

# A Critical Reexamination of Alienation

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This article will examine the concept of alienation and reconsider its usefulness in sociology and in the social sciences. This concept once occupied center stage in sociological theory, but in recent times it has declined in significance. However, a review of the sociofile database reveals that alienation has and will continue to play a major role in sociological theory. The questions discussed in this article include the following: How has the concept of alienation fared during the last twenty years? What uses have been made of it in the literature of the social sciences? What role will alienation play in future investigations of the sociology of labor and other human endeavors? This article explores the various meanings associated with alienation and is based on secondary data gathered from journal articles and books published between 1974 and 1994.

## INTRODUCTION

This article reexamines the usefulness of the concept of alienation as it appears in sociological literature and as it is applied in the social sciences. The article's theoretical point of departure is that alienation is rooted in human society, that it is an outcome of various human activities and circumstances. Alienation, for instance, may derive from social, political, or economic interactions, from circumstances arising from communication or education, and be expressed in history, music, and literature. It should be noted, however, that not all human activity and circumstances are alienating.

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The term itself has been expanded to include a variety of psychological states: loneliness, homelessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, apathy, isolation, and a disjunction between two conditions such as work and self-esteem. It possesses both subjective and objective dimensions. As a result, alienation has been used rather broadly as a psychological and sociological explanation for a wide range of human behavior. Because of this, some social scientists have suggested delimiting the concept or abandoning it.

For Johnson (1973), alienation is a "panchreston," one of those words that, while seeming to explain all, essentially explain nothing. Israel (1971) asked if alienation was still a theoretically fruitful concept? He noted that the use of the term in empirical-positivistic sociology had, if anything, revealed the ambiguity that had adhered to the concept and the vagueness with which it was applied. He suggested that alienation be discarded from sociological and psychological theorizing completely and that other, more narrowly defined expressions be used in its place. If alienation is used to embrace such concepts as powerlessness, normlessness, and meaningless, he argues, why not just use these terms in its place.

These views seemed to have been influential, at least for a time. Another critic of alienation, Wrong (1985) commented in his article on the myths of alienation that the concept had become less salient in discourse in the field than it had been, largely as a result of its excessive use in the 1950s and 1960s. As Wrong saw it, the term became vague and amorphous, coming to serve as a sort of verbal talisman connoting just about any psychological discomfort or malaise.

Nonetheless, alienation has definitely not been removed from scientific discourse over the last twenty years. Despite the often valid criticism of past commentators, the term has played a critical role in many of the debates that animate the social sciences. It has certainly not outlived its usefulness, as a review of the sociofile database journal entries from 1974 to the present show.

### **Literature on Alienation**

This article will not survey the entire literature on alienation, nor is it necessary to explore the various meanings of the concept from its inception. Rather, my strategy is to follow the recent debate about the term by examining the works of four contemporary writers who have worked intensively with this concept and review their comments. Although these writers are by no means the only ones who have written on the subject, their work stands out for the clarity with which they describe their differing positions.

Schacht (1970) provides an extensive survey of alienation from its linguistic origins to the intellectual tradition that surrounds the term to its uses in the literature of sociology. Schacht sees operative in alienation the idea of separation, a term that poses less of a problem for commentators: "Separation" is a very useful term, with many different applications. No one supposes, however, that the term names a specific phenomenon, or that the different phenomena to which it is applicable constitute so many different "modes" or "aspects" or "dimensions" or something called "separation," or that they are interrelated in any significant way. It is understood that "separation" is merely a general relational term, that the different phenomena to which

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