RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making Alienation "accessible"

Towards a tripartite understanding of the concept, and its application to the British working-class

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of alienation. While acknowledging the valuable contributions of scholars in expanding its scope and application, the article argues for a more accessible and immediately intelligible understanding of the concept. By adopting an author-based thematic approach, the article examines the works of Hegel, Marx, and Alasdair MacIntyre to identify the key characteristics that define alienation. It highlights the interconnectedness of three central elements: the lack of agency, meaning, and the detachment of oneself from the community. These elements are synthesised into a comprehensive framework that can analyse the position of the working class in contemporary society. By doing so, it demonstrates the continued applicability of alienation as an analytical tool for comprehending and addressing issues in the modern world. By presenting a more accessible and streamlined conceptualisation, this article aims to encourage wider engagement with the concept of alienation and promote its use in public discourse.

Keywords: Alienation, Hegel, Marx, Working-Class, Britain

Introduction

Alienation is a concept originating in Hegel's 1807 work The Phenomenology of Spirit. Since then, there have been a myriad of developments related to the term, most notably from those with a Marxist-orientation, like the Frankfurt School, but also communitarians, humanists, and others. These developments stretch the term so that it can be better applied across a range of issues and contexts. However, in this stretching there is a danger that we make the concept too unwieldy to operationalise in public discourse.

This article seeks to conceptualise alienation in such a way as to render it more accessible as an analytical tool to address contemporary issues. This is not to challenge the developments made by scholars but, rather, is an attempt to produce an understanding of alienation which is immediately accessible, can stand on its own, or serve as a gateway to more developed conceptualisations.

As such, I outline in-brief the way that I have conceptualised alienation to suggest that it is made up of three interlocking parts, these being a lack of agency, meaning, and the separation of oneself from the community. I then apply this to the position of the working-class within contemporary Britain to demonstrate its applicability, though I leave open the possibility of its application in other contexts.

Conceiving Class

In order to contextualise the claims made in the application of alienation to the working-class, it is worthwhile the reader making note of the class-schema that these claims rest upon. Notably, the definition of working-class offered here, and elaborated upon in my previous work (Taylor Hill, 2023), follows the Bourdieusian inspired class-schema of Mike Savage, as established in his Great British Class Study. Under this scheme, the working class is able to be split into three working-classes known as the precariat, the traditional working-class (TWC), and the emergent service workers (ESW), alongside the class straddling new affluent workers (NAW), who are nevertheless tied to the class as their relatives, through their upbringing, and in relation to class-culture (Reay in Calver, 2022).

I utilise this framework to understand the complexity of the class experience, moving to suggest that the working-class experience is complicated by an individual's belonging within different sub-groups which are, nevertheless, ultimately tied together into one overarching group that we can still call the working-class. This reflects the diversity that is present within the class but acknowledges class-culture and attachments in the sense that, for instance, members of the NAW and ESW are often related to members of the TWC, with an upbringing in the class habitus to match this position (Savage, 2015).

Please refer to a more substantive discussion of my work for more detail, but the core of this class-definition rests on the belief that the impact of globalisation and changing economic circumstances has facilitated an evolution and warping of traditional understandings of class, and yet in that we can recognise a reconstituted working-class, defined by their unique class experiences, forms of work, upbringing, and relationships, as well as their degradations over the past forty-or-so years (Taylor Hill, 2023). This transforms the working-class into sub-groups, which is beneficial for inter-and-infra factional analysis, whilst alienation presents itself as a useful analytical tool here because it presents an overarching framework with which to consider the similar and different experiences of the working-class across said sub-groups.

Conceptualising Alienation

Hegel and Agency

Hegel (2018) argues that alienation occurs when individuals are disconnected from their species-essence (Gattungswesen) and fail to reconnect with it. The process of overcoming alienation involves the re-connection of mind and object, and that object's further utilisation in service of the mind's quest for freedom. For example, he sees human life, its objects, and its institutions as in a constant state of change in which they are renewed, reformed, and replaced through the interaction of ideas. These changes occur naturally in the dialectical process (Maybee, 2016). This refers to when one mode of living (the thesis) enters a logical, often conflicting, 'discussion' with another (the antithesis) until such a time as the two can be remedied (the synthesis). This occurs repeatedly throughout history, with the synthesis becoming the new thesis, driving its development forward until such a time as the mind and its products can be brought back into relation, though this final goal remains somewhat elusive (Singh et al, 2008, 15). Under this process, Hegel to some extent assumes a level of alienation within society that is to be met and remedied over time as our institutions and norms change. This offers some significance in the processes' definition as it establishes that alienation should diminish over time as citizens come to shape their community in a way that is reflective of themselves as a collective and an individual,

identifying the necessity of mutuality in these relationships as a foundational element of non-alienation. In other words, agency is tied to not only the individual, but to the way in which the individual has a hand in the collective shaping of their society. Agency then refers to mastery of oneself, and an ability to see oneself reflected in community, but it additionally refers to agential action for a collective purpose.

This highlights the agential-communal dimension of alienation, suggesting that one is not alienated if they are able to contribute to change in the world around them and to see themselves reflected in it. One must both be able to exercise control over their life and recognise their place within the frameworks of the community. Such a consideration highlights the importance of the subjective sense of one's place, which has relevance for the subsequent discussion around narrative in the latter half of this article.

Marx and Dignity

Marx makes an important distinction in suggesting that we might permit some level of alienation so long as it produces a positive and mutual outcome. One such example might be to permit a degree of alienation between the individual and the collective which gives that individual space to establish their own identity (Kuch & Ferald, 2021). This is called differentiated unity. Here desirable versions of community and individuality flourish together (Marx, 2000; Inwood 1992, 36). Indeed, in their new forms, communal and individual identities, and communal and individual interests, presuppose and reinforce one-another, but remain partly separate so that they can also flourish in themselves (Gould, 1980). This distinction recognises that the individual is shaped by the community, but that they remain an individual. Crucially, it establishes that the community, regardless of individual identity, will always continue to define them in some way and that, therefore, they should be an active part of it, using their individual expertise to ensure that it continues to flourish. This understanding of the interconnectedness of the individual with the collective is supportive of a mutualistic bond between the two which recognises that one does not have to supersede the other, but rather form equal parts of a greater whole. To sever this mutualistic bond would then be to produce negative alienation, causing serious harm by robbing the individual of part of their identity, and the community of something that could contribute to its maintenance and development.

Marx sees capitalism as the force which degrades this bond, creating structures that alienate citizens from one-another, and leaves them with weaker senses of self. Within the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx depicts this in relation to four examples (Marx, 2000, 29-31). First, he identifies alienation from the object that the worker produces when it is immediately taken away from them to be sold by their employer. Second, he suggests that work can become a torment through the monotony which is engendered by the extreme division of labour to the point that one worker is relegated to the position of a cog in a large machine. Third, that the worker can become alienated if they have no say in what they produce or to what ends they produce it. Finally, Marx sees how it might dawn on the worker that their inability to decide what they produce or why leads them to realise that such work does nothing to fulfil mutual, definitively human, needs but, rather, is to service the mode of exchange and the accumulation of capital by their employer. Within each of these circumstances, the worker is ultimately reduced to a mechanism designed to produce profit in service of capitalism, and in each case loses some part of themselves (Marx, 2000, 30-33). They have lost their species-essence because their minds are restricted from producing objects for others that satisfy their needs. In this, the structure of the capitalist system consequently provides real obstacles for the individual to overcome and ensures that they remain in an alienated position whereby they cannot be agents of their own destiny. This is a development of

Hegel's relationship between object and subject to say that alienation is far more than a mental reservation, it is a physical one as well defined in part by domination and active agential degradation.

Marx terms this subordination as fetishism. In this case, the fetishism of capital limits the minds of every group within society by making them subservient to the objects which they created (Marx, 2000, 53). The worker and capitalist are separated by structure and can no longer see each other as human having found themselves in roles that garner mutual loathing for one-another. (Marx, 2000, 4-6). Here, the structures that we have created have become their own independent entities which distort the relationship between individuals, leading to the development of damaging norms which destroy our humanity and ability to relate to one-another (Marx, 2000, 39). Under these systems we are objectively alienated because there is no way of developing meaning or dignity in what we do when our only aim is to generate capital, which in no way promotes the community togetherness from which we can foster mutually beneficial facets of our identity (Marx, 2000, 22). In this way alienation is underlined by an adherence to a structure which undermines the bonds necessary for community, and which extends norms that clash with erstwhile notions of worth as derived from it. This undermines our capacity for relational connectivity and severs the link between community and meaning-generation.

Put simply, Marx emphasises alienation as detachment from community and its ability to generate social goods such as recognition, meaning, and dignified respect. In this, subservience to the capitalist mode of production has a significant impact on our ability to generate meaning, which is a prerequisite for dignity, since relations have become 'poisoned' by these processes of reification and fetishisation (Hilton, 2003). Such distortions are taken here to cloud one's ability to form relationships that are not transactional, promotes a competitive and ultimately destructive individualism, and prevents human needs from being recognised. To put this complex web of alienation more simply, we can build on the agential-communal definition of alienation, in which one has a sense of self that is not realised within community, to suggest that capitalism degrades our common values and attachment to one-another. One is not only unrecognised within community and unable to shape it, but also has their dignity actively eroded within a society that privileges reified ends and struggles to treat citizens as ends in themselves.

Macintyre and Community

Macintyre also sees that capitalism corrupts our humanity. Indeed, for Macintyre, capitalism has rendered value a term that is often associated with wealth (Macintyre, 2007, 148). Therefore, for something to have value it must either be worth money or able to produce it. Such an understanding of the concept renders discussion about value amoral and disconnected from genuine human needs or relationships because we are defining it in financial terms; not in human ones. In this case, we become more alienated from what it means to be a human and fall into a survival mentality whereby we work to consume, lacking social identity or a sense of anything greater than ourselves (Macintyre, 2007, 107). He ultimately sees capitalism, and a selfish-individualism which arises out of it, as fracturing the moral bedrock of community, inhibiting our ability to value one-another in our considerations.

The loss of this consideration as a foundational ethical value is important because it provides a foundation of equal worth whereby we can recognise others as valuable members of the community. Macintyre sees that, by having an ethical frame for community that makes it expressly clear that we must commit ourselves to others, we are better placed to extend a dignity to our citizens, as well as to create a community that one can find recognition within. The prognosis for a society that fails in this is particularly bleak. By losing

something as crucial as our ethical foundation we are robbed of the ability to enjoy these common goods which otherwise arise out of mutuality and deprive citizens of the ability to realise meaning within their lives. He even extends this to our structures, especially those that promote agency (Macintyre, 2007;2016). Take, for example, the decline of the trade unions. As we become more selfish in our interests, not desiring to pay into unions because they are not seen as providing immediate gratification, we lose the ability to gain things that can only come through collective action, in this case the use of collective bargaining to improve conditions.

Taken together, the loss of an ethical basis for community because of selfish individualisation atomises us and robs us of the ability to generate meaningful relationships, as well as denying us those goods, both material and 'spiritual', which we can only gain in common (Macintyre, 2016). In essence, by embracing an individualism that is devoid of express moral sentiment, the desire for duty and responsibility to be extended to others, we deprive ourselves of the capacity to share bonds of equal worth. This contributes to alienation as we become distanced from our community and find our capacity for meaning-generation and, in the case of the unions, agential action, severely stunted.

Defining Alienation

From this, we can identify three fundamental characteristics which can be used to define alienation. This finds itself expressed here in a substantive way in relation to:

1)   Community- The concept of community is essential for the realisation of human needs, according to philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, and Macintyre. Community enables collaborative interaction, helping individuals to understand themselves and others, and to find their place in the world through various roles, including citizenship and friendship. Marx highlights the benefits of communal identity, social engagement, and mutual relationships, which allow individuals to develop their faculties in ways that are not possible for atomised individuals. Macintyre critiques individualism, arguing that it leads to moral privatisation and a loss of identity and purpose. Without community, individuals lack a sense of right and wrong, and they miss the opportunity for a better future that can be achieved through collective action. These philosophers argue that community is necessary for the extension of mutual dignity and equal worth, and its absence results in alienation from oneself and others.

2)   Agency- The loss of agency is the second aspect of alienation according to Hegel, Marx, and Macintyre. Hegel explains it as the inability to recognize oneself in the world and a feeling of powerlessness resulting from the perception of external forces controlling one's life. Marx expands on this idea, arguing that physical structures prevent individuals from exercising agency. Macintyre critiques capitalism and liberal-individualism, which create institutions that undermine human needs and distort the ability to exercise agency. The feeling of powerlessness that comes with the loss of agency alienates individuals who recognize that society's structures prevent them from engaging in processes that could improve their lives. Such individuals are excluded from decision-making power and from participating in associations that hold it, leaving them feeling a lack of control over their lives and unable to shape their communities in conjunction with others.

3)   Dignity- The loss of dignity, defined as the inability of an individual to recognise their value, is the third component of alienation. According to Hegel, dignity is lost when individuals cannot find meaning in what they do or develop a strong identity based on their relationships. Marx sees dignity as related to the recognition of human needs and the ability of individuals to objectify those needs using their creative impulses. However, this dignity is taken away from individuals when they are forced to follow orders and when the fetishisation of capital trumps it. This alienates people from the relationships and actions

that give meaning to life and instead emphasizes survival through work. Macintyre also relates dignity to a person's ability to see themselves as part of a narrative created in tandem with others. The loss of dignity alienates individuals, leaving them without direction. It is psychologically damaging and detrimental to human development, separating us from our fellow human beings and categorising us into hierarchies that do not express our integrity. Like the other characteristics outlined above, dignity is necessary to make life worthwhile.

Potential Applications: The position of the British Working-Class

This article has so-far sought to identify an accessible means of understanding alienation and has moved towards a characterisation of the concept which is made up of three interconnected characteristics. These characteristics can be utilised to provide a tripartite understanding of the concept, wherein it is constituted by:

1)   Decline in relation to a sense of belonging within community
2)   The deterioration of agency.
3)   The loss of dignity.

By re-focusing alienation along these lines, we enable it to be utilised as an analytical framework to understand contemporary issues in a way that provides a clear and joined-up account.

Below, one sketches out one of its potential applications, seeking to understand how we might view the position of the working-class as alienated. One demonstrates this by bringing together arguments from across the political spectrum and shapes them into a more cohesive narrative, which is by no means definitive or unproblematic, but which illustrates the potential usefulness of alienation as a unifying framework to generate discussion. The reader should note that this argument is constructed using a diverse literature that might not necessarily run together if understood within other frames. As such, one takes the reader through an argument that combines literatures around the economic woes of the working-class, the structural and cultural declines and conflicts that have taken place within it, alongside more narrative issues associated with their position.

Are the working-class alienated?

The application of alienation to the working-class requires us to answer three pivotal questions, namely:

1)   Has their dignity declined?
2)   Has their sense of community declined?
3)   Has their agency declined?

If we find evidence of decline across the three, then we can consider the class to be alienated. To illustrate this one offers a limited overview of the literature.

Dignity: Is working-class dignity in decline?

For both Goodhart (2020) and Sandel (2020), a loss of dignity can be identified within the working-class in reference to three interconnected parts, namely the limitation of routes for social mobility, the inflation of credentials, and the de-valuing of non-cognitive roles within society. Taking this first point, both highlight how, in the past, working-class people had more opportunity to 'better themselves' whilst remaining rooted within their communities. Indeed, as university education remained uncommon, most working-class people, including the most intelligent workers, remained close to home and took up positions which either were rooted in the trades sector, in shopfloor or administrative work, or within key public services and associations. Most of these roles did not require a university education and

were generally seen as 'good jobs' that gave people a decent living and community-derived prestige (Goodhart, 2020, 195). The outlook towards these jobs, which are now being de-valued, was one which was not centred on value as derived from how much money one earned but, instead, based upon contribution to the community. What one saw in the past was multiple routes to not only social mobility but dignity, which was built into many jobs and was tied to a stronger sense of community. With the breakdown of community, the closure of workplaces, the cuts to public services, and the destruction of associations, one has seen the decline in prestige associated with those positions (Sandel, 2020).

These changes have been accompanied by a cultural shift towards merit and the attainment of credentials, which had been part of society in the past but found itself less-pronounced since most people did not go into higher education and were able to live dignified lives, perhaps most within the post-war years (Sandel,2020; Edgerton, 2021). However, in the 21st century where poorer regions have few suitable jobs, people must almost leave those communities to find employment, usually in large cities such as London, in which well-paying jobs require a bachelor's degree or more (Goodhart, 2020, 16). This has narrowed the possibility of social mobility for many people who do not either have the time, resources, or ability to go through university (Sandel, 2020). The result of this narrowing has been to create a situation in which a majority do not go to university, whilst a sizeable minority leave their communities for good upon graduating. In both cases there are issues as, within the university group, many must stay on to acquire a Masters degree or higher so that they can 'get ahead', whilst others become under-employed in non-degree work because there is an oversupply of graduates and an undersupply of well-paid middle-class jobs. For those without a degree, these people are immediately labelled as "losers" and have many jobs closed off to them (Goodhart, 2020, 93-95).

For Sandel especially, this demonstrates what he calls the "Tyranny of Merit", which is to make working-class people out to be "failures" deserving of their reduced status if they do not go to university. They deserve this status because they are not seen to possess sufficient knowledge, skill, ambition, nor perhaps work ethic. Having not gone to university, there is also a distinct lack of educational opportunities as the university has, to some extent, become synonymous with education, to the detriment of vocational courses. A degree now confers greater respect than what is an equivalent vocational qualification, whilst qualifications like the City and Guilds carry much less-weight than say, a Russell Group University (Goodhart, 2020, 242). To make matters worse, not even universities are equal, and one finds that those considered 'lesser' have a higher number of working-class students and alumni (English & Bolton, 2015). We thus see a situation where working-class people tend to become even more alienated as, not only are they less likely to attend university in the first instance, but those that 'make it' often find themselves in universities that lack prestige, and consequently suffer in their prospects for social mobility (Reay, 2021). This underlines Goodhart's claim that, by making a top 20 university the single route to social mobility we de-value others and limit their opportunities to acquire prestigious jobs. In this one sees how even a job that is skilled and pays relatively well, like a tradesperson, nevertheless lacks the prestige associated with roles which require a degree. What we see here then is not only a situation in which most workers do not have 'trades' and receive poor pay, but that even those who do are not adequately recognised for their skills, in spite of what pay they can obtain for them.

This has a corresponding impact upon the working-class psyche, which Sandel picks up on to suggest that having seen a particular kind of university-derived knowledge pushed to the forefront, those that miss out are made to feel they are worth less than their fellow citizens. Such a sense is borne out by the statistical evidence as those without a degree are likely to be labelled as 'unskilled' workers, which means low pay, poor security, and variable but

often poor conditions, with median wages at least £10,000 lower than those with a degree (IFS, 2020). This represents, for Sandel (2020), Cruddas (2021), and Goodhart (2020), a clear example of indignity as employers fail to treat their staff with the respect that they deserve, neglect to provide them with security, and are consequently seen to be "exploitative" and, in Marxian terms, "alienating". The failure to ensure 'good work' and the degradation of one's role to that of an 'unskilled' worker underlines such demeaning treatment, whilst a lack of recognition for skilled non-university workers undermines their more sustainable economic position, impoverishing their material and spiritual dignity (Bloodworth, 2018, 36).

Community: Is a working-class sense of community in decline?

There is a growing literature that cites cultural tensions as fomenting community decline. Several working-class respondents, mostly white and older, cite the changing demographics of their localities as a key source of crisis. This is a point to which Kaufmann speaks, although not unproblematically. Kaufmann (2018) and Goodhart (2020) point to an influx of migrants into traditionally working-class areas accompanied by a sense of 'loss'. It has been accompanied by this as minority groups have tended to begin re-shaping communities. For the working-class people already there, having suffered the decline of their communities because of structural loss, now feel such loss compounded by cultural and ethnodemographic changes. The fears that arise out of this is said by Kaufmann (2018) to reinforce negative stereotyping and to exacerbate the feeling of community loss because relations often degenerate either into segregation or resentfulness. The means to ameliorate such hostility between the existing working-class population, and the new population, which is likely to be working-class in economic terms, is virtually non-existent too, again owing to structural decline as the strength and number of trade unions, youth centres, and similar associations has diminished. This lends weight to the notion of being left behind, connecting with narratives already present within our society that resonate with many, typically white, working-class people who feel that 'their' leaders have forced such declines, and yet allowed the community to be reshaped in another's image (Goodhart, 2020). In this way, the white working-class struggle to navigate the landscape of cultural change and find it especially difficult to re-integrate themselves into a narrative of progress since their daily experience of life is alienating. They believe genuinely that they are ignored by government and left without a community to rely upon. Alienation is, therefore, related to community-loss here as the white working-class is left without a means to assert their claims for recognition, whilst the circumstances and old forms of association have been left to crumble (Kaufmann, 2018, 410).

This latter decline also prevents white and minority working-people from overcoming their present misrecognitions. Without these vital associations, there is little to stem the feelings of loss and fear that divides communities, further fomenting their breakdown. The working-class suffer in this as minority and majority peoples struggle to see each other as equals, grow distrustful of one-another, and consequently find it difficult to build community anew. These challenges worsen alienation and undermine a cohesive sense of working-class-ness, which in turn makes it harder to exert collective agency. In this analysis we see an overlap of declines across each of the three characteristics.

Disconnection from a national narrative

This disconnection is also prevalent within our national politics and the stories that we tell to make sense of our lives. Cruddas (2021) and Sandel (2012;2021) highlight the importance of a cohesive narrative that includes and enables people to see themselves as living in-common. This has traditionally been achieved among the working-class in reference to patriotism, which resonates with working-people to the extent that most of the ~70% of people who describe themselves as such also consider themselves to be working-class,

including most minority peoples within Britain (More in Common, 2020). However, at present there is a distinct lack of vision for working-people to buy into. For example, Cruddas (2021) and McKenzie (2017) point to their conversations with working-people and the moral issues that are included when they air their concerns. They cite discussions surrounding concepts such as "fairness", "justice", "equality", and "solidarity" and complain that they do not see this reflected within our politics, which they suggest has lost its ability to inspire. Sandel (2021) speaks to this. He tracks how our moral discourse has changed over time and demonstrates how the "big questions" of morality, injustice, inequality, essentially those challenges which people face on a daily basis and which used to galvanise people into action, has been replaced by a sterile "rhetoric of rising" in which politicians now speak of encouraging "opportunity", which is for many a hollow term (Sandel, 2020). According to IPSOS (2022), many working-class, and other, people are dissatisfied with the lack of direction for our country, and of politician's inability to offer something more. The working-class are alienated here because they are unable to imagine themselves to belong to something more. Where, in previous decades, they had means of meaning-creation owing to the structures of the associations or access to a national narrative of some kind, they now lack each of these things, without which it becomes significantly harder to find one's place or to see themselves in common (Edgerton, 2021).

Populist-Nationalism

This is partly why we have seen a surge in support for populist groups, because they have offered something that appears different to politics as usual for those, typically white, members of society who are not targeted by populist narratives (Gerbaudo, 2021). Unfortunately, the narratives that these groups promote tend to be divisive, actively promoting "culture wars" on topics like statues, immigration, or minority rights (Beckett, 2020). Such examples underline the narrative issue as this vitriolic rhetoric widens already deep divisions within the working-class and demonises those that it is targeted against. Indeed, minority working-people have been pushed to the margins of society and are robbed of the prestige associated with belonging (Akala, 2018).

In fact, minority workers have long suffered from a lack of recognition as constituent members of the British nation, whilst the working-class nature of many of these peoples has been highlighted by Stuart Hall (1980) to often worsen their situation, leading to ostracism or, alternatively, either their non-recognition or a recognition which takes no account of race. As Akala (2018) argues in relation to the 'Black' community, when one does something worthy of praise, they are no longer 'black' or 'black-British'-they are just British. For Hall and Akala, this is a case of misrecognition because being, in this case, black, working-class, and being British are fundamentally interlinked parts of one's identity that define their existence. Indeed, Hall notes that race and class are both concepts which involved the erection of "those systems of meaning, concepts, categories and representations which make sense of the world, and through which individuals come to 'live' … in an imaginary way, their relation to the real, material conditions of their existence." (Hall, 1980, 334). It is, therefore, important to consider them as they provide a narrative framing for one's life, much like community, which makes sense of the context in which we live. Our narratives should connect and resonate with different aspects of people's identities.

This is not the case for the minority members of the working-class today. Although efforts have been made to facilitate equal rights, and to undermine discrimination in law, minority peoples do not see those aspects of their identity recognised on an institutional or narrative level. Indeed, in a poll conducted by ICM (2021), when asked to name someone who contributed much to British history, only 1% of respondents named a non-white person. We see here evidence of exclusion from community as minority groups are unable to see their

histories, and their contributions, reflected in the stories that we tell about Britain, nor are they recognised by the community. This represents alienation from community if one cannot see themselves as belonging, see their struggles and their contributions go unnoticed, nor be appreciated by the national community. In this instance, a lack of recognition for one's role in shaping our community is demonstrative of alienation from it.

How does alienation measure against alternative frameworks?

One accepts that these are more complex issues than that which the article might reasonably articulate, but the application of alienation to contemporary issues does offer us a means of 'testing' other frameworks, which can generate beneficial questions.

Questions of community breakdown have recently been understood in relation to Social Capital Theory. This theory, developed by Robert Putnam (2001), claims to measure interactions between people and develop structures to promote communication. It analyses tangible resources like private property, alongside intangibles like human capital, and assumes that community breakdown can be reversed primarily by encouraging interaction. One accepts this premise to some extent and sees value in addressing structural issues which hamper community. However, this is insufficient because the theory does not understand 'community' in a deeper sense. The point is to measure forms of capital with the assumption that more capital for more people will create a 'better' community. It is then unclear what it means by community other than it being a physical entity and a network of interactions in which people exchange resources. For this reason, it often appears overly individualistic, rational, and reductionist in the sense that community becomes but the sum of its parts. Indeed, social capital is reflective of the detached marketisation that is now prevalent throughout our society. Many of its scholars, Putnam included, focus upon a transaction of resources, and hold that it is desirable, and community is desirable, because it enables individuals to use those resources for their own gain (Castiglione, 2008). It does recognise the community's role in establishing norms, and encouraging interaction, but the way that scholars of social capital portray this is without some sense of the ends which it looks towards. Community is taken to exist, and is beneficial for individuals, but it is not much more than that. It becomes a hollow term that refers to a stable network of transactional relationships built upon shared norms. Here, community is instrumentalised. This logic does not give due to the community as anything more, nor appreciates its potential as the spiritual embodiment of 'us'. What one is suggesting is more Marxian and Hegelian, a sense that we must be respectful of community because it is something that creates meaning, and which we should be able to connect to give our lives purpose. Community in-itself is not about getting ahead, it is about meaning-creation and connectivity in the realisation of flourishing (Hegel, 2018). It is born out of moral questions and grand narratives of the nation. This is important because many working-class people, although practical, are also idealistic, and desire a community predicated on notions of fairness, justice, or solidarity, amongst other things. Indeed, in the 2021 Hartlepool by-election, many working-class people complained that the Labour Party "don't have a vision" and offered nothing to the restoration of community (Armstrong, 2021). Working-people want this and to be able to find a place within it. They want a way of understanding their daily lives in the context of something more.

We have noted how populist groups have done this, but this neglects the building of community in terms of its infrastructure, whilst its narrative is one that has increased division. This is not a healthy basis for the reconstitution of community, and one in which the narrative, whilst appealing to some, is likely to damage that sense of community that many so desire. This reflects an issue that structure alone cannot solve, and which social capital is ill-equipped to handle. To re-connect people with community, we must be able to

appreciate its value and the associated value of narrative. In many respects, it has the potential to enable us to transcend our mundane realities, inspiring a sense of something greater than ourselves. It is this spiritual nature of community that bonds people as much as our relationships.

This has a structural component, yet there is a need to create narratives that connect with people, enable them to make sense of their experiences, and imagine themselves to be part of something greater. The problems facing the working-class can, therefore, be understood as a case of alienation from community. Social Capital Theory might partially acknowledge this, but it cannot explain how important community itself, and narratives which are tied to it, are and is therefore insufficient in diagnosing the issues faced by the working-class. The application of alienation asks us to look more critically at existing frameworks.

Agency: Is working-class agency in decline?

There is a complex literature on agency that has been advanced by scholars such as Surridge (2021) and Gerbaudo (2020), yet here one identifies the argument of Cruddas (2021), who speaks of a value-gap between what has become a middle-class dominated parliamentary Labour Party and the working-class, and its impact on agency. He highlights how three successive New Labour governments championed "Education, Education, Education" and social mobility within this new neoliberal Knowledge Economy (Blair, 2001). He notes this as being where working-people increasingly lost faith in the party which had long been considered a guardian of their dignity, and a conduit for the shaping of society in their image (Embery, 2021; Cruddas, 2021, Bloodworth, 2018). Cruddas points to the growth of working-class alienation as arising out of New Labour's shift towards the capture of the middle-class vote, and the creation of a society with no clear place for the working-class. He argues here that that a key guarantor of working-class dignity, with historical and powerful roots in their communities, ties to the trade unions, and other bodies which had once sought to give voice to, and protect, working-people, had now been seen to shun them. This attitude would transform the party to the extent that it is now only around 8% working-class in its PLP composition (O'Grady, 2018).

Embery (2021) speaks to this in stating that, during the Blair years:

 "blue collar and white collar united in the struggle for social and economic justice — started to fall apart as Labour began to be dominated by the latter, transforming itself into a party of the managerial and professional classes, graduates, and urban liberals…"

The party of dignified work became that of technocracy and social mobility. It still sought to help the working-class but not by listening to them. Instead, what one saw was a politics emerge in which votes were to be won with 'transactions'. This is reflected in Cruddas' assertion that "votes are the form of exchange, policies the commodities, and elected office the derived profit" (Cruddas, 2021, 32). Such a transactional model of politics sought to 'buy' working-class votes which, for many working-people, felt disingenuous. This was to literally alienate them in Marxian terms, dehumanising them as a commodity. For all the promise of opportunity that came with this marketisation too, the working-class saw little of it. They continued to suffer the effects of globalisation, made worse by a post-New Labour austerity. The impact of this was to further limit the agency of the working-class who, having already lost out from the restraining of the unions and the breakdown of their communities, now lost its connection to the force which it had viewed as most capable of protecting them. According to Goodwin, this rejection led to a deep-seated political resentment that would later be unleashed by Brexit (Goodwin, 2021; Evans & Tilley, 2017, 186).

Assessing the narrative of structural exclusion

Such a narrative begs us to incorporate empirical data into our account, broadening the range of material that can be understood in relation to claims about alienation. Evans and Mellon (2020) confirm a working-class dissatisfaction with Labour by pointing to the dramatic rise in working-class voter disaffection during New Labour's period in government. According to Evans and Tilley (2017) 23% of those voters who had voted for Labour in 1997 did not vote in the 2001 General Election at all, which is a trend that they see as broadly continuing over time. Heath (2016) too identifies 2001 as a turning point in working-class voter apathy as, previous to this election, it was typical to witness a working-class voter turnout rate which was within 5 percentage points of their middle-class counterparts. However, by 2010, this had become a near 20% gap in turnout between the working-and-middle classes, with Heath (2016;1997) drawing a correlation between the number of Labour candidates from a working-class background, and turnout, seeing that the decreasing number of candidates from such backgrounds has increased the likelihood of non-voting, to a point that many working-people do not vote, whilst others no longer vote Labour. In fact, from 1997-2010, the percentage of the working-class that voted for Labour fell from 55% to 34%, declining further in 2015 before a small rebound in 2017, which was later wiped out with the decisive Conservative victory in 2019 (IPSOS MORI, 1997;2001;2010;2015;2017;2019).

This is the context in which we see the decline of the Labour Party's ability to connect with the working-class to the point where only 15% of working-people feel that the party is "close" to them, a considerable decline from even 2010 where 64% of people would have suggested that Labour predominantly stood for working-people (YouGov, 2022; Ford & Sobolewska, 2018). This part of Cruddas' argument is self-evident. However, this does not necessarily demonstrate wider alienation, and although an argument could be made for increasing levels of apathy being indicative of such, these statistics largely suggest a dissatisfaction with the Labour Party alone. What is needed is a further exploration of the why question.

Social Mobility statistics indicate dissatisfaction with the direction of society both under New Labour and successive Conservative governments, and reveal a working-class that does, as Cruddas (2021) points out, feel left behind within society. 86% of working-people see class as the fundamental determiner of opportunity, rather than factors like merit, and see that the 'opportunity' of social mobility has largely meant nothing for them. Their belief that they are left out, and that social mobility has failed, is underlined by deepening structural inequalities as working-class people now earn 17% less on average than those in the middle-class and are significantly less likely to be able to access quality education, nor jobs with any serious chance of progression. Furthermore, since the 1980s, children who grew up in poverty are four times more likely to be stuck in poverty as an adult than children in the 1970s. In fact, child poverty, which fell somewhat under New Labour but still hovered at around 3.5m, is now estimated at some 5.4m- meaning that 1 in 3 British children are likely to be in poverty, and over half of all working-class children, with this being particularly harmful for its British-Bangladeshi sub-group (JRF, 2022). This, like many working-class issues, has not sufficiently been addressed by any government. Indeed, the 3% increase in the pay of the poorest workers in the past two decades under both parties' governments has not been enough to reverse the dramatic fall in living standards (JRF, 2022).

The reality of this for working-class people is significant (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). In contemporary Britain many now suffer not only the effects of precarity but there is also a sense that they are being exploited in those jobs which are accessible to them. One such example is a recent study into workers for Amazon, one of the UK's larger employers, which found that over 80% felt that their conditions constituted exploitation (GMB, 2020). This has itself been validated by research conducted by the TUC detailing complaints against the

employer for abuse of contract, safety violations, surveillance, and other actions detrimental to wellbeing (TUC, 2020). Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that only 29% of working-people feel that their job provides them with security (Cruddas, 2021). These poor conditions show the increasing precarity of the working-class across its sub-groups in this globalised world and indicate that they really have found themselves unable to alter their new-found position. Their concerns are under-represented, whilst their personal agency is hampered by structural insecurity and exclusion.

The empirical data seems to confirm Cruddas' argument. Whilst transactional politics delivered some benefits to the working-class, it did little to change the structures which limited their agency. The New Labour government became considerably unpopular over the course of its 13 years in government and alienated further the working-class by taking society in a direction that they did not desire, and which did not afford them a place within it, nor any means to voice their dissent. The examples given of the past two decades lay bare the loss of agency which had occurred within the class.

Conclusion

Having set out a tripartite understanding of alienation in the first section of this article, one has endeavoured in the second to utilise the concept in addressing a diverse literature that seeks to understand the issues faced by the working-class in contemporary Britain. Readers who are familiar with this will have noticed that this article utilises scholarly accounts from across the political spectrum. This is one of the methodological benefits of viewing such issues within a framework of alienation. Research can be utilised to track declines across these three characteristics in a clear manner, where we arrive at a more joined-up account of the working-class position. In this instance, accounts by Kaufmann, Goodwin, and Goodhart, who sit on the right in terms of their proposed solutions, have been utilised. Their focuses are certainly useful, but they do not consider the current position of the working-class as one related to a multifaceted social condition. However, by broadening this perspective to say that their concerns are but one part of a wider condition, it opens the study of working-class issues to further insights, in this case from Sandel and others, as well as the application of developed facets of alienation.

I should also note that this conception of alienation reflects the fact that the nature of class is changing, as are our considerations around it. Indeed, as literature from Kaufmann, Goodwin, and to some extent Sandel, identify, class cannot be fully understood according to socio-economic stratification, and instead is reflected in considerations both around factors like age and generation, as well as more subjective ideas such as one's sense of attachment, or understanding of community. This conception of alienation recognises the importance of these more subjective strands and appreciates that we need a concept that maintains a focus on the subjective, community, or a civic participation dimension in its own right, rather than as part of a mainly economic analysis, if we are to comprehend the position of the working-class in contemporary society.

In particular, it acknowledges how members of the class can hold quite different understandings of self and place as derived from factors like age, ethnicity, and socialisation. This complicates class-analysis because there exist a broadly similar set of economic constraints upon the working-class, differing only in their intensity, but some unique narratives which impact upon its sub-groups in different ways. For instance, minorities are most likely to make up the precariat, as are young people, and tend to see themselves as a forgotten class left behind in a globalised and increasingly insecure economy, with often worse prospects than their parents, and consequently might prioritise advancements that secure them material dignity (Standing, 2011). However, the older, and more often than not white, working-class (TCW), who usually own their own homes and are

more economically stable, if not secure, might well see their agency constrained in relation to what they wish Britain to be 'about' given its socially progressive turn, and thus seek redress in respect to the laws that govern our community (Goodwin, 2023). These narratives and the way that they shape the sub-group's response to the issues facing them differ, but we need to comprehend these experiences and the subjective ideas of self which they help to shape and reinforce if we are to understand how working-people live in contemporary society. Alienation as I have presented it considers this in reference to both agency and narrative, therefore giving academics the tools to examine both the respective positions of working-class sub-groups in relation to one-another, as well as to elaborate the similar and differing qualities which make up their narratives and sense of self or belonging. This will be useful in elaborating about a wider working-class position, as well as directing attention towards the complex and multifaceted needs of those who make it up.

As an overarching framework then, alienation can have a positive impact on the way that we approach and understand such contemporary issues. As I have described, this tripartite conceptualisation makes it easier to engage with a theory of alienation in the first instance. Indeed, we can begin on a fundamental level to identify alienation and track it across these characteristics, considering whether a group is suffering from it based on whether they have a lack of agency, dignity, or a sense of belonging in community. This opens space for more quantitative analysis of such problems, as well as greater debate around the meaning of these three characteristics, whilst the concept moves us beyond economically-rooted understandings of working-class decline towards an understanding of the class position as one beset by a series of challenges to their subjective sense of self, their 'narrative', and place within our community.

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