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INTRODUCTION

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Losing one's place in the world: rethinking alienation as a diagnostic for our time

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ABSTRACT

This special issue reclaims *alienation* as a critical concept within contemporary social theory, arguing for its renewed relevance in understanding the complexities of twenty-first-century life. Drawing on anthropological case studies from diverse global contexts, the contributions explore when, how, and why experiences of alienation emerge, and what conditions make our current moment particularly susceptible to them. In this introduction, we outline the theoretical and epistemological framework that underpins the issue as a whole. We argue that alienation should be approached not as a clearly defined pathology, but as a diagnostic lens through which to engage with the concerns, contradictions, and discontents that shape everyday life. This perspective allows centring lived experiences and using them as a foundation for theorising the broader structures and forces at play in the contemporary world. We suggest that keeping the focus on the realm of daily life allows us to attend both to the diffuse, often unspoken experiences associated with alienation and to the specific narratives and genealogies of estrangement that circulate in particular places and times.

KEYWORDS

Alienation; estrangement; social theory; anthropology; social diagnosis; common concerns

An epidemic of estrangement

In the early morning hours of 6th November 2024, as the results of the US presidential elections materialised, commentators across the world were scrambling to make sense of what had just happened. Amidst the flurry of media analyses, one explanatory pattern kept surfacing: People had voted for Trump because of how alienated they had become. His popularity was a symptom of an "estrangement epidemic" in the United States (Coleman and Johnson 2024). This assertion was not new. In the aftermath of Trump's first election success in 2016 alienation emerged as a key trope through which his supporters were characterised. Marginalised white Americans were portrayed as individuals who had become so disconnected from society that they felt like "strangers in their own land" (Hochschild 2018), feeling overlooked, looked down upon or left behind by the liberal political elite (Gusterson 2017; Kalb 2021). Trump, this line of analysis suggested, had cleverly weaponised people's alienation by promising to restore their stolen sense of pride and meaning (Hochschild 2024). He emerged as "the president of alienation" (Harvey 2018, 429).

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But Trump voters were not the only Americans to be labelled alienated. In the months following the elections, more and more sections of American society came to be characterised through this trope. If Trump voters had been alienated by liberal cosmopolitan agendas, Democratic voters were now also described as gripped by a deep sense of alienation from the society they would be living in under Trump's presidency. David Strong from Malibu poignantly describes this in a letter to the editor published in the *New York Times* on 7 November 2024. "It's hard to convey the sense of alienation I feel now," he writes.

> Living in America, in a country I once felt so deeply connected to, is becoming harder by the day. As some of our elected leaders continue to chip away at equality, human rights and environmental responsibility, I feel less able to be active in the causes that mean so much to me. (Strong 2024)

A few months later, when the 26-year-old Luigi Mangione allegedly killed UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in New York, the alienation trope appeared yet again. A handwritten notebook emerging soon after Mangione's arrest suggested that the murder was an expression of disdain for the corporate greed and power marking American society. As details about Mangione's motives started to emerge, the public reaction took many by surprise. The comments on the UnitedHealthcare's condolence page on Facebook had to be taken offline after it received more than 80,000 laughter emojis and platforms such as Reddit and X were bursting with supportive statements. As media commentators were trying to make sense of this wave of solidarity for a murderer, the alienation trope appeared again: Both Mangione and his supporters acted the way they did, they suggested, because of how estranged they had become from a society that was driven by capitalist profiteering. "Mangione may well be a deeply disturbed person," Sarah Baxter (2024) noted in London's *Standard*. "But one of the more troubling aspects of his case is how much he has in common with other Americans in his anxiety and alienation."

These snapshots of "alienation-talk" marking current US public debates create a bleak depiction of contemporary America. They suggest a country made up of unbridgeable rifts, a nation populated by a people who have lost their sense of orientation. Powerless and humiliated, they are no longer capable to envisage a place for themselves in society. What is more, these examples from the United States do not represent isolated incidents. Similar socio-political dynamics can be found in other parts of the world: The rise of the German far-right AfD party is to a great extend propelled by anxieties of "native" Germans becoming replaced by migrants in their own country. Environmental activists' sense of hopelessness over political decisionmakers' refusal to act against the impeding climate catastrophe, provoking intense imaginaries of human extinction, reveals another, yet different, alienated relationship. In China, the spread of online memes about "lying flat" expresses young Chinese people's sense of powerlessness in the face of sky-rocketing youth unemployment (Day 2021). The situation of Palestinians and those who stand in solidarity with them across the world is another example. Having to watch the slow annihilation of Gaza with much of the Western world not just remaining schtum about Israel's genocidal actions, but actively silencing critical voices, has caused many to be gripped by an all-encompassing sense of disbelief and despair. Even academia is not immune from these dynamics. As universities become increasingly corporate-like and tightly managed, more and more scholars feel removed from the institutions they work for, to the point that they question the meaningfulness of their occupation (Hall 2018). Indeed, the creation of this very special issue was surrounded by events that many of its contributors described as alienating. The sacking of our colleague Ghassan Hage by the Max Planck Society for posting statements critical of Israel just a few months after he had presented a compelling keynote in the workshop in 2023 that this special issue originated in rendered many of

us speechless. As taken-for-granted assumptions about academic freedom were being shattered, many of us started to not just question our role in society, but our place in the academic institutions we were supposed to belong to.

There are good reasons why the trope of alienation is so omni-present. At the current historical conjuncture, humans' relationship to society appears to be out of whack. Social problems of various kinds—livelihood precarity, rampant inequality, the breakdown of public consensus, looming climate catastrophes, and the uncertainties associated with pandemics and wars—whilst not new, have become more tightly intersected in an age of overlapping crises, or "polycrisis" (Henig and Knight 2023). Consequently, a growing number of people across the globe voice fears of losing their footing in the world, an opaque anxiety which is compounded by feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness or withdrawal from the social worlds they inhabit. Deeply personal, these feelings also affect the political make-up of societies, having profound geopolitical impacts on our world. This is what modern thinkers have long interpreted as alienation or estrangement: an ailment commonly described as the separation of a person from their sense of self or their social environment (Figure 1).

Yet, paradoxically, at the same time as talk about alienation has taken centre stage in the public domain, theories of alienation have receded from social scientists' view. Driven by 1960s critiques of alienation theory's "proliferating ambiguity" (Ricoeur, 1968 cited in Choquet 2021, 106), in recent decades thinkers across the humanities and social sciences have turned away from it. There were good reasons for this theoretical self-correction, but the omni-presence of alienation-talk across the world suggests that the experience of alienation itself has never gone away. If anything, it has become more pronounced, thereby creating a range of issues for scholars,



Figure 1. Drawing by Jay Davies, 2025.

who are lacking the vocabulary to analytically capture situations they observe in social life. While there is an abundancy of alienation-talk, alienation-analyses are few and far in between.

This special issue confronts this paradox and aims to bridge the gap between alienation-talk and alienation-analyses. It does so in two ways: empirical and theoretical. On the one hand, the issue zooms in on manifestations of estrangement in different corners of the world and puts the value of alienation as an analytical tool to the empirical test. The issue brings together anthropological case studies from China, India, Singapore, Australia, Serbia and Lebanon to address the question of why, how and when experiences of alienation emerge or accumulate and what has made the twenty-first century so prone to it. From the realms of highly educated young employees in China's burgeoning e-tech industry or high school teachers and students in urban China to the lifeworlds of marginalised peasant communities in the Indian-Bangladesh borderland, and from the collective struggles of Serbians grappling with corruption and authoritarianism to the dissection of an Australian anthropologist's experience of seeing her indigenous collaborators exposed to settler-colonial violence time and again—this collection of articles gives insight into diverse breeding grounds for alienation and shines a light on the historically embedded, classed and racialised nature of these environments.

On the other hand, the issue joins recent attempts to resurrect alienation theory (Henning 2024; Jaeggi 2014; Rosa 2020), aiming to make theory more apt for empirical examination. In doing so, it strives to add conceptual depth to anthropological engagements with alienation. While sociologists have been key contributors to past and current efforts to (re)consider alienation as a critical concept for the social sciences (e.g. Hochschild 2003; Kalekin-Fishman and Langman 2015; Ludz 1976; Silver 2019) these conversations hardly ever find their way into anthropological debates. With very few exceptions (e.g. Berliner 2020; De Martino 2012; Pina-Cabral 2022; Walle 2023) anthropologists have worked with non-theorised, taken-for-granted understandings of alienation and estrangement. They have mainly treated it as a by-product of the dispossession and displacement that are the result of colonialism—often, however, without explicitly making use of the conceptual vocabulary of alienation. Such lack of critical engagement is visible throughout anthropology's history as a discipline. It is full of examples of nostalgic depictions of indigenous people either as the last bearers of "authentic" non-alienated existence or as entirely alienated and lost in the modern world. This demonstrates that the question of how to conceptualise and address alienation anthropologically is of crucial importance. Recent anthropological engagements with the sociopolitical ailments affecting late capitalist societies also corroborate this (e.g. Ahmann 2024; Dzenovska and Fedirko 2021; Pasieka 2024). The rapid dismantling of social institutions, the erosion of hard-won rights and the mushrooming of exclusionary ideas and movements call for a serious engagement with alienation that is both empirically and conceptually grounded.

In this introduction, we lay the theoretical and epistemological foundations for the articles that follow. We do so by mapping the overriding argument holding this special issue together: That we need to reconsider alienation as a key diagnostic of our time. We will show that such a diagnostic approach to alienation is not concerned with pinning down alienation as an objectifiable "disease." Rather, it allows us to shine the spotlight on concerns people are grappling with and to use these everyday struggles as the basis for theorisations that are of direct relevance to the world we live in today. Approaching alienation as a social diagnostic that is grounded in people's "common concerns" (Xiang, Uherek, and Horálek 2022), enables us to give a name to dynamics people are concerned with and shed light on the conditions that give rise to these concerns. It brings to the surface the multiple and often-times paradoxical dynamics tangled up in the phenomenon of alienation. As the opening snapshots show, the alienation trope is multi-facetted. It has subjective and objective

facets and can simultaneously be used as an analytical and descriptive tool. Keeping our focus on the realm of daily life allows us to capture both, the diffuse and often unlabelled experiences commonly linked to the phenomenon of alienation and the distinct narratives and genealogies of estrangement circulating in particular places at particular times. Using alienation as a social diagnostic allows us to embrace rather than fight the ambiguity surrounding the notion of alienation. Ultimately, our aim is to generate insights that can travel back to public discussions.

In a first step, we show the emergence of alienation as a multilayered notion. By shedding light on alienation's modern history, we demonstrate that alienation theory has always been characterised by conceptual ambiguity. Depending on whether thinkers were more interested in objective or subjective issues, they foregrounded either the existential struggles surrounding individual experiences of alienation or the structural issues provoking them. We make visible how this epistemological division of labour has created a range of conceptual inconsistencies, provoking critiques to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s that were so influential that they brought on several decades of stagnation in alienation theory. In a second step we position ourselves in line with recent scholarly attempts to move beyond this impasse. We demonstrate why we believe that alienation's multiplicity needs to be productively utilised. By delineating the ambiguous and at times paradoxical ways the trope of alienation appears in the case studies, we develop a diagnostic take on alienation that highlights the interplay of both structural and existential aspects. Rather than attempting to come to one unitary conclusion, this special issue allows for the emergence of ambiguities.

The origins of an ambiguous concept

The issue builds on an established history of thinking with and through alienation. Key Western thinkers and writers from Rousseau to Schiller, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Marx to Heidegger and Sartre have deployed alienation as an angle to interpret the anxieties and contradictory experiences people face in their daily lives. With the onset of modern thought, alienation turned into the disease of civilisation par excellence, a cipher through which philosophers were able to capture the insecurity, fragmentation and rupture caused by advanced forms of industrialisation (Jaeggi 2014, 6). Commentators from different, and often even opposed, intellectual traditions agreed "that there was a certain 'uneasiness' (…) a sense of not being at home in the anonymous, mechanised world of late modernity" (Henning 2024, 6).

Yet, while alienation became a key modern trope, its definition and usage have always been slippery. The word's modern etymological appearance and meaning differ across various parts of the world (Figure 2). In some languages, such as German or English, alienation (or *Entfremdung*) is anchored in vernacular language and used as an emic descriptor, albeit in slightly different ways. Both in modern English and German everyday language the term alienation is used to capture the cooling down of interpersonal relationships (Schacht 2015, 3–5). Yet, while the German *Entfremdung* (estrangement) has a decidedly existential connotation focused on the subjective experience of being *fremd* (strange, alien),[1] the English alienation is closely aligned with psychological dynamics, specifically with the depression arising from being isolated or left out.[2] Contrary to the German and English case, in most other regions in the world, alienation does not appear in vernacular language at all but is exclusively used as a concept in theoretical debates. Yet as the contributions in this issue show, the use of alienation is never stable. This becomes particularly apparent in the Chinese context, where it evolved from a foreign loanword applied in high theory to a term utilised by ordinary people (Xiang 2025 this issue; Zhou 2025 this issue). Similarly, the case study from Serbia shows that the circulation of alienation can wax and wane over time, moving

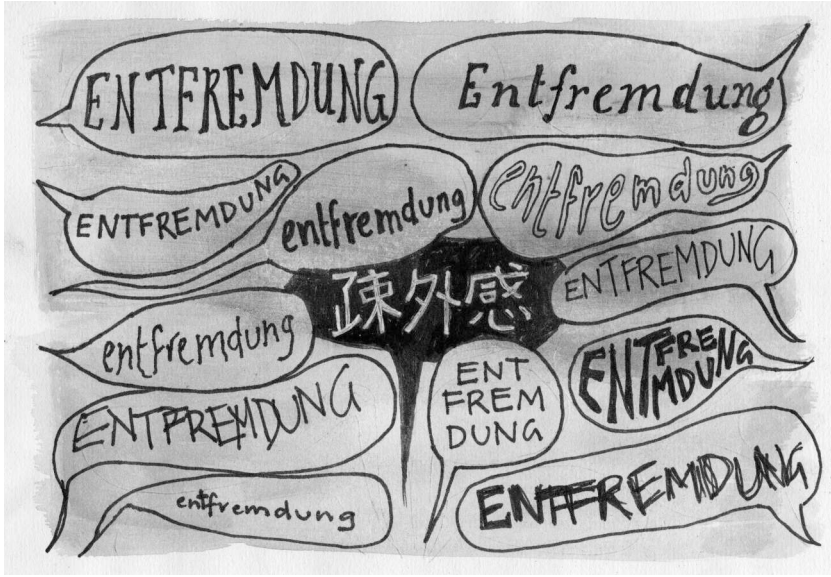


Figure 2. Drawing by Jay Davies, 2025.

from the closed circle of Marxist Praxis Philosophy to the public realm, just to disappear again and pop up in different shapes and forms decades later (Tošic 2025, this issue). The different linguistic usages of alienation across the world demonstrate that a universal definition of the term is impossible.

Besides the difficulty of pinning down alienation linguistically, its conceptual use is eclectic. It has been deployed by thinkers to describe a range of different experiences (or combination thereof), including a sense of distance from society, rootlessness, loss of humanity, inauthenticity, powerlessness, meaninglessness, voicelessness, isolation, self-estrangement, depression or desperation. Some scholars have tried to systematize the notion of alienation (e.g. Schacht 2015; Seeman 1959) by creating a catalogue of social categorizations, but to no avail. Alienation continues to be a slippery notion, used by social scientists and intellectuals to theorise a hodgepodge of experiences. To make things even more complex, some thinkers commonly associated with alienation theory, apply the term sparsely or not at all. Alienation theory is intertwined with a number of "sibling concepts," which, while describing similar phenomena, make use of different vocabulary to do so. One example is Max Weber's "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*), a notion he developed in direct conversation with Marx's alienation theory to describe the "fate of our times" (Weber 1946, cited in Etzrodt 2024, 657), the societal processes of rationalisation through which life is made calculable, leading to a loss of meaning. Likewise, Durkheim (1951) used the term "anomie" to describe social processes of alienation, while Kierkegaard (1941) spoke of "spiritual despair."

Even though the use of alienation is everything else but homogenous, its modern circulation in both vernacular and theoretical realms marks a clear diversion from earlier Christian applications of the term. Alienation was a key trope in biblical stories, where it indicated the spiritual distance from God. These "fall-of-man"-type narratives described human's very existence on earth as alienating (Kendall George 1983). Provoked by Adam and Eve's act of disobedience, humans' banishment from the Garden of Eden marked the beginning of their estrangement from God. This Christian trope of estranged humanity was counterpoised by eschatological hopes of a de-alienated

future in the presence of God.[3] While the theme of man's homelessness in the world echoes through many modern engagements with alienation, its cause has come to be interpreted differently. With the onset of modern thought alienation is no longer linked to the spiritual separation from God, but to the ills of industrialised society.

This theme first emerges in its most explicit form in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who describes alienation as a quintessential modern experience of self-forlornness in the face of rationalisation and industrialisation—a permanent state of living outside oneself, leading to an imbalance between self and society (Henning 2024, 17). Throughout his large body of work, modern humans appear as deformed beings who have fallen out with their own nature and become estranged from their innermost needs (Jaeggi 2005, 26). The figure of the alienated modern human arising from Rousseau's writings stands in stark contrast to the uncorrupted (or unalienated) natural state of being that can be found in indigenous groups or people from earlier epochs—a nostalgia interwoven with the descriptions of alienation that echoes through many classical anthropological texts (Trouillot 2003). In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* from 1754 Rousseau (1999, 84) notes that "the savage lives within himself; the social man, outside himself, lives only in the opinion of others and it is, so to speak, from their judgement alone that he gets the sense of his own existence." Whilst approached from a different theoretical angle, this theme of modern alienation as an inauthentic mode of being soon re-emerges in Hegel's work in the shape of the fragmentation of modern consciousness. In his writings, the *Entzweiung* (split) of humans in a society marked by disintegration emerges as the key source of alienation (Hardimon 1992).

Although there is much more to be said about the complex theorisation of alienation in Rousseau's and Hegel's work, for the purpose of this special issue it suffices to point out their influence on the development of alienation theory. These two thinkers do not just contribute to the emergence of alienation as a key trope in modern philosophy and literature, their writings make visible an epistemological partition between existential and structural questions that has come to mark subsequent engagements with alienation. Where Rousseau sees the key problem of alienation in the processes fuelling the loss of self in modern society, Hegel's focus is on the complex internal dynamics underwriting the chasm between individual and society (Jaeggi 2005, 27–28). While the writings of both thinkers contain structural as well as subjective elements, they each weigh them differently, leading to distinct conceptualisations of alienation. Depending on the epistemological lens scholars choose, they either foreground the systemic issues leading to the emergence of alienation, or the existential struggles the presence of alienation brings to the fore. In what follows, we outline how the sustained perseverance to uphold this epistemological division has fed into alienation's conceptual ambiguity and eventually provoked alienation theory's decades-long stagnation.

Two epistemologies of alienation

Karl Marx is often seen as key representative of the structural approach to alienation theory, inspired by Hegel's and Feuerbach's anthropology. In Marx's highly influential work, alienation appears as an inherent feature of modern capitalist societies. Driven by profiteering, exploitation and competition, capitalism inhibits human's potential to thrive, thwarting what Marx calls our "species being" or *Gattungswesen* (Brook 2009, 18). In his writings, people become alienated as they are drawn into powerful capitalist production processes that deprive them of the ability to freely use their creative capabilities (Øversveen 2022, 446). This, in turn, estranges humans from the products of their labour, leading to the inability to meaningfully identify with their activities.

The figure of the alienated worker emerging from Marx's early work is a figure who no longer has control over her life. "Her product is exchanged on a market she does not control and under conditions she does not control," Rahel Jaeggi (2014, 12) notes. The estrangement from the work we perform, Marx ([1844] 2010, 220) writes, "turns man as far as possible into an abstract being, a machine tool, etc., and transforms him into a spiritual and physical monster." This has profound social consequences because "what applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labour and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labour and object of labour" (Marx [1844] 2024, 59).

From Marx's perspective, alienation is therefore inextricably linked to systemic questions. Yet, true to the notion's ambiguity, the concept of alienation in his work is not consistent. While it is very prominent in his early writings, particularly in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, it disappears from his theorisation for some time, to reappear in the *Grundrisse* in a radically reworked form. After this, it fades into the background again (Harvey 2018, 425). These different phases in which Marx engages with alienation are representative of a conceptual split between his early and later engagements with alienation. Whilst both approaches take the systemic context of capitalist society as their point of departure, early Marx is mainly preoccupied with the sensual and existential questions arising from workers' alienation. He is interested in the ruinous effects it has on their bodies and minds (Brook 2009, 14) and in the ways it inhibits their potential for self-fulfilment (Harvey 2018, 426). In the *Grundrisse*, on the other hand, Marx leaves these humanist questions behind and shifts his focus to the political economy producing alienated humans. It leads him to describe alienation as specific to the inequality and dispossession systemic to capitalism. Alienation no longer features as a subjective, universal condition of labour, but as rooted in the capitalist mode of production specifically affecting the working class (Øversveen 2022, 448) but that can be overturned via revolution (Zeitlin 1966).

This split in Marx's alienation theory shows that even within one and the same thinker's work, epistemologies of alienation do not have to be stable. However, subsequent generations of social theorists have struggled to deal with this ambiguity and tried to eradicate or purify it. In Marxist scholarship, alienation occupies an awkward position, to the point that, as Emil Øversveen (Øversveen 2022, 441) suggests, "it is a controversial question whether or not there even exists a Marxist theory of alienation at all." The contentious status of alienation in contemporary Marxist theory is peculiar, given that it is one of the few concepts from Marx's scholarship that made its way into everyday language (442). It can be attributed to the lasting influence of alienation critique emerging from Marxist social philosophy in the 1960s, and particularly the work of Louis Althusser ([1965] 2005), who argues that Marx's concept of alienation is ideologically flawed. He builds this claim on the (in itself faulty) assumption that alienation only appears in Marx's early work, before the introduction of historical materialism and is hence underdeveloped (Choquet 2021, 106). Althusser ([1965] 2005) launches a sustained attack on Marx's humanist or "ideological" conceptualisations of alienation. He does so based on the critique that Marx's concern with existential questions leads to essentialising depictions of humans. Althusser does indeed uncover an important weakness haunting not just Marx's early engagements with alienation but alienation theory at large. Similar to Rousseau's alienated modern man, the figure of the alienated worker emerging from the young Marx's writings, gets tangled up in romanticising imaginaries about a primordial, harmonious and unalienated human essence predating capitalism (Harvey 2018, 426). Althusser therefore argues that the humanist Marx is not compatible with "proper" Marxist theory. In line with this suggestion, alienation theory needs to be replaced by an anti-humanist stance that foregrounds structural problems rather than framing them as universal "problems of man" (Øversveen 2022, 443).

While Althusser's project of cleansing Marxist theory from humanism has, in turn, received ample criticism (e.g. Thompson 1978), his claim that alienation is a flawed concept has become accepted as common sense in social philosophy (Jaeggi 2014, 28). In recent years, scholars have started to explore the re-appearance of alienation theory in Marx's later work, pointing out that the political economy angle he deploys there in fact allows for a new, de-essentialised reading of the concept (Harvey 2018; Øversveen 2022). Yet, while these attempts to rethink alienation alongside Marx are of critical importance (and have, indeed, been crucial to the development of this special issue), they reinforce the epistemological division between structural and existential approaches.

This division is perhaps even more apparent in the second epistemological tradition in alienation theory. Linked to existential schools of thought, this approach tends to fade out systemic questions related to alienation, instead focusing on the ways in which alienation shapes individuals' subjective experience of being-in-the-world (Figure 3). This recalls the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to alienation, which describes the inherently estranged or separated experience of the subject. For Jacques Lacan, alienation marks an unavoidable and necessary process in an infant's development and its identification to an Other (the mother) when it enters the realm of language (Lacan 1998). As Verghaeghe notes, in this understanding, "the subject is split from its real being and forever tossed between eventually contradicting signifiers coming from the Other" (Verhaeghe 2019, 10). The existential tradition has more pessimistic undertones; it associates alienation with the homelessness and emptiness of modern man. In Nietzsche's work, modernity is described in terms of the horizonlessness it has produced in individuals, leaving them to navigate a cold, meaningless space without a sense of where they are headed or why they exist (Beiner 2018, 38). This trope of modern humans' existential homelessness reappears in



Figure 3. Drawing by Jay Davies, 2025.

Heidegger's ([1927] 1996) writings. His point of departure for thinking about alienation is our practical, everyday interaction with the world. One of Heidegger's key arguments is that as human beings we are "thrown into the world." This means that we always already find ourselves practically related to the world, we are always already moving and acting within it (Jaeggi 2014, 15). Alienation arises from a misapprehension—or, as Heidegger puts it, "inauthenticity"—that he sees as a byproduct of modernity. While humans should be living with an acute awareness of their entangled relationship with the world, they have sunk into a state of self-forgottenness, dealing with their presence in the world in a taken-for-granted-way. Humans live almost entirely in the present and fill their days with banal habitual routines Heidegger denotes as "self-anaesthetizing" practices that distract them from the essence of existence (cited in Beiner 2018, 76). They approach the world from a detached point of view, failing to recognise that they are always already a part of it (Jaeggi 2014, 18).

Alienation, then, is a distorted mode of existence. It occurs when people fail to apprehend that they are the co-makers of the world and hence possess agency, instead adapting themselves entirely to others. Heidegger speaks of the *Herrschaft des Man*, the "dictatorship of they" (Duff 2015), determining modern life: Driven by the anxiety that the freedom of existence is too much to bear, humans neglect their possibilities and seek shelter in the public realm of *das Man* (the "they"). As Brady (2018) puts it: "So, Dasein flees from anxiety and falls into the embrace of 'their' way of choosing things, doing things, valuing things, thinking things, saying things, and so on, merely because that's what 'one' chooses, does, values, thinks, says etc." Rahel Jaeggi (2014, 19) points out that in Heidegger's alienation theory, the social world (*Mitwelt*) occupies an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it is crucial to our being-in-the-world: We understand our existence from within our situatedness in a world that is intensely social. On the other, it is precisely this social world that is the cause of alienation, as we are forced to understand ourselves from public interpretations (20).

Like Marx's earlier writings, Heidegger's deliberations on estranged Dasein emerging from *Being and Time* have been highly influential. His theorisation of the anxieties underwriting modern human existence have shaped subsequent generations of scholars aiming to decipher the lived experience of alienation. Heidegger's work has contributed to the establishment of an experiential lens that treats alienation as an inherently intersubjective phenomenon. In the existential tradition, the subjective experience of alienation is always looked at against the backdrop of "the self radically immersed in the world, with this relational embedding being the individual's inescapable condition" (Choquet 2021, 109). It forms a counterbalance to structural approaches that unilaterally frame alienation in terms of the relations of domination that cause it. Rather than seeing alienated humans solely as victims of an oppressive system that leaves no space for them to manoeuvre, existential approaches aim to identify the existential conditions under which human beings can understand themselves as masters of their own actions (Jaeggi 2014, 23). It offers a way of thinking about alienation without the paternalistic undertones marking many engagements with alienation following the structural approach, where alienated people are portrayed as seized by a false consciousness they need to be liberated from (Øversveen 2022, 443). Yet, the existential approach comes with its own set of inconsistencies. One core problem with Heidegger's alienation theory is that in thinking through the possibility of unalienated existence, he gets caught up in a range of essentialising ideas, some of which have deeply exclusionary undertones. In recent years, there have been many debates about the question if the fact that Heidegger was a member of the National Socialist Party and an anti-Semite has tainted his entire body of work (Schnegg 2023), including his theorisation of alienation.

While scholars from both the structural and the existential approach link alienation to the advent of modernity, they do so from very different political points of view. Where Marx historically situates alienation in the context of the formation of capitalism, Heidegger links it to the evolution of modern liberalism, bemoaning the existential abyss this has created in humans. In his sweeping critique of the conservative and anti-egalitarian agendas underwriting Nietzsche's and Heidegger's writings, Ronald Beiner (2018) points towards the multitude of ways their depictions of estranged modern beings echo through far-right ideologies. Both writers see the cosmopolitanism and openness marking liberalism as the root cause of alienation, as it displaces "authentic" modes of being. Heidegger's search for unalienated existence is therefore also the search for the recovery of a genuine sense of rootedness (Beiner 2018). On this mission, he seeks inspiration from the poems of Friedrich Hölderlin that call upon Germans to reconnect with the essence of their Germanness by re-establishing a sense of *Heimat*. What is at stake for Heidegger in Hölderlin's poetry is not just the rootedness in being German, but overcoming the alienation of Being. Beiner (2018, 94) notes that for Heidegger, "rootedness in the homeland and healing of the alienation of Being *are one and the same thing*." There is not just an uncanny resemblance with Nazi ideology in this portrayal of the existential homelessness caused by modern liberalism. It also produces romanticising depictions of a human essence.

As has become evident from this brief outline of the two schools of thought marking alienation theory, essentialism is a recurring problem that can be found across different approaches. Where Rousseau contrasts alienated moderns with the "natural" uncorrupted state of indigenous people and Marx with the harmonious life predating capitalism, Heidegger ascribes this role to the figure of the German peasant who holds his authenticity against the homelessness of liberal cosmopolitanism. Jaeggi (2014, 23) points out the core difference between the ideas about alienation emerging from the Heideggerian and Marxist intellectual traditions: while conservative theorists of alienation see modern freedom as its cause, progressive thinkers see alienation as a form of unfreedom. Heidegger's fascination with authoritarian ideologies and his tendency to produce essentialising ideas of humanity have been critiqued intensively by many scholars (Escudero 2015). This includes critiques from thinkers within the existential school of thought itself, who have attempted to move beyond the conservativism in Heidegger's thinking by building a bridge between Marxist and phenomenological takes on alienation (Fanon 2018; Sartre 2004). However, despite attempts to salvage alienation theory from the ruins of essentialism, the ambiguity and inconsistency marking its theoretical history ultimately proved to be the nails on its coffin. From the 1960s onwards, the concept came under heavy attack from all sides. Scholars no longer saw use in an antiquated concept that was steeped in ambiguity. Once a key notion for social criticism, alienation almost entirely disappeared from theoretical debates. This conceptual stagnation lasted until very recently, when global phenomena such as increased loneliness and a general sense of meaninglessness and exhaustion shared by even the most privileged fringes of the global population gave rise to attempts to bring alienation back into the analytical vocabulary. As our outline of the two epistemological approaches marking alienation theory show, the critiques of alienation were of crucial importance as they made visible the paternalistic, essentialising and conservative undertones underwriting both structural and existential approaches. Yet, in what follows we will explicate why we believe that alienation still possesses crucial explanatory power, particularly when employed in conversation with ethnographic observations. We will sketch the contours of a retrieved take on alienation—a decidedly anthropological perspective that sharpens alienation's importance as a diagnostic concept while attempting to avoid the many conceptual traps the concept harbours.

Rethinking alienation as a social diagnostic

In calling for a reconsidered take on alienation, this special issue joins a growing chorus of contemporary scholarly voices denouncing its absence from debates, instead suggesting that it is time to "retrieve and consolidate the critical resources traditionally associated with the concept of alienation" (Choquet 2021, 106). This project of retrieval needs to move beyond the epistemological division that has been the cause of so much confusion and inconsistency. We agree with Pierre-Louis Choquet's (106) suggestion that rather than treating the conceptual instability of alienation as a weakness, it needs to be viewed as an advantage. At a time marked by polycrisis (Henig and Knight 2023) such an approach is urgently needed. It allows us to both unmask the relations of domination that have brought us to this point (Choquet 2021, 106) *and* take seriously the lived experiences of estrangement it produces in humans.

In developing this renewed take on alienation, we are guided by the work of philosopher Rahel Jaeggi and sociologist Hartmut Rosa—two alumni of the influential German social philosopher Axel Honneth, who have, each in their own way, mapped the outlines of such an approach. Rahel Jaeggi (2014) draws on both Marx and Heidegger to establish a critical phenomenology of alienation. In thinking existential and Marxist epistemologies in their togetherness, she attempts to move beyond the essentialisms that have haunted alienation theory. Jaeggi (2014, 32) argues that the "rich social and ethical dimension of alienation critique can be made accessible without the strongly objectivist interpretive scheme that is frequently associated with it." She shows that rather than presupposing a harmonious unified subject, the notion of alienation becomes productive precisely when it actively works *with* the anxieties and crises marking human relationships with the world and society. In treating alienation as an inherently relational phenomenon Jaeggi recasts it as a problem that needs to be approached empirically. She contends that as alienation emerges from the social world, it "can be solved only in, not beyond, the world of social practices" (Jaeggi 2014, 217). In approaching alienation from an empirical point of view, Jaeggi (2014, 26) highlights the usefulness of alienation as a social diagnostic, "an interpretive scheme with whose help we can simultaneously discover, interpret, and evaluate certain phenomena in the world."

Jaeggi's attempt to think beyond hardened epistemological divisions and the stubborn essentialisms this has created formed an important point of departure for this special issue. Rather than asking the authors to deploy a particular epistemological angle, or to stick to specific schools of thought, we encouraged them to approach alienation diagnostically—from the basis of the common concerns of the people they work with. In deploying alienation as a social diagnostic, we are, however, careful not to reproduce one-dimensional readings of illness. Against the backdrop of the history of Western medicine, the metaphor of "diagnosis" conjures problematic images of diagnostic practices shaped by power imbalances and normative assumptions about health and well-being. It brings up images of regimes of testing aimed at determining the root cause of patients' problems through a catalogue of pre-set clinical criteria. Basing social research on such an essentializing, patronising, pathologizing and technology-determined understanding of diagnosis would be deeply problematic. Yet, beyond the Western medical context different diagnostic approaches have emerged that lend themselves better to capturing the complexity of the social world. In Chinese medicine, diagnosis consists of four types of human sensoria based on interaction: to look, smell, listen and touch. From these four diagnostic tools, touch is considered the most important and involves the doctor putting her hand on the patient's wrist to feel their pulse. It is a widely used metaphor in China that intellectuals are expected to "feel the pulse of society" in order to "diagnose our times." Diagnosis can therefore be intersubjective, interpretive,

and caring. Rather than following a pre-determined testing regime, the diagnostic approach we promote starts with the "symptom" (the *problématique*), and uses ethnographic observation to look beyond its surface, detecting its manifestations, causes, consequences and interpretations in the life of our interlocutors (for an example of this common concerns approach, see Xiang 2021).

By zooming in on people's daily struggles, the authors use alienation as a tool that enables them to highlight societal ruptures and breaking points. They build on a long tradition of radical thought that treats diagnostics as an important avenue through which we can interpret alienation as an inherently social phenomenon (e.g. Fromm 1981; Honneth 2017). This does not imply treating social issues as objectifiable forms of disease or society as a patient (Jacobs and Kettner 2016, 2). As Grama (2021, 101) notes, the language of pathology has been deployed by many social scientists, not to identify clinical treatment programmes for socio-political crises, but because it enables them to delineate the present in a particular way. Keeping the focus on people's lived experiences, a social diagnostic lens shines the spotlight onto the interface between individual and society and enables scholars to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that lead to the breakdown of this interrelationship.

This becomes apparent in a range of contributions to this special issue that look at the social symptoms caused by the breakdown of the (liberal) public realm. The case study from Singapore takes its point of departure in the highly polarised relationships between citizens emerging in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The erection of hardened social and moral boundaries between "good" citizens, who support the greater good by agreeing to get vaccinated and the "not-so-good" citizens, who, for various reasons, refuse the vaccine, lead to the creation of a deep sense of estrangement between people who can no longer envisage sharing the same national space with each other. Shiwei Chen (2025, this issue) shows that the alienation caused by societal fragmentation processes does not just take shape on a political level. It has the power to enter people's bodies, where it makes itself felt through symptoms, such as skin rashes, anxiety or depression. Minhua Ling's (2025, this issue) case study of the lived experiences of the 2022 Shanghai lockdown also points towards the intersection of social and bodily symptoms in alienation. Through personal narratives circulated on blogs and podcasts, she makes visible how the intersection of health and political crises and the Chinese state's response to them leads to people becoming estranged from their own bodies and sense of self—to the degree that they feel removed from ordinary things that are essential to the functioning of the human body, such as food or sleep.

In using alienation as a diagnostic lens, the authors are able to show how small, seemingly banal bodily experiences of estrangement tie into larger social, political economic conditions at a moment of acute "rupture" of normality (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This does not, however, mean that the body emerges as the only site for the empirical study of estrangement. In Estella Carpi's, Biao Xiang's and Zihuan Zhou's contributions, the diagnostic lens shifts towards other realms of human sociality, such as the workplace. As pointed out earlier, the figure of the alienated worker plays a crucial role in the establishment of alienation theory, particularly in the Marxist tradition. Yet, while Carpi, Xiang and Zhou take inspiration from Marx's work, they adapt his concepts to make them fit for the context of twenty-first century work realities. In focusing on the interplay between existential and structural issues, the authors move beyond simplistic portrayals of alienation as either entirely caused by capitalist acts of disempowerment or individual breakdowns of meaning. They reveal the all-encompassing character of forms of estrangement that find their origins in formal employment relations but extend beyond the workplace (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018).

Estella Carpi explores this theme of contemporary workplace alienation through the prism of humanitarian professionals in Lebanon (Carpi 2025, this issue). She shows how NGO workers

from wealthy Western countries negotiate the ethical conundrums they are confronted with in a workplace saturated with inequalities. She zooms in on the sense of disconnect this creates in them, leading to what Carpi describes as an organised form of amnesia. Two of the case studies from China also explore the question of workplace alienation. By shining a light on the regimented and surveilled daily routines of young employees in a Chinese tech company (Zhou 2025, this issue) and teachers and high school students in urban China (Xiang 2025, this issue), they make visible the ways existential and structural issues intersect. While many authors in this issue deploy alienation predominantly as a scholarly tool, the examples from China highlight the ways alienation has come to move from the secluded realm of Marxist Revisionist Philosophy to the world of middle- and upper-class people. From these case studies, alienation emerges as a self-diagnostic—an emic tool people deploy in everyday life to make sense of their experiences and formulate social critiques. A far cry from Marx's alienated factory worker, the educated and bourgeois workers in Zhou's and Xiang's ethnographies see their lives as determined by similar conditions of objectification. In the face of all-encompassing pressures and continuous acts of monitoring marking their workdays, high school teachers and employees of Internet companies actively and creatively use the language of alienation to make sense of the deep exhaustion they experience, leading them to disengage from the world.

The muteness of the (social) world

The case studies from different parts of the world show that when used as a social diagnostic tool, alienation can no longer be conceptualised from one single perspective. While in some case studies presented in the issue, people actively speak of alienation and even make use of alienation theories to make sense of their experiences, in others, they struggle to express what alienates them and what could be done to change their situation. The authors therefore actively engage with the politics of writing about and representing alienation: They carefully consider what happens when a person or social condition get labelled as alienated. What if the alienated do not (or cannot) describe their condition as alienated? Or, as Henning (2024, 9) poignantly puts it: "Do you need to know that you are alienated in order to be alienated?" The articles engage with the long-running question of whether alienation can only be diagnosed from an emic perspective, or, conversely, from the perspective of an outside observer. Rather than attempting to come to one unitary conclusion, the special issue allows space for the emergence of ambiguities. The authors use alienation as a social diagnostic, not to look for a singular pathology, but to illuminate the different corners of human sociality from where alienation emerges.

In deploying alienation as a diagnostic tool, we also take inspiration from the work of sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2020), who builds his critique of accelerated capitalism on existential and experiential questions. Leaning on Honneth's work, he tries to understand "society's potential for pathology" (cited in Grama 2021, 103). For Rosa it is only possible to decode alienation if we decode the logics underwriting accelerated capitalist societies. This, he proposes, is predicated upon social scientists looking further than the systemic dynamics often foregrounded by social theorists. Instead, they must take seriously the "strange, unresearched psychological mechanisms that make us do things we don't want to do" (see Grama 2021, 104; Rosa 2004, 88). In Rosa's work, this inclination to work against ourselves leads to a collectively shared sense of burnout. This burnout is based on a key modern anxiety—the fear of the loss of world, or, as Rosa describes it, the fear of the world falling mute.

> The scientifically, technologically, economically, and politically controllable world mysteriously seems to elude us or close itself off from us. It withdraws from us, becoming mute and unreadable. Even more, it proves to be threatened and threatening in equal measure, and thus ultimately *constitutively uncontrollable*. (Rosa 2020, 19)

This deep-rooted anxiety of the world no longer responding to us, of a world that has become numb to our causes, weaves its way through many of the articles. It appears in its most radical form in Yasmine Musharbash's (2025, this issue) auto-ethnographic exploration of the alienation she experiences in the aftermath of the police shooting of Kumanjayi Walker, a Warlpiri young man from the Australian indigenous community of Yuendumu—a community she has been closely involved in as an anthropologist for many decades. In making her attempts to support the community in their struggle for justice the object of study, she makes visible the lasting damage that can be inflicted on people by a world that categorically ignores their presence. This deafness is the deafness of a world marked by histories of racialized oppression and colonisation. Franz Fanon masterfully describes the alienation emerging from the colonial lack of reciprocity, the sense of being rendered invisible (see Ndlovu 2020, 7). He likens colonial alienation to a form of existential incarceration and metaphorically compares it to a kind of amputation or imprisonment that casts the oppressed outside of humanity. "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood," asks Fanon (2008, 85; see Ndlovu 2020, 11). Musharbash's article shows that the form of alienation produced by the colony is not restricted to the colonised. It can also be experienced by those who support their cause. This sense of despair becomes powerfully apparent from the drawings by Jay Davies accompanying the article (Musharbash 2025, this issue). As an anthropology postgraduate student, she was introduced to the Warlpiri community by Musharbash and became heavily involved in their struggles. Her drawings make visible the speechlessness that is a key part of the experience of estrangement and that often makes it impossible for the alienated to articulate their alienation. Besides Musharbash, Zhou also chose to collaborate with the visual artists Cao Kexin and Cui Yukun to explore layers of alienation that refuse narration. Jay Davies' wonderful drawings are also interspersed through the issue's introduction and many of the articles attest to the value of deploying non-traditional, multimodal approaches in scholarly engagements with alienation. They allow moving beyond the one-dimensionality of alienation talk, instead revealing the complex relationships of exploitation and domination underwriting many contemporary experiences of alienation.

In making diagnostic observations about alienation, it is important to re-emphasise that we are not looking for a treatment programme or cure. This does not, however, imply that we fatalistically accept the presence of alienation. Several authors engage in thought-experiments in de-alienation (Carpi 2025; Chen 2025; Xiang 2025; this issue). Alongside their field interlocutors they think about possible ways out of alienation—of different scenarios that would make it possible for the alienated to leap into action and re-appropriate the world. In her research with Serbian protestors, Jelena Tošić (2025, this issue) explores the moment scholars have hoped for since Marx's writings on alienation: When the powerlessness and despair of the masses vis-à-vis a corrupt and authoritarian political system turns into collective anger and action. Her long-term ethnographic observations of Serbian citizen's estrangement from the socio-political order emerging in the post socialist era allows her to shed light on the dynamics that flip the switch around. By listening to people's everyday concerns she is able to detect the moment when the shared sense of alienation becomes the grounds for political mobilisation. In ethnographically studying a mass protest movement as it unfolds, she provides a unique take on a central theme in alienation theory: The conditions that allow for de-alienation to emerge—or, in other words, the grounds on

which alienation can become a possibility for re-appropriating the world. It is within the same spirit of de-alienation, of actively searching for avenues to counter the alienation many of us experienced after his shocking dismissal by the Max Planck Society, that we asked Ghassan Hage to write the afterword to this issue (Hage 2025). Engaging with his work on existential viability has enabled us to not just think about the devastating impacts of the feeling of being displaced from one's social world, but to also consider the small, seemingly banal acts of repair people perform to make that world their own again.

The link between alienation and belonging also appears in the case study from the India-Bangladesh border. Panchali Ray (2025, this issue) studies the hypermobile social worlds of the marginalised Muslim minority who live on the *chars* or sandbanks, that emerge and disappear with the river's movements. Treated as the ultimate Other, they are a people who are not claimed, heard or seen by anyone. Because of their cross-border movements, neither India nor Bangladesh accept them as members of their national community, turning them into aliens on their own land. Here, alienation appears in the form of the tedious and dehumanising bureaucratic practices they are subjected to by border guards on a daily basis, and in the loss of the natural environment they have been historically embedded in due to the effects of climate change. Ray's article demonstrates that the plurivalent approach to alienation we develop in this issue dissolves persistent ideas of human exceptionalism that have haunted much of social theory. As Choquet (2021, 116) notes such a flexible approach to alienation makes possible the formulation of "fine-grained descriptions of the ethical experiences of individuals in contemporary societies and scrutinize the ways humans insert themselves in the natural world."

Building on these thoughts, we want to conclude with a few observations about the link between alienation and displacement. While the case studies highlight the centrality of displacement in contemporary appearances of alienation, this sense of losing one's place in the world does not always correlate to an actual experience of displacement. Often, it is the fear of becoming replaced or replaceable that drives narratives (rather than experiences) of alienation. It highlights the ambiguity of who or what exactly gets labelled as alienated: Is it a subjective experience, something that makes itself felt in in individuals' bodies and minds in distinct ways, or a narrative tool allowing us to name and analyse societal dynamics? The glimpses into the alienation talk emerging from Trump's (re-)election that we started out with seem to suggest the latter. While right-wing movements in the US and Europe are driven by racialized anxieties about the replacement of "native" citizens by migrants, the narratives of estrangement they harbour are expressions of shared anxieties of *becoming* alienated, which lends a particular urgency to the present. This exemplifies the importance of our key argument: that if we are to move beyond essentialising and conservative interpretations of alienation, we need to look at it and its associated practices, such as labelling oneself alienated, as processes located in a particular socio-political context. In doing so, we can begin to distinguish between the many layers of experience, narrative and concept that make up contemporary appearances of alienation.

Notes

1. Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. "Entfremdung," accessed January 20, 2024. https://www.dwds.de/wb/etymwb/Entfremdung
2. Oxford Online English Dictionary. "Meaning of Alienation in English," accessed January 20, 2024. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/alienation
3. Bible Hub. "Isolation and Alienation," accessed January 20, 2024. https://biblehub.com/topical/i/isolation_and_alienation.htm

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