

# An autoethnography of alienation

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Andrew Voyce

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this study is to discuss alienation from a viewpoint of autoethnography. Literature since the 19th century has described the economic determinants of social relations. The proposition is that human beings are strangers in a world they have created. The author revisits this paradigm and aims to show the relevance of alienation in the 20th and 21st centuries.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This paper uses the qualitative methodology of autoethnography with data from lived experience. The author relates the author's personal experience to the meta-narrative of alienation.*

**Findings** – *Autoethnography is an excellent tool for interpretation of the author's experiences. The author's work life correlates to models of alienation put forward by Marxist and Critical Theory thought. The author gave the surplus value of the author's labour to others, and as such, the author's autoethnography is an authentic statement. The author's experiences of poor mental health are in the context of pathology residing in alienation.*

**Originality/value** – *Findings reveal that alienation in work and in mental health is a plausible explanation for the way that social situations worked for the author. The author's experiences support a model of alienation in 20th and 21st century economies. The author shows that the author's experiences are shared by other vulnerable people.*

**Keywords** *Economic exploitation, Building work, Clerical work, Social control, Alienation, Marxism, Critical theory, Mental health*

**Paper type** *Conceptual paper*

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## Introduction

Before I hit the skids at Reading University when I overindulged in cannabis smoking and burned all my bridges, the last thing I did was to search the wonderful university library where I discovered the Marxist notion of alienation. This was the last thing I did before insanity took over, (Voyce, 2018; Voyce and Carson, 2020) and today in my older years I still see the relevance of alienation. It is a fertile area to revisit.

Alienation is a subject almost lost in popular dialogue, and my appreciation of its relevance has been gleaned through lived experience of a lifetime of underachievement. If it is allowable to “cherry-pick” alienation as a subject from the catalogue of Marxist-inspired social commentary, it is through such a focus that I can explain and contextualise aspects of my lifetime, especially my working life (Ollman, 1976; Jaeggi, 2016). That is not to say that alienation stands alone as a concept, it is rather to state that taking on board an ideology does not have to follow from the appreciation of the human race being estranged in a world created by humans. Alienation has a lot to offer as an explanation of this parlous condition. However that does not mean that I subscribe to scientific socialism or historical inevitability, class warfare and dialectical materialism.

In the following essay, I will seek to explain my journey from teenager to retirement in an autoethnographic narrative and critique. I remain uncomfortable with outcomes from the alienated social and productive system – it does not have to be like this (Jaeggi, 2016). Even though life can be tolerable, it is not inevitable that exploitation and relations of

appropriation should govern us. I maintain that there is a need to revisit the notion of alienation and to revive consciousness of the human removal from the connection with nature, work and our fellows. My experience of an alienated and exploited lifetime lends itself to the autoethnographic model, for my circumstances have never allowed an overview of social metrics. I have only my personal lived experience to guide me.

## Methodology

My methodology is autoethnography and relies on definitions of alienation to elucidate my journey from youth to old age. For me the most helpful definitions of autoethnography emphasise sharing and social justice. Poulos (2021, p. 4) details the auto (self), the ethno (people) and graphia (writing). In other words, it is a personal narrative in a social setting and written down. Poulos then goes on to quote Tony Adams: [...] "Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that: 1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflexivity'—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) Shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better".

In addition, McGrath, (2022, p. 23) also has a place for social justice and exposure as a facet of autoethnography: "No, the process has not been cathartic" – rather he wishes to lift the secrecy surrounding the abuse he writes of in his autoethnography. I follow this and also write of issues that are unspoken, that concern social justice and that can be realised by reference to the concept of alienation. McGrath advocates for an evocative autoethnography, that goes deeper than the presented story. For autoethnography to be effective, it must appeal to the reader and evoke a reaction. Readers of this essay may not be aware that an autoethnographic interpretation of an alienated society is legitimate, and that disenfranchisement is a living truth for the exploited. There is a whole discussion centring around the relations of appropriation that can be put into relief by personal experience.

What do I mean by "alienation"? I follow the four-part analysis of the term that is used by commentators on the means of production (Bronner, 2011; Jaeggi, 2016; Ollman, 1976; Singer, 2018) and the original work that identified the capitalist system as the residence of alienation (Marx and Engels, 1977). The first insight is the loss of ownership of the material production of a political economy by the worker through appropriation and exploitation. There follows a loss of identity with the products of their labour, an estrangement from the productive process, where the socially necessary work of the proletariat is exceeded to provide surplus value to the owner of the means of production, and where the worker feels controlled. Thirdly, the purpose of the human species is corrupted to serve the alienating productive process. Fourthly, the class of workers are pitted against each other in competitive labour. These are commonly stated to be the features of alienation in the Marxist and neo-Marxist sense. I will follow an autoethnographic narrative to relate my working life to these essences of alienation, albeit that my working life was severely interrupted and curtailed.

## Alienation of house building

"Invicta Homes" and "R J Voyce & Son" were company vehicles that were owned by my father, uncle and mother. The companies typically built four to six, three, four and five bedroom houses each year in places such as Chislehurst, Orpington, Sevenoaks and Crowborough. The companies were in existence from 1963 to 1975. I wonder if the owners of these desirable properties ever knew that their homes had been constructed by workmen

who never got to own and live in one of the houses they had built, me included. This is very aptly illustrated graphically in Robert Tressell's, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (Tressell, 2012), where the workers are the philanthropists giving their work away to others who are rich, even though the workers are in dire need themselves. True to Tressell's description, I was philanthropically giving away the surplus value of my labour to others.

Although I was a grammar-school boy, the building firms had no place for languages, science or the humanities, and I was used as a labourer at weekends, during school holidays and when I had finished university. My tasks included insulating lofts, unloading brick lorries by hand in the days before pallets, painting garage doors and other menial tasks that are essential to build a house. I had become a wage labourer for capitalist enterprises. I cannot say I was anything else.

Ollman (1976) maintains that alienation is anywhere that "un-alienation" does not prevail. I have to differ in that I follow Marx's materialist concept of alienation more closely. My work on the building sites was not to construct houses for people in need, or indeed for myself. Nor was the work of the other labourers for them to live in a dwelling they had constructed. They lived in council houses or other rented accommodation. The workers were selling their labour to the company as a commodity. The wage packet was the sole object of the working week. There were never any celebrations when a house was sold and there were never any thanks from the new homeowners when they moved in. Estranged labour becomes an abstraction for Ollman (1976). There is an inhuman power that puts workers in a relationship between labour and capital. I experienced the camaraderie of the building sites, being known as "groutins" for my work on bathroom tiles and told "that boy can't half drink a cup of tea", and was unaware that part of my purpose was to add the profit from my labour to the capital of the firm (Marx and Engels, 1977). This experience for me was indeed an obviously materialist one. I could not see it as exploitation, yet the value of my labour went, along with the labour of the other workers on the sites, to be appropriated to the capital of the company. The product of labour became an alien object. Through the workings of ownership of private property, the object of labour is corrupted. "The worker's needs, no matter how desperate, do not give him a licence to lay hands on what these same hands have produced, for all his products are the property of another" (Ollman, 1976, p. 143).

Reflecting on this experience, I have to say that my discovery of alienation as a topic in the Reading University library in 1969, certainly has a lot to say about the process and outcomes from my life driving diggers and grouting bathroom tiles from 8 o'clock in the morning, at every time of the year. This was not a common effort to provide each with a place to live, it was to serve the alienating production machine. It is in a context of visceral and unforgiving competition for life. In the book of Zephaniah (Ch 1, v. 13) this is seen as a consequence of life: "Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: they shall also build houses but not inhabit them" (Holy Bible, 1991). I never ignore the homeless – each has a story to tell. I met two homeless men in Bexhill. One had been made roofless when the buy-to-let flat was repossessed from the landlord by the lenders, another was made homeless when the owner returned from abroad and claimed the flat, a legal process. Due to their homelessness these men had lost their employment, one as a plasterer and one as a scaffolder. They ended up on the street as did another person I met in Guildford. He had been evicted and lost his job as an electrician. Zephaniah's Armageddon had become the 20th and 21st centuries' chaos of homelessness, in a society increasingly divided where the rich are becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. There seems little point in such men building houses for others to live in. Marx's analysis is lived out by these modern-day workers.

### **Alienation of office work**

In my 30s, I worked in Tunbridge Wells for an insurance broker trading as Spa Brokers and together we colluded to turn the failing firm around. I can describe this as a relationship of

appropriation ([Jaeggi, 2016](#)). The actual activity, the way the business was run, would please the notorious Andrew Tate (presently under house arrest in Romania), in his podcasts on running a business under his banner of Hustler's University ([Tate, 2023](#)). The management conspired with me as bookkeeper, to extend the credit offered by creditor insurance companies, surreptitiously and untruthfully. From a previous employment I knew what excuses the creditor insurance underwriters would accept for late payment and put that into practice. So, we put off payment by one month, thus enabling the bank balance to increase. This permitted Frank, the owner, to leave rented offices at a noisy station, and to buy the freehold of an office building. At once the value of the building increased due to property price rises, and the firm was solvent and owned a considerable asset. I had no stake in this manoeuvre, and all I felt was that it was satisfying that this intellectual concept had come about. We had used insurance company money in a legitimate ploy and Frank prospered. I remained a waged clerk and could not afford to make myself independent through buying a home for myself. I was striving for emancipation and independence ([Bronner, 2011](#)) yet found myself subjugated. [Jaeggi \(2016\)](#), says that understanding individuals depends on examples and precedents embedded in social institutions. I attempt to follow this with the example of my clerical work for an insurance business, as an illustration of alienation through the relations of appropriation. My work and participation in the broker's business left me as before, a poor man. My part in the resurrection of the firm was rewarded by wages. The work had become a reification, a usurpation, of my clerical life. This was not so much the material alienation of the building firm. It was alienation through appropriation of my working time and the value I brought.

### **Alienation and my mental health**

Poor mental health has had a devastating effect on my life. There is a strong connection between psychosis and alienation for me, not necessarily causative. My mental health was entwined with my history of alienation. As Michel [Foucault \(2006, p. 111\)](#) put it: there is a "pathological character of alienation". I developed the pathological condition of schizophrenia and ended up in psychiatric hospitals, places where control by others was an essential part of the system as a revolving door patient ([Voyce, 2018](#)). In the community, I was often in hostels or halfway houses where a purpose of the place was to ensure I complied with medication. As [Foucault \(2006\)](#) and Thomas [Szasz \(2010a\)](#) both explain, the psychiatric system (which includes inpatient and community locations) is not provided for the interests of the service users, it is there to serve families, the criminal justice system, employers, and not the affected individual. As Foucault wrote, I became part of "the Other". [Szasz \(2010b, p. 188\)](#) writes of the "other defined". Foucault and Szasz highlight the detention of individuals in institutions as a main function, not necessarily the cure of individuals. I was treated as an "old lag" rather than a valued member of the workforce and often consigned to a scrap heap. There are here strong echoes of alienation from the prevailing system of production. I again became part of "the Other". I was lost in exploitative productive society and the mental health system.

David [Byrne \(2023\)](#) of Talking Heads composed this verse:

And you may ask yourself, "How do I work this?"

And you may ask yourself, "Where is that large automobile?"

And you may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful house"

And you may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful wife"

I indeed found that I could not work this, I could not achieve the goals of that song despite being open to such an ambition. I was alienated and pathologised.

Crucially I never attained autonomy, which Michael [Marmot \(2004\)](#) has found to be an essential factor in better health outcomes. It was not so much my place on the income and status gradient which affected my wellbeing, it was my inability to be an independent and autonomous actor with control and participation in my life in society. He mentions the Marxist and critical theory concept of alienation in the context of inequality acting with an adverse effect. Helplessness and lack of control determine how severely poor health and poor mental health will affect the individual. Mental health issues dogged my life, I was alienated in work and when institutionalised. I had no choice or control over my life.

## Discussion

For me, alienation is a helpful descriptor of some of the challenges that include those above. Marx (in [Marx and Engels, 1977](#)) does not elaborate on the vocabulary of alienation that more recent writers include ([Ollman, 1976](#); [Jaeggi, 2016](#)), but the essence of alienation is the starting point of his analysis of the organisation of capitalism. He goes on from this point to argue that there is historical inevitability that the working class will take over the means of production to create a socialist society. Hegel's work is given as the dialectical foundation for Marx's stance, with a thesis being countered by an opposite antithesis, culminating in a new synthesis which may itself become a new thesis, on the way to an ultimate and consummate proposition. This model from [Sim and Van Loon \(2009\)](#) and others supposes a thesis of capitalist work, with the antithesis of working-class consciousness, and the synthesis of scientific socialism. This is a dialectical and ideological proposition. I am reluctant to take on the concept of alienation as a gateway to scientific socialism or to class war. For me alienation is a valid stand-alone analytic tool. It is a help in understanding aspects of my working life. As [Eagleton \(1997\)](#) says in his commentary of Marx, we need to be bound up with the world to reflect. Reflection is an essential of autoethnography ([Ellis et al., 2011](#)) and many lenses are useful in shedding light on personal experience. For example, [Lenin's \(2019\)](#) critique of the capitalist state, shows the strength of the ownership of property, even as a concept. I find this helpful in my autoethnography, whilst eschewing the chance to take on board Lenin's associated ideology of the "withering away" of the state via the dictatorship of the proletariat ([Lenin, 2019](#), p. 49). I can find the appropriation of labour in the context of the hegemony of ownership through my lived experience yet am unable to find a viable Leninist alternative. I can place my autoethnography of alienation in the sense of the appropriation of wage-labour and can leave aside a call to follow Marxist-Leninist ideology. That is my proposition. Gordon [McManus \(2012\)](#) addresses this issue, that the Cold War socialist states were part of a transition to communism. He concludes that state capitalism is as alienating as any form of exploitation through property ownership and wage labour ([McManus, 2012](#), Chapter 1). I feel justified in rejecting ideology while using the tool of alienation. For me the baggage of ideology can detract from the focus on individual experience.

In a less rigorously dogmatic paradigm, I turn to critical theory to shed light on the dilemma of my working life and its products, to the directions indicated by [Jaeggi \(2004\)](#). This is where the relationship to work is not necessarily predominant and where scientific socialism is not prescribed. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it", states [Eagleton \(1997\)](#), p. 3). What do we need to change the world from? It is from the failure of the specifically alienated society which humans inhabit. We can trouble ourselves to ask if in fact the only way to get through our lives is to accept an alienated society. In fact, people can become defensive if their lives are criticised, as is debated in the cartoons of the workmen in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* ([Tressell, 2012](#)). Production can be creative and self-fulfilling, yet the relations of wage-labour have taken this away. [Jaeggi \(2016\)](#), asks what a fulfilling society would look like. That would be, she says, where one is living an authentic life of self-determination. This is different from the classic Marxist solution of a socialist state. They are two different answers stemming from the same starting point, that of alienation. Writing from the point of critical theory, Jaeggi has this to say:

There is impoverishment and meaninglessness on one hand and impotence and powerlessness on the other. There is the absurdity and scandal of alienation in that it is self-made by humans in a world they have made. A stranger in the world that he himself has made': the concept and phenomenon of alienation (Jaeggi, 2016, p. 3).

Marxist and critical theory writers include the estrangement from the process of work (Jaeggi, 2016; Ollman, 1976). Indeed, I reflect that I was controlled especially when a clerk. I was desperate for the system to reward me for complying and had home ownership as a key goal. I saved my benefit cheques and tax rebates for a deposit on a home. Yet, at every juncture, this was hopeless. Property prices were rising exponentially, and I was left further and further behind. In this forlorn hope I sacrificed pleasures. I seemed unable to quit this mindset. Rather than accepting that my savings were never going to enable a house purchase, I could have gone on a holiday or spent savings on a pleasurable extravagance. I saw my contemporaries establish homes and families and could not accept that I could not emulate them. This ambition controlled me to accept the values of society which I could never achieve. I could never bring myself to have any other goal. This goal made me conform and controlled me in the alienated employments I found myself in.

Are we standing up for ourselves when we use absurdity in the search for an escape from our particular social form which alienates us? For Bronner (2011), we are seeking an alternative to alienation, which, elusive and unyielding, it has become associated with feelings of guilt, fear, mortality and meaninglessness (Bronner, 2011, p.105). Is there absurdity in rejecting this alienated and fearful life that we are born into? As Bronner says in his introduction, we perhaps need a Socrates to challenge long-standing beliefs. Some way in which we can question, which can be obscured by the pervasive arrangements for meeting everyday needs. Bronner evokes the liberation of the individual by movements in the arts such as Cubism, Surrealism and Dada, with their confounding focus on the impenetrable.

The drift of critical theory and postmodernist art is to move away from the restriction of Marxist materialism, yet critique is all there is to offer. There is no clear way forward except to mock the alienated conventions of a society founded on relations of appropriation. This is a way of making a stand if one has the insight.

In the 21st century, we live in a world between reality and fiction (Belsey, 2002), and where alienation through the production process, through exploitation, is no longer a viable alternative explanation to sound bites and media images. It is the possession of the visual media, with access to many, which is as important as the ownership of a building company or an insurance broker. Truth is subject to change.

## Conclusions

The current economy may be said to present distractions of austerity, Brexit, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, the cost-of-living crisis and so on. It can be argued that we remain in an alienated society where there is material exploitation and appropriation. Certainly, I can reflect on times when work meant that to me. There are different interpretations of alienation, and my lived experience is an authentic mirror of Marxist and critical theory stances. My time has been in social situations where others share this manifestation that can be said to underpin economic relations. McGrath (2022, p. 7) from an autoethnographic point of view and Jaeggi (2016, p. 219) from an exposition of alienation through critical theory, both agree that your story is not your own. Ellis *et al.* (2011) follow this with the comment that a journey and its history are not value-free. While I can say that I am living a contented life, it could have been so different. If I had been a stakeholder in the housebuilding and insurance firms, I could still be living a happy life, but in much better circumstances. I could have learned lessons other than that in the books in Reading University, which in describing alienation, were reflecting a reality. This realisation does not make me happy; my happiness is stored elsewhere. Satire and absurdity can be directed at the perverse situation where humans are strangers in a world they created as Belsey (2002) writes, but truth can be found at a deeper level of exploitation and alienation.



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