



## CONCEPT OF ALIENATION IN THE WORKS OF K. MARX AND J. BAUDRILLARD

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*Abstract:* This article explores the idea of alienation in J. Baudrillard's philosophy, which is both a continuation and a critique of K. Marx's understanding of alienation. A comparison of both philosophies is drawn based on the specific example of the concept of alienation, which played an exceptionally important role in both Marx's and Baudrillard's concepts. Baudrillard, like Marx, uses the concept of alienation mainly as a tool to criticize modern society and the human condition in it. Moreover, like Marx, Baudrillard views alienation in close connection with the notion of private property. Yet along with this, as the article demonstrates, Baudrillard, in contrast to Marx, sees alienation not at all as a separation of man from his own universal essence, but on the contrary, as a dissolution in the social (to which Baudrillard attributed not a universal, but a concrete-historical meaning; this is reflected, for example, in the name consumer society for Western society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

*Keywords:* private property, consumer society, critical philosophy.

### Introduction

The ideological atmosphere in Europe in the 1950s and 1970s was very similar to that in Europe a century earlier. Then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as never before, there were many popular authors calling for social reorganization, mercilessly criticizing all institutions of social order: religion (M. Stirner, B. Bauer, L. Feuerbach), state power (M. Bakunin, L. Blanqui), and the economic system (P.-J. Proudhon, K. Marx). It was the era of the emergence of most, if not all, revolutionary ideologies at least in the form of social movements: anarchism, various kinds of socialism and communism, and terrorist movements. Histori-

ans describing European history in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century see this era as one of rapid social and economic development that avoided serious internal conflicts, almost an era of prosperity.

A century later, the situation in many respects repeated itself: Europe was once again on the rise and once again engulfed in revolutionary ferment. The range of critical perspectives offered by European philosophers concerning the modern world is indeed wide and varied. In addition to individualistic existentialism, as presented by J.-P. Sartre and A. Camus, which harbors a deep mistrust of all forms of organizations and ideologies, there are several noteworthy criticisms.

These include T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer's critique of the totalitarian rationalism of the Enlightenment, R. Barthes, G. Deleuze, and F. Guattari's denouncement of bourgeois myths, M. Foucault's exposure of covert power tactics, H. Marcuse's objection to the one-dimensionality of modern society that negates any critical stance, and G. Debord's condemnation of the 'society of the spectacle', which forces individuals into a passive role as mere spectators, among others.

By the time of the publication of J. Baudrillard's first major work, "The System of Objects" (1968), most of these authors and their concepts were already widely known, and Baudrillard, who was also highly critical of his contemporary bourgeois world, was already able to make some generalizations and comparisons. Thus, it was hard not to notice that a century later, of all the critical philosophies of the 19th century, the only one that retained a significant influence was Marxism. It was also hard to overlook the lack of economic material in the many versions of criticisms of capitalism of the 1950s and 1970s and the complete absence of systematic analysis of the economic sphere.

A legitimate question arises: can a critical philosophy that does not involve economics be radical? A second question: can Marxism still claim to be the most profound and radical methodology of philosophical analysis? This paper aims to show that Baudrillard's philosophy gives a negative answer to both questions. In other words, economic analysis is necessary, even if its principles differ from the Marxist ones. But in this case, Baudrillard completely changes the meaning of the opposition "common – private", or "individual – society", which both he and Marx had in mind as a kind of ontological basis for the entire economic sphere. Specifically, if Marx vested ontological authenticity in man's social existence, while the individual, separating man from social existence, trapped him in a circle of alienation, Baudrillard seeks to show that only the individual has the power to overcome alienation, which in Baudrillard's view emanated precisely from society.

The method of this study is the comparison of the concept of alienation in the works of Marx and Baudrillard, which should demonstrate (1) that, although Marx and Baudrillard share a similar understanding of the term 'alienation', the specific interpretations and implications they at-

tribute to this concept differ significantly, and (2) how this similarity/difference in the treatment of a particular concept reveals the "continuity/separation" relationship of Baudrillard's philosophy to that of Marx.

### Baudrillard – A Continuation of Marx, but Outside of Marxism

In his works, especially in "The Consumer Society" (1970) and "Symbolic Exchange" (1976), Baudrillard seeks to make up for the lack of attention to the economic sphere in many of his contemporary critical philosophies. As noted by A.M. Koch and R. Elmore (2006), "Baudrillard represents a continuation of the Marxian project in a world that is losing the ability to critically examine its direction. Baudrillard continues the maxim, represented in Marx, that the economic order is going to be a major, if not 'the' major, influence in determining the direction of social institutions and activities" (p. 574). It is also quite possible to justify the view that Baudrillard's work is "explicitly more radical than Marx's" (Redhead, 2014, p. 102), because Baudrillard "removed ideology from its traditional role as a distorting element between the material base and the superstructure ... and install it as "the one and only form that traverses all fields of social production" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 146)" (Valente, 1985, p. 57), thereby demythologizing the very production base of classical Marxism by incorporating it into the complex context of social relations.

There is a fundamental difference between the philosophies of Baudrillard and Marx, because of which Baudrillard did not want to be viewed as a Marxist philosopher. This difference does not boil down to Baudrillard's critique of Marx's concepts of production and productive labor. In arguing that Marx's "critical theory of the mode of production does not touch the principle of production" (Baudrillard, 1975, p. 17), Baudrillard clarifies the goal of his own critical work – to discover the principle of production at least at its modern stage. This, according to Baudrillard, means returning to what Marx attributed to the superstructure: ideology, the mechanisms of consumption of the products of production. Baudrillard (2000) often attributes his differences from Marx to the difference between the economic

situation itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when “some aspect of production still supported a social form called capital and its internal criticism called Marxism”, and the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when “we have gone from the commodity law to the structural law of value, and this coincides with the undermining of the social form called production” (p. 57). Baudrillard’s assessment of the state of affairs in the contemporary economic sphere has caused some authors to disagree, writing that “for all its complexity and inventiveness”, Baudrillard’s analysis nevertheless makes the mistake of rejecting the Marxist concept of production, since it proves unable to explain the production of the signs on which it speaks so much (Miklitsch, 1996, p. 28).

Baudrillard (2000), indeed, rather describes a single cycle of production-consumption that “no longer targets needs of profit” (p. 74). In this cycle Baudrillard (2000) emphasizes consumption over production because, as he suggests, “production thus joins the consumerist system of signs” (p. 63), virtually submitting to it. Aggressive, imposed consumption is one of the main themes in Baudrillard’s critique of the modern consumer society, in which “consumerist man [l’hommeconsommateur] regards enjoyment as an obligation; he sees himself as an enjoyment and satisfaction business... You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of ‘missing’ something, some form of enjoyment or other” (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 110).

However, such motives were not alien to Marx (1956), especially in “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts”, where he writes, for example, that “Under private property ... every person speculates on creating a new need in another, so as to drive him to fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of enjoyment and therefore economic ruin” (p. 599). Elsewhere in the “Manuscripts” Marx (1956) notes: “Private property does not know how to change crude need into human need. Its idealism is fantasy, caprice and whim; and no eunuch flatters his despot more basely or uses more despicable means to stimulate his dulled capacity for pleasure in order to sneak a favor for himself than does the industrial eunuch – the producer – in order to sneak for himself a few pieces of silver, in order to charm the golden birds out of the pockets of his dearly beloved neighbors in Christ” (p. 600). Even the

image of striptease, which Baudrillard (2000) suggests as an embodiment of the quintessence of consumption without production (“The striptease is a dance, perhaps the only one, and definitely the most original in the contemporary Western world”) finds its match in Marx’s work – the English gin shop (p. 205). When Marx (1956) gives the example of a crude need artificially induced by industry, it turns out to be illusory satisfaction of need in the form of self-stupefaction; “The English gin shops are therefore the symbolical representations of private property” (p. 605).

### Baudrillard and Marx on the Estranged Man

Marx certainly does not ascribe to imposed consumption the significance the same Baudrillard does, but this again is not a fundamental difference, but a difference in emphasis. It seems that the radical difference between Marx and Baudrillard lies not in economics, but rather in philosophical anthropology, which is best expressed by their different interpretations of the concept of alienation. As Baudrillard (1975) puts it, “at the heart of its strategy, in its analytic distinction between quantity and quality, Marxist thought inherits the esthetic and humanistic virus of bourgeois thought, since the concept of quality is burdened with all the finalities – whether those concrete finalities of use value, or those endless ideal and transcendent finalities” (p. 57). First of all, Baudrillard explains, it is a question of Marx’s belief in a certain positive essence of man, his primordial freedom and rationality, in the very possibility of arriving at the fullness and truth of human life by overcoming alienation. But what is, according to Marx, the fullness and truth of human life, and what is the alienation that prevents their attainment? In “Capital”, Marx speaks of alienation exclusively in the context of economic relations, namely alienated, or sold, labor as a commodity (within a simple commodity exchange between individual producers), or labor itself as a commodity (within a contract between the worker and the capitalist). In the latter case, “One party to the contract sells his labour-power, the other buys it. The former receives the value of his commodity, whose use value – labour – is thereby alienated to the buyer.

Means of production which already belong to the latter are then transformed by him, with the aid of labour equally belonging to him, into a new product which is likewise lawfully his” (Marx, 1952, p. 589). However, in “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” Marx (1956) defines alienation (estrangement) more broadly: “Estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is itself something different from itself – that my activity is something else and that, finally (and this applies also to the capitalist), all is under [the sway] of inhuman power” (p. 608).

Baudrillard (1975) refers to this broader definition of alienation when arguing that a worker, according to Marx, “is alienated not insofar as he sells his labor power, but insofar as he is an owner, ‘disposing’ of it as if it were his own goods” (p. 95). Of course, one could argue with Baudrillard, based in particular on the text of “Capital” and the “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, that the worker is alienated from his labor force precisely because he has to sell it to reproduce himself as labor force (that is, his possession of his own labor force is completely illusory). Yet bearing in mind that the capitalist worker is not a slave or a serf, it can be argued that the worker is alienated both because he owns his labor force and because he sells it.

Nevertheless, Baudrillard is essentially right in directly linking alienation and private property. Without private property, labor performed by an individual worker for the good of society would not have the quality of alienation. On the contrary, such labor, lacking the quality of compulsory servitude, which is shunned like the plague, as Marx puts it, would be a source of supreme pleasure and a way of self-realization, i.e., the individual’s communion with humanity.

Yet under the reign of private property as the most general relation to anything, the worker regards his labor force as a kind of special private property, even if he has nothing else. It is this sense of possession that alienates him from his human essence – just as possession of any object alienates the essence of that object from an individual. This is why Marx writes in the passage quoted above that alienation applies in some measure to the capitalist as well.

In “Capital”, however, there are no such statements equating the capitalist and the worker, the rich and the poor. The reason for this, of course, is not that “Capital” is the work of a mature thinker, and the “Manuscripts” are Marx’s first attempts at writing. “Capital” is a largely publicistic work designed to serve as a weapon for the proletariat in its struggle, the historical meaning and results of which were quite clear to Marx. “Capital” emphasizes class antagonism in every possible way, while in “Manuscripts” it is philosophically justified, showing why capitalist society, even with hypothetical mitigation of antagonism to the maximum extent possible (workers receive high wages, their labor is undemanding and satisfying, they are guaranteed social benefits (insurance, pensions, etc.), finally they become part owners of their enterprise by possessing a few shares), remains completely unacceptable.

#### Private Property and its Teleology in the Works of Marx

The reason for the insufficiency of partial improvements in the condition of the worker is the continuing principle of private property, which, as Marx argues, “has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it” (Koch & Elmore, 2006, p. 562). But why is that so? Because the “sense of having”, Marx continues, being “sheer estrangement of all [physical and mental] senses”, subtly displaces all the senses by which we perceive the object in our possession. For example, “The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no sense for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense” (Marx, 1956, p. 594). In this example, Marx reiterates the point he has made repeatedly: if one does not own property, this does not mean that property does not own him; his view of the object is just as one-sided as that of the owner of the object. In other words, private property, as it is commonly understood as possession, contains two opposing yet related aspects: the state of having and the state of not having, which exist in a contradictory yet parallel relationship.



But what do both (the possessor and the non-possessor) not see when looking at a mineral (to take Marx's example)? It is easy to picture a similar situation: during a conversation, one of the interlocutors suddenly takes a huge diamond out of his pocket and says: "Look how beautifully the light shimmers on its facets!" The answer is easy to imagine: "Is it real?!", "Where did you get it?", and of course: "How much is it worth?!". It would be extremely difficult to abstract from these economic matters.

The sense of private ownership in the form of possession that Marx speaks of in "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" also has its history and teleology. Property tends to accumulate in money, money tends to form wealth, and wealth tends to multiply itself, i.e., to become capital. It is in the form of the possession of money that the sense of having acquires its purity, freed from a substantial residue, transformed from the possession of something concrete into the possession of potentially everything, which inevitably creates an impulse of infinite growth. Marx (1956) then proceeds indeed to money, calling it "an object in the highest sense" (obviously as an object of possession), which is also deceiving in the highest sense, mixing opposites – exchanging love for hate, friendship for enmity, whereas in the genuinely human world, "you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc." (p. 620). As Marx (1956) states, "The antithesis between lack of property and property", or "possession" and "non-possession", reaches the stage of contradiction only as the antithesis of labor and capital (p. 585). But at all stages, these opposites tend to grow into one another, not only in reality but also at the level of the sense of possession. Thus, possession always has its other in the form of anxiety and fear because of the risk of losing what one has; on the other hand, the sense of possession bears in itself hope for even greater gains. The fear of losses is also there, even more so, at the pole of non-possession (the poor are afraid of losing their meager means of subsistence, which would condemn them to starvation); hopes to improve one's situation here, if any, are much more modest than at the possession pole.

### Baudrillard: Alienated Consumption

As will be demonstrated further, Baudrillard uses

the same two-pole structure of alienation as Marx, and put at its core private property, again like Marx. But then begin the differences. First of all, Baudrillard questions Marx's thesis that the sense of possession is only the alienation of genuine human feelings, which are the development of all human culture. Baudrillard seems to be questioning his texts, especially "The Consumer Society": isn't the sense of possession connected to a rich cultural tradition – at any rate, it has its own history – and that is the history of private property itself? Furthermore, how is it possible to understand the sense of possession outside the context of the multiple sign systems associated with the life of a given society? An important example in Baudrillard's critical philosophy is fashion. Does the scale "fashionable – unfashionable" affect the market value of an object? Evidently, yes. Does this quality belong directly to the object, like, say, color? Certainly not. Can "trendy" just be taken to mean newer? Not necessarily: "retro" can also be in fashion, while many novelties are never fashionable. It would be wrong to attribute fashion to the desire to reproduce the best: profound works (books, movies, etc.) are hardly fashionable. By definition, fashion is superficial, frivolous, and at the same time unpredictable and poorly managed. Fashion refers not only to the purchase of goods but also to the most diverse aspects of life (appearance, behavior, preferences (political, gustatory, spectacle, etc.)). As Baudrillard (2000) notes, "fashion is at the core of modernity, extending even into science and revolution, because the entire order of modernity, from sex to the media, from art to politics, is infiltrated by this logic" (p. 174).

In Baudrillard's view, fashion cannot be attributed to some hidden power strategy: it is as much imposed on society as it is produced by it. When Marx covers such motives, he considers it an initiative of a particular seller of goods ("every person speculates on creating a new need in another"), keeping imposed consumption in the sphere of the private, individual rather than the public, endowed by Marx only with positive meanings. Baudrillard, on the contrary, extending the influence of the social to the whole sphere of representation, views it as outwardly neutral but essentially negative, since it plunges the individual into a world of alienation, separating him from himself, but (in contrast to Marx)

from himself as an individual, with his own goals, desires, and preferences. Baudrillard links alienation not to the economically oriented opposition of “possession – non-possession” but rather to the soft conformism of assent to the system of standards (possession of status things, appearance, behavior) offered by society or the social group.

The pole of possession is still present here, but it expands, first, from the possession of things to the ownership of some image of the self and, second, becomes a never fully attainable ideal to which the individual strives to conform. According to Baudrillard's paradoxical thought, in a consumer society, the individual never reaches the stage of fully possession anything, since he is always forced to follow changing social tastes.

Since possession in Baudrillard's theory loses its direct correlation with private property (as it was for Marx), it consequently loses its teleology in the form of a transition to monetary form and then to capital. Hence it is not surprising that the theme of money plays a very minor role in “The Consumer Society” and “Symbolic Exchange”, and that capital, as Baudrillard (2000) writes, having detached from the economic sphere, obtains power that “is completely absorbed, without a trace of blood, in the signs that surround us... where capital has finally attained its purest form of discourse, beyond the specific dialects of industry, of the market and of finance, beyond the dialects of class which held sway in the ‘productive’ phase” (p. 57). In other words, Baudrillard interprets capital as broadly as ownership itself.

### Baudrillard: Alienation from the Body and Death

The structure of alienation in Baudrillard not only retains the possession and non-possession poles inherent in Marxism but also significantly strengthens this structure, giving these poles, quite abstract in Marx, a vivid figurative content. Let us return to the theme of fashion in Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard (2000), its almost boundless space is united by a certain system of unified semantic signposts: here there is “modified sexuality” (p. 183). As Baudrillard notes further, “the passion for fashion, in all its

ambiguity, will come to play on the body confused with sex”. In this way, we come to the *body* marked by sexual dimorphism as the center in which all the lines of force of the fashion world and all the strategies of possession converge. At the same time, this is the fundamental basis of alienation. This may come across as a paradox since our possession of the body seems to be invariable and inalienable. However, it is difficult to argue with Baudrillard's argument that all fashionable things become fashionable in a particular representative environment, say, when clothes are advertised by a person who is attractive in our eyes, and not just in a store window. This person is the image that, along with the thing itself, the ordinary purchaser would like to acquire, but to which he fatally continues to fail to conform. It is this idealized body that Baudrillard has in mind when writing in consumer society that “In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other – and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY” (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 67). Baudrillard (2006) continues to say that “the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic cult which surrounds it, the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an object of salvation” (p. 67).

Thus, one's own body is the object that the individual of consumer society aspires to, but cannot acquire. In this, the only way to complete failure is the opposite pole of the opposition, which, of course, is death. The striving for the ideal body is simultaneously a flight from its death; it turns death into a persecutor, endowing it with the meaning of an intimidating possibility. In this respect, Baudrillard (2000) suggests that “the price we pay for the ‘reality’ of this life, to live it as a positive value, is the ever-present phantasm of death” (p. 245). Consumer society exists because of the constant indoctrination of the idea that the consumer does not die, that “to be dead is an unthinkable anomaly”, and that “death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy” (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 234). Death naturally does not disappear; moreover, it also transcends, so to speak, its natural limits, becoming an obsessive thought for the living. All this, Baudril-

lard argues, is nothing but the alienation of the individual from his own death, where it turns from a socially significant event, an action where the dying themselves play an important role (this was the case, Baudrillard notes, not only in archaic societies but also in Europe's recent past), into an accident that can always be avoided. Baudrillard (2000) suggests that this kind of evolution with respect to the dead and death should be thought of in the context of the evolution of forms of power ("Shattering the union of the living and the dead... – the primary source of social control" (p. 238)). However, in the overall logic of his reasoning, this explanation seems somewhat redundant: aversion to death already follows from the religion of the body itself, and the introduction of the idea of death as an unfortunate accident does not require any repressive strategy.

More importantly, Baudrillard suggests that together with death, all forms of deviance are banished to the periphery of culture, into the social exile of a modern society that prides itself on tolerance. Here Baudrillard seeks to generalize the ideas of M. Foucault in saying that this concerns not only criminals and the mentally ill but also the elderly, women, children, and people of different cultural regions. Ultimately, everyone can be labeled deviant, i.e., deviating from the ideal, and it is essentially a matter of banishing the individual.

### Conclusion: The Individual and the Social in Baudrillard and Marx

Here we may return to Marx's thesis that the individual is alienated from society by the individual itself, embodied in the principle of appropriation. Philosophical consideration reveals a lack and deprivation precisely where the individual seeks to assert his own self – in private property. For Marx, overcoming alienation means the individual's accession to his social being in its absolute and only true form, and this means overcoming not only the individual but also any collective limitations. Marx (1956) argues that "religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property as the appropriation of human life, is therefore the positive tran-

scendence of all estrangement – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social, existence" (p. 589).

Baudrillard paradoxically considers social existence to be Marx's bourgeois prejudice, believing only relative historical communities to be truly existing. Baudrillard does, however, give a reference to a kind of society without alienation. This is a conventionally depicted primitive society consisting of the living and the dead, two parts held together by strong threads of symbolic exchange. This original state, which corresponds in stages to Marx's primitive communism (this analogy has already been noted by scholars (Smith, 2010, p. 211)), is disrupted with the first signs of the emergence of social domination, and Baudrillard does not claim that it will be recreated in some form in the future.

Except for this example, Baudrillard's social existence lacks the positive meaning that Marx assigns to it. On the contrary, it is the cause of alienation that results in the emergence of the individual in its present perverted form. This reassessment of the fields of the common and the private is historically well explained. It fits Baudrillard's thought into the tradition of criticizing totalitarianism in all its manifestations, which emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in particular in J. Ortega y Gasset's "The Revolt of the Masses") but became the mainstream of European critical philosophy after World War II. The ambivalence of this trend toward Marxism is understandable: as the most influential and radical critique of capitalism, Marxism, in its dogmatized form, became the ideological basis of one of the totalitarian states that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the USSR.

This duality perhaps lies at the heart of Baudrillard's thought: from the same principle, i.e. the principle of alienation, he wants to construct a critique of capitalism even more radical than Marx's. Yet at the same time, Baudrillard sees no possibility of any social movement that could put his philosophical critique as the basis of its own program of political action. In other words, Baudrillard does not see the possibility of revolution beyond the existing order (and the revolutions he does see possible are embedded in the existing order, which itself suggests permanent revolution, for the same fashion can exist only in the context of technological and social innovation).



Thus, the criticism of Baudrillard that he has emasculated the revolutionary pathos of Marxism and that his whole philosophy is nothing more than the preaching of Quietism (Horsfield, 1999, p. 3; Koch & Elmore, 2006, p. 574) is not unfounded. For his part, Baudrillard could argue that a revolution against capitalism is impossible in principle: capitalism already presupposes a continuing revolution, and to overthrow it would mean a return to some previous stage of development. Rather, the solution would be a conscious rejection of the rules of the game cultivated by the individual, i.e. a rejection of them in one form or another. After all, alienation is not necessarily the original setting in which the individual discovers himself and which he sometimes tries to overcome. Alienation can be secondary: a conscious choice that the individual makes about his own life. This is another difference between Baudrillard and Marx: for Marx, alienation cannot be considered overcome even when it is realized, because the individual remains in a system of property economic relations from which he cannot escape at will. In the case of a radical change in such a system, the individual can get rid of his own alienation without even thinking about its philosophical foundations. Conversely, for Baudrillard, the individual's awareness of the very fact and causes of his own alienation already considerably diminishes their power, and the extent to which he wishes to transcend them is up to him alone.

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