

Disempowered Individuals: Identifying Synergies between Marx's 'Alienation' and Zuboff's 'Surveillance Capitalism'

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Abstract

Karl Marx defined alienation as a separation between workers and the product they produce, which further disconnects them from themselves. In a modern capitalistic society, workers are alienated from social and creative forms. Surveillance capitalism, in the encompassing world of artificial intelligence and machine learning, illicitly extracts users' online data to design algorithms that generate accurate predictions about users' online behavior. These predictions are sold to advertisers who implicitly or explicitly manufacture our future behaviors. Shoshana Zuboff, who has worked on the concept extensively, considers it an instrumentalism that operates through behavioral modification. This article examines both concepts using qualitative literature review and contextual analysis to find correlations and synergies between them. As a result, four themes have emerged that highlight intrinsic layers of positive connection between alienation and surveillance capitalism. The inferences indicate a strong correlation between the two conceptualizations and that alienation is a historically transient element.

Keywords: Alienation; Behavioural surplus; Capitalism; Instrumental power; Marx; Surveillance capitalism; Zuboff.

Introduction: Notable Reflections on Surveillance Capitalism

The term Surveillance Capitalism was popularized by Shoshana Zuboff, Professor Emeritus of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, who published an overarching manuscript called 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Future at the New Frontier of Power' in 2019, which shortly after its publication garnered positive

reviews from the critics and significance in popular culture and academia. Zuboff has been speaking about the concept eloquently for many years. The book, comprising more than six hundred pages, is a comprehensive framework of surveillance capitalism. Zuboff indicates that surveillance capitalism is not a technique or technology but a form of political capitalism or a surveillance-based economy that has taken an aggressive turn recently, causing an alarming situation in information civilization. Surveillance Capitalism is an unethical manifestation of computer-mediated capitalism where big-tech corporations like Google and Facebook incorporate predatory behavioral data extraction processes to predict, modify, and control individuals. The behavioral data is collected, analyzed, and assessed to manufacture predictive products, which ultimately determine our thoughts, actions, desires, and feelings (Zuboff, 2019).

Zuboff has drawn serious accusations on multinational corporations with substantial evidence. The essence of surveillance capitalism is better understood through an example. While using social networking websites like Facebook or search engines like Google, these companies extract the user's data without their consent. Through machine intelligence, this data is used to investigate online behavior to build accurate predictions later converted into products. An online food delivery application could analyze users' meal choices and timings to introduce them to exciting offers and coupon codes with the most favorable snacks at the right time. Zuboff argues that these elite corporations are collecting our information and selling it to market research companies to make a profit. This all takes place without providing the slightest idea to the user. One might not identify the hidden harm behind this manipulation. People often feel privileged by accurate product suggestions on shopping platforms. However, these predictive algorithms are not only recommending but also determining our behavior. This is not just a commodification of information to target potential consumers. The real intent behind surveillance capitalism is sinister (Zuboff, 2019).

Zuboff raises critical concerns in the book. According to her, capitalistic logic is accumulating personal data to manufacture needs and determine social conduct to maximize profit. It is harming the democracy. The business model should not shape social and cultural attitudes. Zuboff notes,

The commodification of behavior under surveillance capitalism pivots us toward a societal future in which market power is protected by moats of secrecy, indecipherability, and expertise. Even when knowledge derived from our behavior is fed back to us as a quid pro quo for participation, as

in the case of so-called “personalization,” parallel secret operations pursue the conversion of surplus into sales that point far beyond our interests. We have no formal control because we are not essential to this market action. In this future we are exiles from our own behavior, denied access to or control over knowledge derived from its dispossession by others for others. Knowledge, authority, and power rest with surveillance capital, for which we are merely “human natural resources” (page no. 71)

Zuboff decodes the intrinsic layers of surveillance capitalism. While doing this, her primary targets are Facebook and Google and their creative exploitation practices. She notes that Google avoided advertising on search engine platforms. Hence, the alternative was to collect, organize, and assess the collateral information to predict the behavior of billions of people. She states that the telecast of ‘Who Wants to Be Millionaire’ changed the game for Google as millions of people visited the platform to seek correct answers. This is how Google started rendering users’ information to determine social behavior.

Zuboff fears the inability of governments to control and monitor this malicious ‘mutation’ of capitalism. She laments that large digital technology companies might shape future democracies and conquer the political and economic world power. The influence of capitalistic organizations has gone beyond the digital realm to physical reality. It possesses the power to dictate to people who do not even use internet-based communication mediums. It produced a disruptive force to alter the human experience.

Alienation: Unfolding a Critical Concept

Marx’s idea of alienation has multiple layers. He developed the concept prominently from a labor perspective; however, we can find philosophical commentaries on alienation from other distinguished scholars. At the outset, Marx outlines that the production of labor in the modern capitalist society creates a divorce between the products and producers of the products, i.e., workers. The theoretical foundation of alienation enumerates the disconnection of workers from the products they produce, which ultimately causes unhappiness. The process of alienation results in the loss of man’s essence, the disability to determine life and destiny, and the meaninglessness of life (Marx, 1992[1844]).

The primitive form of alienation could be found in the German-French Annals published by Marx and Ruge in Paris. Later, Marx developed the idea systematically in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, pub-

lished in 1844. The third volume of *Capital* also denotes the correlation of alienation with universal human nature (Petrovic, 1965). Although the conceptual structuring of alienation is credited to Marx, the term had already appeared in the scholarly work of Rousseau. It was later profoundly explained in the writings of Hegel (On the concept of 'Alienation,' 1985). Hegel's work influences Marx's notion of alienation. Very few dissimilarities in thoughts could be found in their writing. Notably, Marx has radicalized Hegel's variant of alienation.

Marx and Hegel positioned 'labor' as a fundamental phenomenon for their philosophical underpinnings. The economic lenses reiterate 'work' as a mundane and reluctant activity to supply the materialistic needs of humans. In contrast, Hegel interprets 'work' as a 'spiritual' activity distinguishing humans from other animals (Sayers, 2011). Hegel attempts to construct alienation through a consciousness framework, meanwhile converting the fundamentals of normativism into a human one (Bronner, 2017). Marx aligns with Hegel in most interventions; however, he does not believe that the work leads to self-realization. He distinguishes between 'objectification' and 'alienation.' He claims that the workers are alienated from the objects produced by them (Sayers, 2011).

Marxists did not generate prolific discussions about alienation as a severe problem for a brief period. In fact, numerous falsified and loosely interpreted variations of Marx's alienation are registered in the research pool. Such arbitrary arguments formulate dubiety between alienation and self-alienation. It is essential to understand that during the process of labor, man alienates from the product or himself. The alienation of man from the product transcends material activity, whereas the alienation of man from himself projects spiritual activity. The accurate Marxist interpretation of self-alienation is that "at the same time, man alienates something from himself and himself from something; that he alienates himself from himself" (Petrovic, 1963, p. 421).

According to Marx (1844), alienation is the separation or isolation of workers from the products they manufacture in the industries. Though the term also applies to social conditions, norms, and values, Marx emphasized the industrial workers in a capitalist setting. The workers perform the labor against their wishes and do not receive a fair amount. The manufactured product is neither under their essential need, nor they can afford it as a luxury. During manufacturing, workers are alienated from their souls as well. The inability to claim one's creation enmeshes enslavement concerns and gradual loss of consciousness control. The worker's social actions, re-

relationships, and decision-making abilities are dictated by the bourgeoisie. The elite class ensures the extraction of a maximum surplus value from the worker.

Methodology

Drawing on *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Nature at the New Frontier Power* (2019) and the 'Estranged Labor' segment from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1992 [1844]), along with other additional relevant literature, the prevailing research article attempts to explore a continuity between Marx's concept of 'Alienation' and 'Surveillance Capitalism.' The researcher has conducted a qualitative literature review method (Seers, 2015) and contextual analysis (Falkingham & Reeves, 1998) to understand the possible correlation between the two conceptualizations. The critical reading of two manuscripts and other relevant literature facilitated the formulation of four significant themes highlighting interesting relationships between the study object.

Alienated Labor and Predictive Markets

Many of us perceive search engines, for instance, Google, as a boon for providing accurate, valuable, and free results. However, according to Zuboff, we pay a hidden price for the information we search using Google. A few years after the launch of Gmail, Google admitted that it scans all emails (Gibbs, 2020). It has automated systems to analyze the user content. The revelation invited a range of criticism of the company. Google defended the malpractice by claiming that user's personal information is utilized for constructing meaningful and friendly algorithms. Facebook also followed a similar business model. Zuboff (2019), in this regard, finds the algorithms, which are mathematical calculations of human behavior, responsible for generating accurate predictions of human actions. She states that this act is a commodification of human nature. Her primary concern is the selling of personal information and shaping human behavior.

In 2012 and 2013, Facebook conducted psychological experiments on the users known as "massive-scale contagion experiments" (Gibbs, 2017). The aim was to test if they could affect users' behavior and real-world emotions by critically analyzing their news feeds without their knowledge. During the 2012 mid-term elections, Facebook put subliminal cues in people's news feeds to make them cast real votes without their awareness and consent to understand if the company could affect real-world behavior (Caksu, 2020). In another experiment, using subliminal cues again, Face-

book tested whether it could make people happy or sad. Zuboff (2019) has accused Facebook of scanning facial elements of users' personal photographs to sell this information to China to monitor Uyghur prison camps.

In this sense, people using Facebook and Google generate valuable data for these companies without their consent and awareness. This chunk of data is sold to unknown stakeholders and territories. The purpose of producing and generating data is capitalistic and materialistic. People are uninformed and unaware that they produce free labor for capitalistic corporations. They are implicitly filling the pockets of wealthy capitalists. In this scenario, humans for these multinational companies are animals, as Marx claimed, alienated labor (Horowitz, 2010). They are only filling the gap. The users of Facebook and Google are alienated from the data and the process of generating the data.

Subjective Alienation and Behavioural Surplus

Zuboff (2019) introduces the concept of 'Behavioral Surplus' in her book. While describing the insidious intentions of manipulative algorithms, she unfolds the capitalistic logic and surveillance-based economy. When we install applications on mobile or review the terms and agreements of using a website service or social network, the companies ask to collect our primary information to improve the application performance or site experience. These data chunks are used for the company's betterment with user consent. However, corporations like Google and Facebook are not interested in this data. For them, the proprietary data, which is free raw material and later translated into behavioral data to learn human lived experience and predict accurate human actions, is significant and called a 'Behavioral Surplus.' This data is a corporate surveillance asset extracted from people's online activity, mobile phones, in-home artificial intelligence, and wearable devices. Feeding the surplus data into machine intelligence provides accurate predictions or anticipation of what you will do now, soon, or later (Zuboff, 2020). The viciousness in this process is that the product predictions by advertisers not only influence buyers' decisions but also dictate his or her present and future behavior. Thus, companies' business models "intensify hidden processes aimed at the extraction of behavioral data and personal information." (Zuboff, 2019, p. 88). Zuboff proposes that the behavioral surplus was the brainchild of Google. During the dot-com crisis, Google increased profit margins through behavioral surplus, producing a 3,590 percent increase in 2002 and 3.2 billion in 2004 (Huberman, 2020). This incident legitimizes Zuboff's conclusion that behavioral surplus is a turning point in Google's biography and historical

advancement in capitalism.

Hegel and Marx worked on the two types of Alienation: Subjective and Objective. These types are conceptually distant from each other. The subjective side of alienation highlights that people are separated from reality. In other words, according to Hegel, in terms of modern social life and the world, people fail to perceive the world as their home even if it is, and people perceive the world as their home when it is not. While establishing a correlation with a behavioral surplus, online users negate the commercial values of behavioral surplus data. They do not see the hidden manipulations of the act. Moreover, they continue to be ignorant of the term while engaging in online e-commerce or social networking. They feel blessed or lucky to receive accurate predictions of the products. They fail to understand that capitalistic minds control their lived experiences. This is a pure form of subjective alienation.

Alienation and Self-Alienation: Determining Our Actions and Manipulation

There have been numerous cognitive debates on the distinction between alienation and self-alienation. Some thinkers have also tried to connect alienation with objectification. However, it is wise to refer to Marx's enumeration of alienation in four aspects. The essence of self-alienation is that while producing labor, man is not only alienated from the process and outcome of the process but also from himself. Marx regards objectification as man's alienation from the object (result) of his labor. He notes that the objects of man's labor constitute an independent world that dominates man (Petrovic, 1964). The reason is the alienation from productive activity. Marx notes that labor activity does not produce the feeling of freedom; however, it subjugates the man. The third phase delineates the feeling of alienation from oneself. Marx believes that the essence of man lies in the creativity. However, man is alienated from the human essence. Thus, he alienates from himself. In the fourth and final phase, man alienates from other men. As the workers are alienated from the product and production and their true essence, they are alienated from other men (Petrovic, 1964).

Zuboff calls the internet "the world's largest ungoverned space," celebrated by surveillance capitalists (Zuboff, 2020). Her revelations with substantial evidence indicate that the leading surveillance capitalists – Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Facebook, unilaterally access our data to generate predictive signals; however, the actual danger comes up when this data collected through complex supply chains of devices begins to render

our lives. For instance, Facebook used internal data to target 6.4 million young Australians and New Zealanders in 2017, using psychological insights to modify user behavior. The company monitored posts, pictures, interactions, and internet activity in real-time to identify when young people needed a boost in confidence and were most vulnerable to specific subliminal cues. This information was then used to match each emotional phase with appropriate ad messaging (Zuboff, 2020). She also confronts the fact that data is transmitted through complex supply chains, tracking software, and niche app ecosystems. Facebook receives heart rate, menstrual cycle, and real estate interest data from apps like Instant Heart Rate: HR Monitor, Flo Period & Ovulation Tracker, and realtor.com without user knowledge (Schenscher & Secada, 2019).

Zuboff notes that surveillance capitalists,

“Sell certainty to business customers who would like to know with certainty what we do. Targeted adverts, yes, but also businesses want to know whether to sell us a mortgage, insurance, what to charge us, do we drive safely? They want to know the maximum they can extract from us in an exchange. They want to know how we will behave in order to know how to best intervene in our behaviour.” (Kavenna, 2019)

Within surveillance capitalism, users are alienated from their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. They are unaware that their online and offline activity produces proprietary data for multinational corporations. They are being controlled, regulated, governed, and commodified by the capitalists. This process also happens in four phases, as Marx has explained. As Zuboff proclaims, surveillance capitalism is an assault on human autonomy (Kavenna, 2019). Today, people in an online environment seem divorced from their activities, actions, and, ultimately, from themselves.

The Conflation of Marx’s Reification and Zuboff’s Instrumentarian Power

According to Tairako (2018), reification is,

“The capitalist commodity society is characterized by the uniquely (indirectly) social character of private labor that, although workers are totally dependent on each other, they are deprived of socialness. In this society, the social relations of private workers to each other do not appear as social relations in the dimension of labor but assume a converted [verkehrt] form of appearance as the social relations of things (Sachen) to each other.

Thus, the conversion [Verkehrung] of social relations of persons to persons into social relations of things (Sachen) to things can be defined as reification (Versachlichung); this means a process that, in the dimension of social relations, switches from a person to a thing" (Page no. 1)

Marx linked alienation to reification. He believed people were alienated from their work and treated as commodities by the capitalists. The conceptualization of reification should not be linked with commodity fetishism, which portrays a different meaning. The term reification was seen in the work of George Lukas. However, different Marxist schools of thought have elaborated the term. Zuboff's (2019) perception of Instrumentarian power is that governments and corporations use technology to manipulate people effectively. The Instrumentarian power is attached to the business model of Facebook and Google. These companies' primary revenue source is the techniques of prediction and manipulation. She has identified three techniques of instrumentation power: Turning, Herding, and Conditioning.

Thus, we can examine that both terms can find synergy between them. Corporations like Google and Facebook profit by trading their user's private data with mysterious but powerful entities. For them, the people are commodities or mere objects. By stealing their data, companies are posing a threat to freedom and democracy. Marx raises capitalists' radical actions to control the proletariat in his seminal work. He mentions that the commodity form and bureaucracy threaten liberal democracy and social reform. It should be noted that capitalistic logic and economic interest are omnipresent in history. It is only changing over time. The proletariat has been an object of external forces; however, its objective should be abolishing class society and alienation (Bronner, 2017).

Concluding Remarks

The emerging themes showcase the strong association between both conceptualizations. Marx used alienation to define the contemporary shift in social and economic conditions. The essence of Zuboff's surveillance capitalism is the imposed social relations. She tries to understand the new dominated economic power within the eyes of governance, asymmetry of power and knowledge, and market capitalism. Marx emphasized the separation of workers from their product of labor. They do not control the workflow and have no option to control production. Their existence depends on the global economy. Zuboff makes a strong evidential statement that we are all technology-enabled, disempowered individuals who are

being exploited and dehumanized by the control and influence of a few corporation giants over the internet.

This article aimed to explore the synergies between alienation and surveillance capitalism. The emerging theme suggests that Marx's perception of alienation still can be found in the prevailing economic and social order. The behavioral surplus is the online user's uncharted and illicit labor, ultimately alienating them from online activities and themselves. We are being remotely controlled and modified. What we believe, feel, and think is not manufactured and shaped by our consciousness. It results from a commercial endeavor incepted by surveillance capitalists. The logic behind surveillance capitalism is indeed political. Marx's writings on alienation are unfinished. He could not complete the manuscript. He poses many questions related to the philosophical and economic understanding of alienation. His understanding is still relevant in today's world. Internet governance has turned public spaces into private ones to maximize revenues. In this process, Marx's question of how alienation is found in human development is answered some to extent.

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