

CHAPTER 2

Theories of Alienation – Seeman and Marx

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines in detail the two contrasting approaches to alienation by Seeman and Marx. It was the discovery and subsequent publication in 1932 of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1970b), which 'rapidly became one of the most widely translated, circulated and discussed philosophical writings of the twentieth century' (Musto 2010: 94), that provided the impetus for a wide interest in researching alienation. In 1969, for example, the US National Institute of Mental Health compiled a bibliography of 225 articles concerned with alienation. More recently, ICT has driven research on the complex and contradictory relationship between technology and society evidenced by the emergence of Digital Humanities as an academic discipline, and an increase in journals, conferences, books, and publicly and privately financed research projects. However, mainstream non-critical, alienation research has confronted three problems. First is the shadow of Marx, with all its political implications; second, the difficulties in undertaking measurable, quantifiable work demanded by the dominant positivist framework; and finally the concept of alienation is frequently defined as a vague descriptor for feelings of unease or dissatisfaction.

2.2 The Seeman Model

Seeman's 1959 seminal paper attempted to resolve these problems and to 'present an organised view of the uses that have been made of the concept; and [to tie] the historical interest in alienation to modern empirical effort' (Seeman 1959: 783). Distilling the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Adorno and Wright

How to cite this book chapter:

Healy, M. 2020. *Marx and Digital Machines: Alienation, Technology, Capitalism*. Pp. 7–26. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book47.b>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Mills, Seeman constructed five categories of alienation: powerlessness; meaninglessness; normlessness; isolation; and self-estrangement. Another category, cultural estrangement, was added after the tumultuous events of 1968. These categories encouraged research programmes using metrics to determine, measure and interrogate alienation within the positivist frame. The explicit (erroneous) inference is that studies of alienation using Seeman are non-polemical, non-political and independent of ideology. Since Seeman's perspective informs most research investigating alienation it is appropriate to outline and critically evaluate his model.

Powerlessness is the belief that a person's 'own behaviour cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes or reinforcements' she wants (Seeman 1959: 784). While treating powerlessness from the standpoint of the 'objective conditions in society' (Seeman 1959: 784), he focuses specifically on 'powerlessness as expectancy' firmly rooted in the discrepancy between an individual's expectations for control (Seeman 1959: 785) and the minimal possibility of achieving such control. Seeman acknowledges that the concept of powerlessness draws upon the work of psychologist, Julian Rotter (1954) (cited in Seeman 1959: footnote 6: 784). Powerlessness as ultimately determined by an individual's perceptions of her experience.

Meaninglessness as the 'individual's sense of understanding the events in which he is engaged' or the lack of clarity about what she is expected to believe. It is derived from 'Adorno's treatment of prejudice' (Seeman 1959: 786). Excessive meaninglessness derives from an inability to predict outcomes of events and to determine the consequences of acting on a given belief. Conversely, meaninglessness is minimal when satisfactory predictions can be made (Seeman 1959: 786). Thus, the strength or weakness of meaninglessness should be measurable.

Seeman drew upon Durkheim's notion of anomie to develop the concept of normlessness where 'social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behaviour' (Seeman 1959: 787) and/or where individuals have become disconnected from social conscience. Individualism is elevated to such a degree that people cease to consider or care about the concerns, needs and aspirations of others. The driving force of anomie is society's inability to meet individuals' aspirations, resulting in deviant behaviour.

Isolation, Seeman argues, occurs when individuals 'assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society' (Seeman 1959: 789) creating feelings of separateness from society and the desire to impose changes that reflect their own priorities and imperatives. Isolation can be linked to other concepts within his typology to 'be profitably applied in conjunction with one another in the analysis of a given state of affairs' (Seeman 1959: 789). As with his previous aspects of alienation, Seeman talks about the possibility of developing measures that can determine the isolation of the individual.

Seeman's concept of self-estrangement conveys 'the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work and the failure to be fulfilled by the activities in which one is engaged.' He believes this aspect of alienation is the most problematic for description and usage in analysis but maintains that 'the basic idea contained in the rhetoric of self-estrangement – the idea of intrinsically meaningful activity – can, perhaps, be recast into more manageable social learning terms... to see alienation *as the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards*, that is, upon rewards that lie outside the activity itself' (Seeman 1959: 590 italics in the original). The words 'degree of dependence' underline Seeman's desire to measure alienation. Cultural estrangement is 'the individual's rejection of or sense of removal from dominant social values' (Seeman 1991: 351) seeking to explain why individuals or groups do not accept and follow a set of commonly agreed standards of social practices.

In moulding this typology, Seeman sought to achieve two objectives. Firstly, to make the concept of alienation more accessible by describing various forms of behaviour thereby providing a toolbox for investigating those behaviours. His approach facilitates the construction of various measures acting as surrogates for his six categories – for example, job satisfaction or loneliness – which are designed to illuminate the alienated state by using techniques such as self-reporting questionnaires, with results being processed through statistical programs. However, his scheme has several problems.

First, constructing a list of various conditions of alienation requires consideration of the relation between each component part, including their interaction. In Seeman's scheme 'there is no theoretical structure between the six dimensions and presence of all six dimensions is not required' (Rayce et al. 2009: 81). Seeman acknowledges there may be inner connections between his categories, but he insists that three aspects, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness, operate independently of each other. In doing so he slices the notion of alienation vertically, thus decoupling the different strands. Yet he also confirms that the categories of his scheme could 'be profitably applied in conjunction with one another in the analysis of a given state of affairs' (Seeman 1959: 789). However, this concession undermines Seeman's view that his categories of alienation are separate research domains. Attempts have been made to resolve these difficulties and contradictions. Blauner (1964), among others, sought to establish a relationship between Seeman's categories hoping to remake Seeman's scheme into 'moments of a single process' (Harvey et al. 1980: 202). The attempts to try to reconcile the contradictions within Seeman's view of alienation acknowledge that his scheme had entrenched weaknesses.

The second criticism is linked to his second objective, to prise alienation research from the Marxist influence. Seeman's method slices the notion of alienation horizontally by treating 'alienation from the personal standpoint of the actor – that is, alienation is taken from the social-psychological point of view' (Seeman 1959: 784) encouraging researchers to see the individual person or group as experiencing an exceptional moment thus reinforcing the notion

that each instance of alienation is unique arising from a conflation of quite specific circumstances. This emphasis on immediacy focuses on solutions applicable to particular circumstances, constructing a barrier to generalising from the specific instance.

The problematic inherent in Seeman's contradictory approach is expressed in the research informed by his perspective, or one of its derivatives, with alienation itself becoming merely another category synonymous with issues such as emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and employee voice. Alienation ceases to be the cause of and the explanation for the manifestations of discord: instead expressions of discord become the antecedents of alienation. It is inverted and conceptualised as either a mediator providing a relation between inputs and outcomes or as the consequence of categories decided by the researcher. It is considered by degrees allowing for conclusions that portray one group as experiencing greater (or lesser or, indeed, no) intensity of alienation than another. The implication is that an alienated state can be increased or decreased by altering inputs such as employee voice. Accordingly, alienation ceases to be a meaningful concept and is easily replaced by sentiments such as disaffection, dissatisfaction, cynicism, disillusionment, or pessimism, denoting various degrees of unease. Consequently, researchers are not misapplying Seeman's notion of alienation, they are simply, and often unknowingly, expressing the contradictions and problematic implications inherent in his approach. Ceasing to focus on the societal relations that mould our alienated state, researchers instead undertake a technical exercise in constructing appropriate questions and metrics, and appropriate statistical analysis. Invariably, the audience for such research are those at the top of hierarchical structures, such as management/employers/organisations who, it is argued, can alleviate our alienated condition by, for example, adopting more progressive employment policies.

A third criticism of Seeman's is that he fails to provide a non-political and non-polemical view of alienation because it is seen as a state of mind requiring modification and, in the work context, HR managers are often seen as offering a potential role in reducing alienation. These conclusions are intensely political in two ways. First, they implicitly accept the dominant relation of managers over labour. This is a recurring theme in much of the research output looking at, for example, job dissatisfaction and alienation at work. Reference to the overarching causes for the contradictory and conflictual relation between workers and their employers are absent from such research. The Seeman lens emphasises how alienation negatively impacts on employers' needs and focuses on solutions linked to the specific instance with recommendations for action that are invariably targeted at management initiatives. Essentially, this is a business case approach to researching alienation from an idealist perspective which sees alienation as an intellectual problem concerned with the subject's perceptions and pursuing remedies designed to impact solely on the consciousness of the subject. By accepting existing employee-employer

relations, Seeman reinforces the view that even if it is management practices and attitudes that foster alienation, it is the management that can ameliorate the problem.

Secondly, the language describing those who express dissatisfaction identifies the alienated as the problem because of their deviant behaviour. Managers are urged to 'alleviate alienation among workers to reduce costs associated with deviant activities' (Shantz et al. 2015: 390). The use of the word 'deviant' implies a presupposition that we should aspire to natural and normal non-deviant behaviour and commit to a given organisation and adhere to its imperatives. Such conclusions flow directly from Seeman's view of alienation because each of his categories identifies the individual (or group) as exhibiting abnormal, aberrant or criminal behaviour. Seeman's approach is implicitly biased in favour of existing social relations and the imperatives of hierarchical structures. Consequently, researching alienation from the Seeman perspective is highly politicised.

It is also polemical in focussing on core suppositions of Seeman's thesis to construct processes supposedly designed to iron out the wrinkles inhibiting the smooth working of the corporate experience and minimise organisational conflict. Seeman's approach shows bias against research involving the collective voice of organised labour. Participants complete a myriad of questionnaires and/or are subject to pre-defined semi-structured interviews, while considered solely as atomised individuals with problems that can only be resolved by an external agency. Accordingly, Seeman's perspective has created and continues to support a body of work that denies other, more critical, ways of researching alienation. Failure to engage with relevant critical texts encourages research publications that contribute to and support a discussion which moves almost seamlessly between references, for example, from Marx to Seeman to Blauner to Weber and Braverman, without fully delineating the real differences between these traditions. For a sustained insightful critique of Seeman see Harvey et al. (1980, 1983) and Warner et al. (1985) on the problems and contradictions inherent within Seeman's approach to researching alienation. These papers are relatively unknown but together they provide a rigorous, scholarly and forensic examination of the 'Seeman problematic' (Warner et al. 1985: 364) and in doing so develop the critical tradition in this area. The first paper undertook a dialectical analysis of the history of alienation research to conclude that it is possible to develop a 'theory of alienation which was historical and critical in nature' (Harvey et al. 1980: 229). The second paper scrutinised Seeman's 1959 claim to have constructed his five categories of alienation using other, authoritative, sources. By linking these original sources back to Seeman, Harvey et al. show that in several critical instances, he erroneously refashioned previous work to fit within the frame of 'positivist canons of explanation and validation' (Harvey et al. 1983: 45). The paper concludes that Seeman's approach employs 'Procrustean canons that allow only a selective construction of an operational

definition' of alienation (Harvey et al. 1983: 46). The final paper examined the latent content and ideology within the Seeman approach.

Seeman's approach is fraught with contradictions which ultimately flow from a non-critical approach to researching alienation. He treats alienation in the same way classical economics regards crisis as a passing accidental disturbance which arises because the 'incomprehensibility and irrationality of crises is ... a consequence of the class situation and interests' of the ruling class (Lukács 1971: 105). Yet Seeman has one redeeming feature. References to powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and so forth as well as the subsequent attempts to use his framework, are an admission that there is something deeply disturbing about the way we live. It was this 'something' Marx sought to address in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

2.3 Alienation – the Marxist Perspective

Marx's theory of alienation has a chequered history but, as a critical interest in alienation re-emerges, so does the awareness and the significance of Marx's contribution. Moreover, as Costas and Fleming argue, Marx's tradition 'yields important insights' in the exploration of alienation (Costas and Fleming 2009: 360) with, recent examples being Langman and Ryan (2009) drawing upon Marx's presentation of alienation to explore contemporary global culture, Hall (2018a, 2018b) looking at academic life, Silver (2019) seeking to reconstruct Marx's theory of alienation, and Healy and Wilkowska (2017) looking at the impact of alienation on dignity at work. After reviewing research concerned with work and alienation, Archibald argues that 'globalization and competition... increased objective powerlessness and subjective alienation' (Archibald 2009a: 337) and that those seeking to study alienation from a Marxist perspective should be prepared to read widely and deeply on the subject.

Silver (2019: 90) asserts it is unnecessary to rehearse the key elements of Marx's theory of alienation since the 'general thrust of Marx's account is well known'. This assumes that Marx's approach is widely understood when the evidence suggests otherwise. Further, in the current climate when we can detect a stronger pulse of interest in his view, re-stating Marx's position should encourage a rigorous engagement with his relevant texts. The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx 1970b) were the start of a larger project exploring the nature of capitalism and should be considered in that context. The tendency, when referring to Marx' theory of alienation, is to decontextualise the *Manuscripts* from Marx's other work and to further decontextualise the section on alienation from remaining chapters in the *Manuscripts*.

For Marx, alienation is historically located in the dialectical and contradictory relation between capital and labour and the resultant loss of control over one's labour power. Marx emphasises that this relation exists in real, practical life and gave the section in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* directly

concerned with alienation the title ‘Estranged Labour’. Marx has a distinct view of our species-being and argues labour expresses the essential humanity of people. During the process of labour people transform themselves and their social context. This creative, innovative drive occurs within a social context as people develop a range of relationships to achieve the outcomes of their labours. He emphasises the collective endeavour needed to obtain those things required for us to live, survive and thrive arguing that society ‘does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand’ (Marx 1973a: 265). These are the key aspects of Marx’s view of humanity: we work on and transform the world as we find it, we undertake this task within a collective environment, and in this process, we change our world and the ideas we have about that world. In doing so we change ourselves; and, finally, and by extension, re-shape the social context within which labour occurs. It is a dialectical process subject to continuous change creating new practical problems requiring new resolutions and is a dynamic, interactive, creative, and transformative process that both contributes to and is founded upon social relations.

Marx argues that capitalism, in which labour itself becomes a commodity, continues yet contorts this process to create a contradictory, conflictual and universal alienated condition in which all relations under capitalism are alienated relations. Two conditions drive this process. Firstly, people become alienated from the products of their work because they invariably have no control over the decisions about what gets made; the decisions concerning the production of commodities are determined by the employer and/or the marketplace, not the worker. For Marx:

the worker is related to the product of labour as to an alien object... the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him... The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object... What the product of his labour is, he is not... The externalisation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien (Marx 1970b: 108).

I will argue later when discussing ICT professionals and scholars researching the societal impacts of ICT, that this is exactly the experience of these two groups of workers. Labour power is a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace like any other, and since the worker has no control over the way the marketplace operates, by extension has no real control over the commodity she embodies. Marx develops the argument to say:

the fact that labour is *external* to the worker – i.e., does not belong to his essential being;... does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy... the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working... External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external character of labour for the worker is demonstrated by the fact that it belongs not to him but to another, and that in it he belongs not to himself but to another... the activity of the worker is not his own spontaneous activity... it is a loss of his self (Marx 1970b: 111).

Marx argues we are alienated, estranged, from the products of our labour, including our ability to work. The alienation that a worker has from the products of her labours impacts on the relations she has with the world.

The second key element of Marx's theory of alienation lies 'not only in the result, but also in the *act of production*, within the *activity of production* itself' (Marx 1970b: 109 italics in the original). He argues that if 'the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity... The product is... but the summary of the activity of production' (Marx 190: 110). A critical aspect of alienation is the transformation of the work system where the process of production (the ownership of tools, processes of production and the like) is removed from control (formal subsumption) of the worker to be fully controlled by capital (real subsumption) thus deepening and broadening the division of labour. Consequently, it is capital that shapes production development (Marx 1970a: 510).

These two overarching conditions determine further aspects of alienation. Discussions concerning Marx's theory of alienation often neglect to fully appreciate that it is alienation from both the products and processes of labour that create the conditions for the development of two further concepts Marx considered in his theory of alienation. Firstly, Marx argues that alienation from both the product and process of labour has a negative impact on our species-being. Labour is the life activity of the human species and that 'productive life is species-life. It is life-producing life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its activity, and free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man' (Marx 1970b: 113). Marx is outlining our relationship to nature arguing that the natural world is our direct material means of existence and upon which all human development depends. He is emphasising that 'man lives on nature, [which] means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange...' (Marx 1970b: 112). He is accentuating the practical, material activity we must undertake to survive, and we reflect upon on our own labour in this process and can see our species-character in the concrete objects we produce. We contemplate ourselves in the

processes we create, in the relationships we develop, and in the world we have changed and continue to remake. When we are denied control and use over the product of our labour, when it becomes alienated from us, appearing to have power over us, we are in effect alienated from our own species-being; alienated from our own humanity and from the world we inhabit.

Drawing upon Lukács (1971), Costas and Fleming (2009) describe a condition where self-alienation arises because ‘self becomes an object to be exchanged since skill, expertise and experience are commodified as a productive resource’ (Costas and Fleming 2009: 361). These attributes can only exist within a person. Weeks (2007) asserts that the work of Mills (1951) and Hochschild (2003) provide a powerful argument in support of the view that the critique of estranged labour is even more applicable to the conditions of immaterial labour than it ever was to industrial production. Immaterial labour can be described as the production of symbols, codes, texts or ideas, or producing and manipulating emotions or feelings. ‘The alienation of immaterial laborers from the product and process of labor may be comparable to the experience of industrial work but work that requires the application and adjustment of “personality” is a further manifestation of alienation (Weeks 2007: 242). The concept of immaterial labour is contentious and misleading since any form of labour requires physical effort (Carchedi 2014).

Consequently, the purpose of work ceases to be the purpose of life and becomes instead merely a means of physical existence. ‘Estranged labour, therefore, turns Man’s *species-being*, both nature and his intellectual species-power, into a being alien to him and a *means* of his *individual existence*. It estranges man from his own body as well as external nature, from his spiritual essence, his *human existence*’ (Marx 1970b: 114) (We just need to refer to what is happening to the planet for evidence to support our profound alienation from our environment). While alienation arises from the relation between capital and labour, an experience which under capitalism is carried out in shops, offices and factories, it bursts beyond the confines of the workplace, becomes an embedded condition that touches upon all spheres of activity. Marx also argues:

Just as he is thus depressed spiritually and physically to the condition of a machine and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a belly, so he also becomes ever more dependent on every fluctuation in market price, on the application of capital, and on the whim of the rich (Marx 1970b: 68).

Every aspect of society is adversely affected by alienation’s consequential impoverishment and degradation of self.

Marx argues the manifestation of alienation takes a practical form and self-estrangement can ‘only become manifest through the real practical relationship to other men. The medium through which estrangement takes place is itself *practical*’ (Marx 1970b: 116). Thus alienation is not merely a matter of

consciousness, of feelings, but is the lived experience of actual, practical life and points to the final expression of alienation which concerns the collective endeavour Marx identified as being critical to labour. In this respect, Marx argues that:

An immediate consequence of man's estrangement from the product of his labour, his life activity, his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men. What is true of man's relationship to his labour, to the product of his labour, and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, and to the labour and the object of the labour of other men (Marx 1970b: 114).

Identifying a further aspect of relations between people, Marx argues that if the product of labour is not owned by the creator of the product, it is owned by someone else, who owns the outcome of alienated labour.

The alien being to whom labour and the product of labour belongs, in whose service labour is performed, and for whose enjoyment the product of labour is created, can be none other than man himself. If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, and if it confronts him as an alien power, this is only possible because it belongs to a man other than the worker. If his activity is a torment for him, it must provide pleasure and enjoyment for someone else... only man himself can be this alien power over men (Marx 1970b: 115).

Further, because workers relate to one another in a competitive rather than a cooperative context, this has real concrete consequences since the 'competition thus created between the labourers allows the capitalist to beat down the price of labour, whilst the falling price of labour allows him, on the other hand, to screw up still further the working-time' (Marx 1970a: 549). An increase in the number of people creating material goods is seen as a problem by existing workers and as an opportunity for employers rather than a positive development for enhancing the practical lived experience of humanity. Consequently, the alienation from labour, the product of labour and from each other, means people relate to their labour as 'unfree activity' undertaken in the 'service, under rule, coercion, and yoke of another person, it is *forced labour*... undertaken not to satisfy the needs of the worker but is "a mere *means* to satisfy needs outside itself"' (Marx 1970b: 111). This abstraction of the person leads to 'depersonalization, [an] irretrievable loss of time, [and a] permanent depletion of vitality' (Worrell 2009: 432).

Marx appreciated the need to ground his argument in concrete conditions and he spent considerable time developing themes initially outlined in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, initially published in 1776 (1863), specifically those

concerned with the division of labour which played a crucial part in the alienation of labour since:

in the production process of capital ... labour is a totality – a combination of labours – whose individual component parts are alien to one another, so that the overall process as a totality is not the work of the individual worker, and is furthermore the work of the different workers together only to the extent that they are [forcibly] combined, and do not [voluntarily] enter into combination with one another (Marx 1973a: 470).

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx considered alienation as embracing the totality of human relations touching upon areas beyond the immediate working environment. While the section on estranged labour in the *Manuscripts* is focused on workers, he also talks about examining 'the relation to the worker, to labor and its object' by those who have appropriated labour. Here Marx says:

First it has to be noted that everything which appears in the worker as an *activity of alienation, of estrangement*, appears in the non-worker as a *state of alienation, of estrangement*.

Secondly, that the worker's *real, practical attitude* in production and to the product (as a state of mind) appears in the non-worker who confronting him as a *theoretical attitude*.

Thirdly, the non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself; but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker (Marx 1970b: 119).

Although the section on estrangement stops at this point, Marx revisits these ideas in the section in the *Manuscripts* headed 'The Meaning of Human Requirements' where he speaks of all relations being under the sway of an external power (Marx 1970b: 156). Marx underlines this point by arguing that alienation, historically located in capitalism, is a universal, but not ahistorical, condition, 'whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities' (Marx 1973a: 92). He returns to this theme in *Capital*:

the transformation of production under the sway of capital, means, at the same time, the martyrdom of the producer; the instrument of labour becomes the means of enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing the labourer; the social combination and organisation of labour-processes is turned into an organised mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom, and independence (Marx 1970a: 506).

While Marx identified the locus of alienation to be the labour-capital relation, he was aware of its adverse impact on wider social interaction. Marx's theory of alienation attempts to define and reveal our complex myriad of wider social relations. The *Grundrisse* develops this view to argue that social connections between people is obscured by relations seemingly between things.

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth (Marx 1973a: 157).

The golden threads running through Marx's theory of alienation are the relations between all its elements and its practical manifestation in the social connection between people. It is an overarching theoretical framework consisting of interlocking elements denying a pick-and-mix approach because the component parts are intimately interdependent. The driving forces of alienation cannot be reduced to each other. As Mészáros argues, 'one cannot grasp the "specific" without identifying its manifold interconnections with a given system of complex mediations' (Mészáros 1970). This encourages a view of human activity focused on totality, mediation and immediacy, demanding an approach to research that considers any event or moment as part of a total experience. Alienation cannot be comprehended unless both the abstract and concrete conditions are appreciated since they both influence and impact on each other. Marx appreciated that the conditions described above did partially exist prior to the full development of capitalism and he argues that capitalism itself could not have emerged as an all-embracing economic formation without the presence of some prior form of alienation and division of labour. Marx is identifying the crucial role that alienation plays in the transition from one dominant economic formation to another indicating that the causes and manifestations of alienation are historically determined. This idea is revisited later when he sees that the alienation of labour creates the conditions for a further transition from capitalism to a socialist society. By doing so, Marx is recognising that while alienation is rooted in the labour-capital relation, it has much wider ramifications reaching way beyond work in any specific instance.

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic construction showing the complex interlocking components of Marx's theory of alienation.

by Marx. There are several reasons for this. Marx's view of human nature is considered problematic as exemplified by the recent work of Jaeggi (2014) and Silver (2019). In addition, Sparling's (2012) discussion of the differences between Simone Weil's and Marx's conception of the dignity of labour and their differing concepts of free and unalienated labour as well as their divergent views on the role of technology, raises further questions. These critics, and others, pose several challenges to those, like me, who advocate the possibilities available using Marx's theory of alienation. However, engaging in this discussion is beyond the parameters of this book and simply covering them in a few short paragraphs would not do justice to the concerns they raise.

The second reason relates to postmodernist perspectives, once dominant in certain intellectual quarters, which criticised the notion of alienation itself since with postmodernism 'there is no longer any subject to be alienated and nothing to be alienated from, "authenticity" having been less rejected than merely forgotten' (Eagleton 1985: 61). The third reason arose from the criticism of alienation from within Marxism itself with writers such as Althusser arguing that alienation resides in Marx's immature period and which was ignored in his later work since it does not adhere to his materialist perspective (Althusser 2005). Althusser's influential criticisms were particularly important, for they addressed an audience that may have favoured a qualitative approach to research and had a significant impact on researchers in Europe. Convincing criticisms of Althusser's approach can be found in Thompson (1978), Harman (1983, 2010) and Geras (1987). While it is not considered appropriate to engage with this debate here, a useful overview can be found in Fuchs and Seignani (2013) and (Fuchs 2019b). The fourth reason for neglecting Marx's theory of alienation is that it does not sit comfortably with attempts to investigate and measure alienation from a positivist perspective. Seeman's salami-slicing approach to resolving this problem seems more attractive to researchers working in the mainstream, because focusing on limited aspects of alienation using a quantitative approach fits neatly within the positivist frame.

The explicit political consequences also account for the lack of interest in Marx's notion of alienation. If it is shown to offer much for research projects, it immediately raises questions about control and power over, for example, ICT as well as about the purpose and process of researching alienation. It encourages the researcher to interrogate herself about the value of her research within a wider critical frame and to ask if her work contributes to participants becoming aware of their alienation. If Marx's theory is applicable, it demands action of a political nature raising serious concerns about the possibilities of realising the full potential of ICT under the prevailing social, political and economic structures. Consequently, studies using a Marxist approach can be subject to trenchant criticism as evidenced by the reaction to Hochschild's (2003) work on immaterial labour (Brook 2009).

2.4 Alienation and Reification

This section will conclude by outlining two interrelated arguments justifying the selection of setting of a third, a group of ICT end-users undertaking a training course, since some maintain that as alienation arises from alienated labour, manifestations of alienation can only be examined in the world of work. The first is situated in the nature of commodities and how they are perceived by their consumers. Lukács argues the commodity-structure is a relation between people but which appears to be a relation between things and people thus giving over to ‘material objects and social institutions ... the power to regulate behavior’ (Heinz 1981: 235). In the area we are particularly concerned with, it can seem we interact with and give over control to digital products. This process Lukács calls reification and it ‘requires that a society should learn to satisfy *all of its needs* in terms of commodity production’ (Lukács 1971: 91, my italics). Under this reified appearance is a reality determined by relations between people.

The second is linked to the nature of commodity production. As commodity production nestles into every aspect of social life, so do the profoundly negative consequences emanating from alienation. As Lukács argues ‘consumer articles no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community ... but as isolated objects the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculation’ (Lukács 1971: 91). Further, the experience of the worker is:

typical of society as a whole *in that ... self-objectification, this transformation of human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation* (Lukács 1971: 92, my italics).

Harvey is also clear that manifestations of alienation are rooted in the labour-capital relation needed to produce commodities and he echoes Lukács’ sentiments when he argues that ‘alienation is everywhere. It exists at work in production, at home in consumption, and it dominates much of politics and daily life’ (Harvey 2018: 429). He adds that ‘the objective alienation ... leaves behind a bitter residue of subjective alienation from the kind of political economy that capital has constructed’ illustrating his argument by listing protests across the globe from America, Greece and Brazil, covering a range of issues which draw in participants beyond the organised working class (Harvey 2018: 437). Implicit in this persuasive line of argument is an appreciation that manifestations of alienation, often taking a less dramatic form than those listed by Harvey, can be observed in non-work environments. These two arguments buttress the decision to focus on a non-work environment to examine the reified attitude towards to technology and to determine whether expressions of alienation can be discerned.

2.5 Blauner and Alienation

Despite the criticisms directed at Marx's theory of alienation and his other economic, political and social analyses, his ideas continue to have purchase in the fabric of academic research and teaching. This view is evidenced firstly from the coverage of his ideas in courses ranging from Yale's Foundations of Modern Social Thought to the University of Sussex's MA in Social and Political Thought. Secondly, there is a growing interest in his ideas, including his view of alienation, by researchers seeking to provide explanations for a range of issues across an array of disciplines.

Two interventions are particularly relevant. Robert Blauner's book *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), sought to examine alienation from a Marxist perspective by focusing on its operational aspects and it has been cited in over 3,900 research publications (Google Scholar: 2019). Blauner seems impatient with those who use 'minimal empirical materials' to support their discussions on alienation (Blauner 1964: 4). He set himself the task of testing the 'theoretical assumptions' of alienation 'through consideration of empirical evidence' (Blauner 1964: 4) and to undertake this project by looking at different workplace settings. He also saw this activity as being placed within an overarching framework inspired by the Marxist theory of alienation.

While his book continues to have a considerable influence on research concerned with alienation, there are several significant weaknesses at the methodological, conceptual and interpretive levels. The major part of his study used data generated in 1947 'by a job attitude survey carried out by Elmo Roper for *Fortune* magazine' (Blauner 1964: 11) designed to investigate job satisfaction. Blauner obtained additional data from a questionnaire survey conducted by another researcher investigating the 'effects of job redesign' (Blauner 1964: 13). Consequently, Blauner's data was derived mostly from research concerned with job satisfaction and job redesign rather than emanating from research directly informed by Marx's notion of alienation. These problems persisted into his own contribution to data collection which derived from 21 interviews with chemical workers which do not fit neatly with the other data used in the study.

Apart from data collection issues, there are more fundamental problems with his data analysis because he employs five of Seeman's categories of alienation without acknowledging or discussing the problems inherent in this approach. This is highly problematic for an investigation claiming to examine alienation from a Marxist perspective because, by using uncritically Seeman's categories, Blauner imports into his research all their conflicts and contradictions. Consequently, Blauner repeats the same fundamental errors that beset many studies investigating alienation from a non-Marxist perspective; namely that alienation, and its subsequent amelioration, arises from specific contexts and conditions. When Blauner argues that changes in technology can either increase or diminish alienation he embraces the notion of technological determinism, which 'misrecognizes changes in human labor and social life and attributes properties

of those changes to machines themselves rather than the mode of production that shapes them' (Wendling 2011: 204). Similarly, in a section called 'Solutions to alienation at work', he argues that a 'crash program of research in industrial design and job analysis is needed orientated to the goals of worker freedom and dignity...' (Blauner 1964: 185) and for 'policy recommendations aimed at reducing... alienation' (Blauner 1964: 186). Further, he argues that a 'strong labor union would not only reduce powerlessness and improve working conditions of textile workers; it would also be an important force towards the modernization of this... industry' (Blauner 1964: 186). While these demands may be admirable, by framing the solutions to alienation in this way, Blauner does not identify the conflictual relations inherent in commodity production, which are at the root of alienation. Also 'by focusing on the subjective experience of alienation, Blauner has trivialized Marx's concept of alienation [reducing it] to a study of job satisfaction' (Edgell 2012: 42). Blauner did not draw upon the *Manuscripts* or any of Marx's major works to inform the categories he used in his research.

The fundamental problems arising from Seeman's categories; the reliance on data generated by job satisfaction research; plus the adherence to technological determinism, means Blauner's work on alienation, while placing alienation in an historical context, prevents it from proving a viable guide to researching alienation and technology from the classical Marxist perspective. I would argue that compared to work such as Mills (1951) or Braverman (1974), Blauner's approach is a diversion from more fruitful avenues of study and provides a Marxist gloss to a deeply un-Marxist study of alienation. In doing so it provides an additional cover for the Seeman perspective and rips out the critical core pivotal to Marx's theory of alienation.

2.6 Wendling and Alienation

If Blauner presents problems, Wendling (2011) provides several insights that can be usefully employed by those interested in Marx's view of alienation. Wendling examines Marx's perspective on the relationship between technology and alienation covering several complex arguments relating to, *inter alia*, commodity fetishism and machine fetishism noting that Marx developed 'the distinction between "objectification" (as the ontological interface between human beings and nature) and "alienation" (as the form this takes in capitalist labor)' (Wendling 2011: 34). Wendling also discusses the relationship between labour and labour power, and the difference between concrete and abstract labour. For Marx, labour is the physical act whereas labour power is the capacity to work which is commodified under capitalism. The difference between use value and exchange value of commodities also impacts upon different kinds of labour. Wendling argues that because concrete labour produces a use value, it can contribute to the objectification of labour, but does not necessarily

lead to alienated labour. However, abstract labour, being concerned solely with exchange value, results in alienation. Capitalist society ‘celebrates abstract labor while degrading concrete labor’ (Wendling 2011: 53). While the distinction between concrete and abstract labour is useful for comprehending how labour can be understood, under capitalism both occur simultaneously (Blackledge 2012).

She also notes the significance of formal and real subsumption on alienation within capitalism. This transformation involves changes over time and space, moving at different velocities depending upon the specific circumstances; such conditions Marx refers to as ‘intermediate’ (Marx 1970: 340). Wendling adds that real subsumption is ‘the failure of receiving a just equivalent for one’s labor and the concentrations of private property and tools in a few hands are accomplished facts’ (Wendling 2011: 33). Thus, inequality and the concentration of control of ownership of the production processes are an integral part of the capitalist system. These accomplished facts mean that capitalist production appears as the ‘natural form of social production’ (Marx 1970a: 515). This has implications for any study seeking to investigate alienation because it can seem to both those undertaking the research and those being researched, that alienation, rather than being an inherent and a necessary part of in the capitalist system, is an aberration, an unusual, unnatural state needing to be alleviated or eradicated if things are to revert to normality.

2.7 Autonomist Marxism and Alienation

The autonomist and Open Marxist movements seek to confront and challenge alienation and argue that it can be overcome within capitalism by non-alienated spaces. Hardt and Negri argue that the domination of immaterial work in contemporary capitalism means jobs are ‘for the most part... highly mobile and involve flexible skills... characterised in general by the central role played by knowledge, information and communication’ (Hardt and Negri 2001: 285). Commodity production has become informationalised so that information and communication play a key role in immaterial labour resulting: the homogenisation of the work process; emergence of the computer as a universal tool; labour is transformed into a service with production tending towards things that are ‘intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement and passion’ (Hardt and Negri 2001: 286).

The political and social significance of these developments mean ‘we participate in production in a more radical and profound commonality’ than previously experienced under capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001: 301–302). Thus, ‘productivity, wealth, and the creation of social surpluses take the form of cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks ... immaterial labour thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’ (Negri and Hardt 2001: 294). Their

analysis of immaterial labour identifies the *commons* as the ‘incarnation, the production and liberation of the multitude’ (Hardt and Negri 2001: 303). These ideas resurface in their subsequent book *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2005) even if the analysis is in a ‘rather more cautious and qualified form than before’ (Wright 2005: 37). For example, in talking about alienation and immaterial labour, they argue that ‘the hegemony of immaterial labor, then, does not make all work pleasant, nor does it lessen the hierarchy and command in the workplace or the polarization of the labor market’ (Hardt and Negri 2005: 111). As will be discussed later in the book, the experiences of ICT professionals and scholars cannot be explained by the perspective advanced by Hardt and Negri.

John Holloway is influential in debates within, and the direction of, autonomism. Holloway criticises orthodox Marxism because its starting point is ‘with capital or domination’ whereas the autonomist tradition insists ‘on starting from below, from the struggle of the working class, or more broadly, anti-capitalist struggle’ (Holloway 2011). He maintains that ‘it is possible to emancipate human activity from alienated labor by opening up cracks where one is able to do things differently, to do something that seems useful, necessary, and worthwhile to us’ (Holloway 2014). For Holloway, ‘the rejection of alienated and alienating labor entails, at the same time, a critique of the institutional and organizational structures, and the mindset that springs from it’ (Holloway 2014).

The scream is at the heart of his resistance to alienation for he argues that the scream is a scream against oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation (Holloway 2002: 150). Holloway talks of the possibilities of overcoming alienation within capitalism when he says that ‘Reclaim the Streets realized this beautifully, recognizing that if what the RTS activists opposed was privatization, alienation, and isolation, a street party was not just a ‘protest of these conditions but a temporary triumph over them’ (Solnit 2005: 23 cited in Holloway 2010: 45). In making these arguments, Holloway is revisiting the themes covered in 1992 in his contribution to *Open Marxism* (Holloway 1992). Beradi echoes this theme when he talks about the need to create ‘social zones of human resistance, zones of therapeutic contagion’ (Beradi 2009: 220).

There are differing tendencies within the autonomist tradition over, for example, attitudes towards taking state power, but they are generally in accord in believing that it is possible to overcome alienation, if only partially, under capitalism. This is a major break with the totalising alienated experience identified by Marx and their perspectives have been critiqued from a number of aspects such as: immaterial labour (Camfield 2007, Seignani 2015); the commons (Harvey 2014, Kostakis and Stavroulakis 2013, Mudu 2009); and crack capitalism and alienation (Blackledge 2012).

The research covered in this book was driven by the categories and relations located within Marx’s theory of alienation as outlined in the *Manuscripts* and his later works providing a clear break with dominant approaches to researching

the condition. The *Manuscripts* are frequently the starting point for many researchers interested in Marx's formulation of alienation yet most lapse into the Seeman/Blauner perspective to continue their investigations focusing on the statistical correlation between predetermined variables. I argue the evidence gathered, analysed, and presented here indicates that it is feasible to research alienation using Marx's categories and relations because they offer greater penetrating explanatory power than other approaches. The next chapter provides a commentary on the specific activities involved in my research.