As a consequence, the prospect that entire societies could enter trajectories that would ultimately project them in situations of nearly-irreversible infrastructural lock-in has remained largely underproblematized by social theorists.

The case of Jaeggi is telling. Her attachment to the Hegelian tradition of social philosophy commits her to a worldly (rather than worldless) account of self-realization, which, in her words, presupposes that “there is always something previously there.” This “something previously there” must be appropriated and transformed by the agent as she engages in practices that seek to overcome alienation. Jaeggi therefore implies that in this effort, the agent has to reckon with the “obstinacy” of this “previously there” – but in my opinion, her description of what the latter expression denotes is too elusive: other than the self’s internal resistance, she only mentions external “social processes” (2015: 189). Her accounting, I argue, is too thin: it risks overlooking the fact that struggling against unjust social processes necessarily implies struggling, at the same time, against the nonhuman infrastructures through which they become actualised. This would require first of all a precise description of these various types of infrastructures, in order to characterise their mutual configuration and respective levels of inertia. In this view, it is therefore not only “the tradition of all dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (Marx 1996 [1852]) *but it is also* their ‘infrastructural legacy’ – since infrastructures effectively constrain the recomposition and transformation of the various sets of social rules and conventions that give shape to human agency (Barry 2013). Once this inertial resistance of nonhuman infrastructures (i.e. their ability to frame certain patterns of power relations and correlative practices) is more clearly delineated, I contend that we can address them with three types of practical attitudes: *destruction* (as Ludd would have it), *desertion* (as Melville’s famous anti-hero Bartleby would have it), and *reflexive reorganisation*⁸. This final option suggests that agents can collectively deploy practices that reshape deficient infrastructures in order to alleviate the patterns of alienation that they structure (Feenberg 1999; Boyer 2017): however, such transformative achievements are likely only to be local and limited in scope – furthermore, they must count on some residual estrangement from the nonhuman surroundings (even once these have been re-arranged so as to be stripped from the domination patterns that were encapsulated into them). By contrast, the first two options (destruction and desertion) may be preferable when and where infrastructures are deemed to be so wholly saturated with historical coercive power relations that they cannot be taken back and transformed. The moral implications of each of these possible practical positions vis-a-vis material infrastructures constitutes a philosophical problem that logically emerges from the foregoing discussion on alienation; it is a problem that would merit further research.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to recast the concept of alienation on a firmer theoretical ground, by suggesting that its social and natural dimensions could be employed cooperatively. Re-articulated in such a way, the concept of alienation appears as normatively-bivalent: depending on the context of its use, alienation (or estrangement) can be ‘bad’ or ‘good’ – and as such can be used make different judgements depending on the situation. The concept can thus be har-

nessed as a survey instrument that could be compared to a “critical refractor” that alternatively uses different “theories, ideas and assumptions as ‘lenses’ to assist in clarifying some situation or issue” (Hailwood 2015: 251). Its heuristic potential, I argue, must be continually re-tested through the description and evaluation of existing forms of life. Alienation’s internal heuristic bivalence prevents, I argue, a wholesale polemical use of the concept that would favour purely expressivist, romantic critiques of the capitalist economic system – while it is stripped-down, analytical critiques that are most needed⁹. Thus from yet another angle, this heuristic bivalence renders our re-articulated concept of alienation an ideal candidate to become the normative yardstick of a principled, open-ended geo-social critique. As I have argued throughout this paper, the *raison d’être* of this critique consists in describing and evaluating the thick relational canvas into which human forms of life get consituted; in other words, it scrutinizes the extent to which these forms of life allow their partakers to realize themselves as free persons. However, at a time when the core bio-geo-physical processes of the Earth system are being disrupted, “realizing oneself as a free person” cannot be attended at the expense of nonhuman nature anymore: rather, it implies to engage in sustainable landscaping practices in the different spheres of social life (e.g., as a producer or as a consumer in the market sphere, or as a citizen in the polity). The shift from a social to a geo-social critique thus implies adding a new ‘passive’ component (i.e. the need to recognize the givenness of our primordial anchoring in a nonhuman natural world) to the ‘active’ component that has traditionally been the business of critique (i.e. the effort to unmask and undo entrenched patterns of human domination): this shift from a social to a geo-social critique also demands a close understanding of what is at stake in such a shift; tensions in this transition – if well understood – can become points of dialogue and sources for future creativity. In a time of global environmental crisis, critique must paradoxically yield to fragility in order to rebuild its damaged reputation and reimagine its possible contribution.

Notes

1. Given my insistence on ‘society’ and ‘nature’, I could have used the epithet ‘socio-natural’, or ‘socio-ecological’. However, I maintain that ‘geo-social’ better captures the enveloping of the social by the natural, with the prefix ‘geo-’ implicitly hinting at this encompassing relationship; ‘socio-natural’, by comparison, suggests more of a juxtaposition in my reading.
2. Like this definition of the objective facet of alienation, the three complementary definitions of its subjective facet that I shall outline in the next subsection will appear in italics.
3. This phenomenon also derives from the intrinsic limitations of our cognitive abilities as embodied individuals. As we, human beings, navigate complex environments, we cannot help but use the (semi-)rigid categories of language in order to stabilise and make sense of the processual fluidity of social life around us. Our attention span is not unlimited; it also seems un-

avoidable that every time we seek to disentangle the relational constitution of a specific segment of social life (e.g., as we are engaged in some sort of problem-solving activity), we will temporarily ‘take for granted’ the existence of other segments – thus ‘forgetting’ (both cognitively and practically) their relational nature. As Cassirer has it, “we cannot engage the functions intended to edify the reality of experience while simultaneously submitting them to critical investigation” (cited in Vandenberghe 2008: 11). The capitalist labor contract structurally intensifies these dissociations by widening the rift between the praxic and poietic components of human work.

4. Hornborg (2017) rightly recalls that “when a fetishized object has the appearance of having agency, it is the perception of the object which influences human agency, not the object itself that acts”. This suggests that it is not “justified to dissolve the crucial difference between purposive agency [which is devoted to sentient living beings] and merely having consequences [that is devoted to artefacts and social formations].”

5. Jaeggi suggests that subjective alienation often manifests in (1) a feeling of powerlessness in the face of one’s actions, (2) the loss of authenticity in social roles, (3) the experience of internal division, or (4) indifference to the world. Note that Jaeggi does not seek to delineate the specific role played by the alienation of human labor in amplifying these negatively-charged experiences.

6. There are types of social alienation that are positively-charged. In psychoanalysis, the fact that a child experiences the figure of his/her father (or mother) as alien (i.e., that he/she experiences ‘defusion’) is a necessary (and thus desirable) stage in the development of his/her individuality.

7. With its roots in first century AD, gnosticism consists in a collection of religious ideas and mysteries which originated in early Christian and Jewish sects, and never ceased to resurface throughout Western culture since then. A common feature in most gnostic cosmogonies is the conception of the material world as intrinsically evil – which implies that salvation can only be obtained through the participation in a speculative system. Voegelin suggests that gnosticism re-emerged in modern times during the English Civil War (which was marked by an intensification of religious zealotry) before growing even larger and becoming entirely secular with the French Revolution.

8. This line of argument parallels Hirschmann’s (1990) famous argument on exit, voice, and loyalty.

9. A monist understanding of alienation could consist in holding it as bad and to be overcome whatever the context. Yet and as I have suggested, this one-sided approach is not adequate any more in a time of global environmental crisis.

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