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Authenticity, Alienation and Privilege

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Marx argued that capitalism inevitably alienates workers. But do the privileged experience alienation differently?

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Picture a bunch of relatively impecunious PhD students, in an effortlessly mangy pub, in a Scottish fishing village. A fellow apprentice philosopher, American, puffs at her cigarette and coughs out some angst: "So I guess this grad school thing isn't working out for me. No jobs, no nothing. I'm going back to California and, like, get a cushy job with my family's real estate company." Me, inadequately: "Mmm-hmm." Her: "Y'know, imagine me at a party, telling someone I'm a realtor. People are gonna run a mile. And I'm gonna be bored out of my mind." "In a sense", I reply, "You might be right." Was she?

It seems to me there are two things going on in our friend's lamentation. First, the worry about becoming a centrifugal force for fellow partiers. I'm going to suggest that's about *authenticity*, or lack thereof. Second, the worry about bottomless tedium. Arguably that's about *alienation*. Let's take the two issues in turn, and then see how they may relate to each other.

Authenticity: the rough idea is that you're an authentic person only if you are true to yourself, or at one with yourself, or the way you present is the same as the way you are— not that these are exactly the same. So why would an estate agent be suspected of being inauthentic? Presumably my friend worried that flogging houses isn't many people's idea of a true calling. Or it just that this wasn't her true calling, and she worried that people would clock that. Either way, there's an element of blame associated with inauthenticity: the inauthentic person has made a rotten compromise, and so is blameworthy.



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The other worry, the one about being bored into rigor mortis, isn't about blame or social stigma. It's about one's own well-being, or sense of self-worth. Enter [alienation](#), that old Marxist bugbear. Perhaps the plight of a philosopher-turned-estate agent isn't quite what Marx had in mind; then again, in a society as rich as our own we may reasonably ask for more fulfilling jobs as a philosopher. Still, on that boozy night I found myself somewhat short of the implicitly requested amount of sympathy. I couldn't help imagining an impoverished migrant scrubbing the houses my friend will sell through a gritted smile. What about the cleaner's alienation? Is it on a par with my friend's? Will the cleaner even think of her livelihood in those terms?

Marx thought she should, but might well not, at least not until the revolution. He thought that, under capitalism, all workers would be inescapably estranged from their true selves in several ways: from their balanced flourishing as humans, or "species being" (constant cutthroat hustling and little time for much else), from the product of their work (the production line stretches out of sight), from work itself (shouldn't there be more to producing stuff than making money?), and from society at large (everyone's primarily a competitor or worse).

How does that apply to my friend, and to the cleaner? Let's first consider how my friend came upon her plight. She had two choices: either a life of penury and precariousness as a philosopher or some such, in or out of academia, or a comfortable if dull life as an estate agent. Both choices are alienating in at least one of Marx's senses. The philosopher with dim job prospects "[does what she loves](#)" at the cost of a steady livelihood, control over where she'll live year on year, and so what attachments she can form, and so on. The estate agent is alienated too: "live for the weekend", "[always be closing](#)", "the customer is always right", that sort of thing. Perhaps it was a mistake on the part of the young Marx to think that capitalism would alienate all workers in the same way (and that may be why, by the way, he failed to predict that capitalism wouldn't cause the immiseration of all salaried workers, but rather create a fairly stable [white collar class](#)). My friend's predicament shows that we can pick and choose a stock special set of modes of alienation. Three cheers for choice?

"Perhaps it was a mistake on the part of the young Marx to think that capitalism would alienate all workers in the same way..."

Well, these days a choice has to mainly serve as the alleged justification for pawning off essential services, so its invocation gives me pause. To mangle Lenin's [interrogative slogan on politics](#): who chooses what for whom? Recall the migrant worker scrubbing the real estate firm's portfolio for that perfectly deceitful wide-angle shot. What choice did she have? Let's imagine she didn't get much education, has no network of couches to sleep on in her new country, and so on. The [authenticity-laced version of alienation](#) wasn't even on the table for her. Not much chance of shivering in front of a canvas in a cold painter's studio. No part-time lecturing in ethnomusicology between trips to the food bank.

But there's more. The less physically and mentally taxing my alienation, the more I can think about alienation, conceptualise it, lay it bare with my Freudian analyst and my radical chic friends. I can develop a self-serving story that shifts away blame from my inauthentic choice to the alienating rot in "the system". On the other hand our migrant cleaner, whose alienation is considerably heavier, is less likely to see herself as alienated. For one thing, she barely has the time to think about such abstractions. And so, all else equal, she's more likely to buy into the blaring mythology of "[working hard and playing by the rules](#)" as the route to contentedness—which in turn may lead her to blame herself when contentedness doesn't materialise. Importantly, *both* types of deception are *ideological*, in the pejorative sense of the term: they're distortions of our perception of society that benefit the better off.

So, where's this going? Even doing what you love can and often will result in alienation. That's more than regrettable. But many (most?) don't even have that option, let alone the option of suburban alienated numbness. I'm not suggesting that precarious intellectual workers don't have it so bad after all, because others have it (much) worse. I'm saying that, should they choose the inauthentic, house-flogging option, they at least have the leisure and the intellectual resources to blame the alienating system rather than their choice—*all this while they simultaneously and deliberately contribute to propping up the system and directly exploiting the less fortunate*, thanks to their white collar roles. That, by the way, typically includes substantial portions of the jobs of those of us who somehow managed to end up in comfortable but ostensibly authentic careers (tenured academics at research universities, say). So when the relatively privileged revel in their all too common jaded, sophisticated



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complaints about their alienation they're not just enjoying some idle chatter. Consciously or not, they're obfuscating the reality of their inauthentic choice to prop up the very system they're ostensibly criticising. Authenticity, then, might've had more going for it than just a good answer to the wretched party question: "so, what do you do?".

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