



Perspectives of Alienation in the Digital Labour Market. A Debate and Empirical Proposals between Philosophy, Sociology and Human Rights

PERSPECTIVAS DE LA ALIENACION EN EL MERCADO LABORAL DIGITAL.
UN DEBATE Y PROPUESTAS EMPIRICAS ENTRE LA FILOSOFIA,
LA SOCIOLOGIA Y LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of alienation has long been central in philosophical and sociological thought, especially within critiques of industrial capitalism. With the advent of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, alienation has taken new forms in the digital labour market. This paper re-examines alienation through both theoretical and empirical lenses, drawing on Marxist, existentialist, and contemporary critical theories. We explore how algorithmic management, digital surveillance, and the fragmentation of work under digital capitalism contribute to feelings of powerlessness, detachment, and diminished autonomy. The study focuses on how these dynamics reshape human labour, not only in terms of productivity but also in the erosion of agency and recognition. Empirical evidence from education and the gig economy highlights the socio-psychological consequences of algorithmic control. We propose that alienation should be reconceived not merely as a private psychological response, but as a systemic, organizational, and collective phenomenon. Finally, the paper suggests alternatives such as ethical AI, cooperative work models, and legal safeguards to mitigate digital alienation. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining philosophy and sociology, the study aims to update the concept of alienation for the digital era and provide tools for understanding and transforming contemporary work.

RESUMEN

El concepto de alienación ha ocupado un lugar central en el pensamiento filosófico y sociológico, especialmente en las críticas al capitalismo industrial. Con la aparición de la inteligencia artificial y las tecnologías digitales, la alienación adopta nuevas formas en el mercado laboral digital. Este artículo reexamina la alienación desde perspectivas teóricas y empíricas, basándose en las tradiciones marxistas,

KEYWORDS

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existencialistas y críticas contemporáneas. Se explora cómo la gestión algorítmica, la vigilancia digital y la fragmentación del trabajo en el capitalismo digital contribuyen a sentimientos de impotencia, desconexión y pérdida de autonomía. El estudio analiza cómo estas dinámicas reconfiguran el trabajo humano no solo en términos de productividad, sino también en la erosión de la agencia y el reconocimiento. A través de evidencias empíricas en sectores como la educación y la economía de plataformas, se destacan las consecuencias socio-psicológicas del control algorítmico. Se propone reconceptualizar la alienación no como una respuesta psicológica individual, sino como un fenómeno sistémico, organizativo y colectivo. Finalmente, se sugieren alternativas como la inteligencia artificial ética, los modelos cooperativos de trabajo y las garantías legales como medios para mitigar la alienación digital. A través de un enfoque interdisciplinario entre la filosofía y la sociología, el estudio actualiza el concepto de alienación para la era digital y proporciona herramientas para comprender y transformar el trabajo contemporáneo.

I. INTRODUCTION

Alienation has long occupied a central role in philosophical, sociological, and economic thought, initially conceived within the framework of industrial capitalism but now extending its reach into the digital age. Marx's foundational critique of alienation, where individuals become estranged from the products of their labour, the labour process, their fellow workers, and ultimately their own essence, remains a powerful analytical tool in understanding contemporary transformations driven by artificial intelligence, automation, and digital technologies (Musto, 2018; Petrucciani, 2023). While early industrial capitalism confined alienation primarily to factory settings, the current wave of technological evolution embeds it into the fabric of modern socio-economic and technological infrastructures, shaping work, education, and creative expression in new and profound ways (Fullin, 2023; Menz and Nies, 2024). The digital revolution, with its emphasis on algorithmic governance, has altered the nature of labour, reconfigured traditional employment structures and introducing new forms of estrangement. Automation and AI-driven management systems now dictate work conditions, reducing autonomy and fragmenting labour into increasingly precarious and depersonalized forms.

Scholars such as Braverman had warned against the deskilling impact of mechanization, concerns that remain highly relevant as contemporary workers navigate digital environments where decisions about productivity, efficiency, and remuneration are made by opaque data-driven systems (Braverman, 1974). The rise of gig work and platform economies further exacerbates this condition, as workers find themselves in a liminal space, disconnected from stable employment relationships and subject to the unpredictable whims of algorithmic control (Miele and Tirabeni, 2020; Tirabeni, 2023; Fullin, 2023). Surveillance has emerged as another fundamental aspect of digital alienation. AI-powered tracking mechanisms have normalized a culture of constant monitoring, where workers are not only evaluated on their productivity but also scrutinized for behavioural patterns that align with algorithmic expectations. Zuboff's research on surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) highlights the deep entrenchment of data-driven control in modern workplaces, where information asymmetry ensures

that power remains concentrated in the hands of corporations, leaving workers in a perpetual state of uncertainty. This continuous surveillance leads to heightened stress, psychological distress, and a pervasive sense of estrangement, reinforcing the very conditions of alienation that theorists have long critiqued. Beyond labour, digital alienation manifests in social and creative life. AI-driven interactions increasingly mediate human relationships, shaping how individuals connect, communicate, and establish meaning in their daily interactions.

The philosopher Axel Honneth (2014, 2017) posits that recognition is an essential component of human fulfilment; yet, digital platforms prioritize engagement metrics and algorithmic curation over genuine connection, exacerbating a crisis of social detachment. Social media, while ostensibly designed to foster interaction, often reinforces alienation by emphasizing digital performance and validation over substantive relationships. As users navigate online spaces dictated by algorithmic influence, their autonomy over self-presentation and engagement is increasingly compromised, contributing to a sense of disempowerment and existential disconnection. The realm of creativity has also been profoundly altered by digitalization and artificial intelligence. Historically, artistic and intellectual labour have been celebrated for their capacity to express human ingenuity and cultural identity. However, the rise of AI-generated content—from automated journalism to algorithmically composed music—has introduced a new paradigm where creativity is standardized, curated, and often subordinated to commercial algorithmic incentives. Scholars such as Pfeiffer have explored the implications of this mechanization of culture, emphasizing the loss of artistic agency in favour of AI-optimized outputs (Pfeiffer, 2013; Fuchs, 2016). As technology dictates the parameters of creative production, human creators increasingly find their work subject to the constraints imposed by digital tools, raising critical questions about the autonomy of artistic labour in an age of algorithmic determination. Empirical studies provide concrete evidence of the impacts of digital alienation. In the education sector, digital learning platforms have transformed pedagogical dynamics, often reducing teachers to facilitators of standardized curricula dictated by algorithmic frameworks. Research by Menz and Nies illustrates how such shifts undermine educators' professional autonomy, as decision-making processes become increasingly centralized and depersonalized (Menz and Nies, 2024).

Similarly, in corporate environments, studies indicate that employees working under AI-driven management structures experience lower job satisfaction, greater stress, and an increased sense of disconnection from their work. These findings highlight the tangible consequences of digital alienation, reinforcing the urgency of addressing its socio-economic and psychological ramifications. Addressing digital alienation requires a multifaceted approach, integrating ethical AI governance, legislative protections, and alternative labour structures that prioritize human agency. Transparency in algorithmic decision-making processes is essential to restoring a sense of control and autonomy among workers. Regulatory frameworks must ensure that AI management systems operate within ethical boundaries that respect individual rights and prevent exploitative practices. Cooperative business models, as proposed by scholars such as Hollstein and Rosa (2020, 2023), offer an alternative to conventional corporate structures by emphasizing collective governance and worker participation.

Moreover, policies designed to curb excessive workplace surveillance and promote digital well-being can help mitigate the psychological burdens associated with data-driven labour environments. As artificial intelligence, automation, and digital technologies continue to reshape economies and social structures, the concept of alienation remains crucial in analysing the complexities of contemporary life. The digital revolution is not merely a question of technological progress but a fundamentally human challenge that necessitates ethical reflection and proactive intervention. Without meaningful safeguards, the risks of deepening alienation threaten to undermine the very social and economic fabric that technological advancements aim to enhance. Recognizing and addressing digital alienation is therefore imperative in shaping a future where technology serves to empower rather than estrange, ensuring that human agency and fulfilment remain central in an increasingly automated world.

The concept of alienation should not be reduced to a fading philosophical inquiry or a purely individual response to external constraints or exploitation. Rather, it should be recognized as a dynamic and pervasive social phenomenon. One of the most significant challenges for sociology and philosophy lies in overcoming the tendency to confine alienation to the private psychological and emotional sphere (Musto, 2018; Petrucciani, 2023; Piromalli, 2023). Instead, it must be critically examined within the broader context of social transformations and economic transitions, considering alienation a specific point of view capable to describe and discover inequalities in the revolutionary digital era. Marx's conception of alienation, in particular, marks a pivotal development in German thought, emerging as a response to radical shifts in political economy. This conceptual evolution reflects a tension between the forces of customization and extreme individualism, encapsulating the profound changes brought about by industrial capitalism (Mészáros, 1976: 93).

The development of this concept in its complex Marxian comprehensiveness [...] was simply inconceivable prior to a certain historical epoch, namely before the relative maturation of the social contradictions reflected within it. Reaching this level of understanding also required the refinement of intellectual tools and methods – primarily through the elaboration of the categories of dialectics – that were essential for a proper philosophical grasp of the mystifying manifestations of alienation. Additionally, it necessitated the intellectual capacity of an individual capable of utilizing these tools effectively.

In this context, the rise and widespread adoption of remote work within labour markets underscores the need to examine the intersection of alienation and accelerated digitalization. This comparison is critical for identifying aspects of continuity and disruption that were previously difficult to conceptualize before the pandemic crisis. Moreover, this perspective suggests that alienation should not be narrowly confined to the emotional constraints experienced by workers. Instead, it should be reevaluated in light of the managerial strategies and organizational transformations driven by the rapid expansion of digitalized work practices (Menz & Nies, 2024; Nicklich & Pfeiffer, 2023).

The approach adopted in this study is a genealogical reconstruction of the concept of alienation, considering its etymology, meaning, and various interpretations. This is complemented by a problematic and interpretative analysis of the debate surrounding

the term, beginning with a historical-philological examination and progressing towards an analytical development through key interpretative frameworks that have shaped its conceptual evolution. As Walter Kaufmann (1970: 13) suggests:

What is needed is a careful, critical survey of the ways in which many of the most influential writers have used the term. That, of course, is a difficult undertaking and requires considerable scholarship. But, short of that, we shall always be reduced to confusion when we read about alienation. And if we simply do not care how other men have used the word and say, in effect, "This is how I shall use it", we are quite apt to be told that the term really means something else and that we ought to read this writer or that.

Thus, after reconstructing the debate through its most explanatory interpretative trajectories, we must strive to consider alienation as a crucial philosophical and sociological concept for understanding the transformations of the labour market, its structural equilibria, inequalities, and the relationships between social actors and institutions. The effectiveness of alienation as a philosophical and sociological theory lies in its ability to describe and critique the transformations and contradictions of the economic system. The tendency to frame alienation as an individual phenomenon, linked to personal suffering and a predetermined psychological condition –despite its usefulness in highlighting the importance of subjective repercussions– risks weakening its analytical power. This approach not only distances alienation from its most compelling meaning but also impoverishes its conceptual depth, leading to a neglect of its collective and systemic dimensions.

In other words, what is needed is a critique of economic-political alienation capable of providing analytical and practical tools to social movements, trade unions, scholars, and institutions. Such a critique should help describe inequalities, labour fragmentation, identify continuities and discontinuities with the past, and propose solutions that promote representation and universality–counteracting the prevailing trends of corporatism, sectoral division, and de-qualifying compromises. Marxian alienation, as originally conceived, emerged in the context of the Second Industrial Revolution. Today, it regains renewed relevance as we navigate a digital revolution that is leading towards techno-capitalism and its consequences. In this sense, Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration and contemporary German sociology's universal critique of alienation –particularly within Labour Process Theory– offer a valuable conceptual framework. These perspectives move beyond individualistic psychologism, expanding the scope of analysis to include collective bargaining mechanisms and the imaginaries of labour. Alienation emerges as one of the consequences of relentless technological acceleration, but it remains fundamentally linked to work, its structures, and its transformations.

By bridging philosophy and sociology, we argue that traditional theories of alienation –rooted in industrial production– fail to fully capture the complexities of digital labour. In particular, we challenge the dichotomy between subjective alienation (as psychological distress) and objective alienation (as economic estrangement), proposing instead a dynamic model that integrates both dimensions. This re-evaluation not only refines Marxian and Frankfurt School approaches to alienation, but also reveals its normative implications for contemporary theories of justice, autonomy, and recognition in digital labour environments. In the forthcoming paper, the primary objective is to construct an analysis through three key stages, aimed at elucidating the importance of cultivating a deeper understanding of alienation by amalgamating insights from both philosophy

and sociology. Firstly, we must ascertain whether the existing literature and discourse surrounding alienating work serve as a roadmap for liberating the concept of alienation from its purely metaphysical connotations, instead anchoring it more closely to the tools of labour rather than production in its entirety. Secondly, it becomes imperative to hone in on the precise relationships between alienation and new forms of digitalized employments, with particular emphasis on the significance of individuality and organization dimensions, attesting that remote work might accelerate different working relationships and structural normative variations. Lastly, this discourse endeavours to posit alienation, digitalization and its interplay with the labour market and workforce as a subject matter within the domain of sociology useful for future qualitative research, potentially encompassing both industrial and tertiary production, rather than merely relegating it to the realm of philosophical legacy.

II. THE DEBATE AROUND ALIENATION: A BRIEF CRITICAL BACKGROUND THROUGH SPECIFIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Constructing a Theoretical Proposal

Considering the body of literature available over the past decade, we can undoubtedly highlight various efforts to reconstruct the debate on alienation (Musto, 2018; Petrucciani, 2023; Romagnoli, 2023), which revisits the major perspectives on alienation both historically and conceptually, focusing on their most influential contemporary developments. The unifying thread, an “a priori” concern present in these recent works –especially in the readings by Musto and Petrucciani– lies in their apprehension that alienation might be construed as a psychological and individual phenomenon rather than as a social phenomenon governed by its own laws and philosophical characteristics. In this sense, French existentialism, and above all post-Taylorist American sociology, have substantially contributed to associating the issue of alienation with a search for subjective and pragmatic solutions adaptable to the status quo, rather than focusing on collective strategies aimed at transforming society (Musto, 2018: 28–29).

This structural dichotomy between the subjective and objective dimensions, already present in the writings of Marcuse and Hyppolite in their interpretation of Marx’s analysis of alienation, finds its disciplinary foundation (Piromalli, 2023) in Lukács’ writings (1967, 1981). In objective terms, “a world of finished things and relations between things arises (the world of commodities and their movement in the market), governed by laws which, while gradually comprehensible to humanity, still confront them as forces that cannot be harnessed and that autonomously exert their influence” (Lukács, 1967: 112). As for the relationship between subjectivity and alienation, it consists in “the fact that, in a fully commodified economy, human activity becomes objectified before the individual, transforming into a commodity, and being subject to the alien objectivity of society’s natural laws, must carry out its movements independently of humanity” (Lukács, 1967: 112). However, this apparent opposition may be, to some extent, circumvented if we consider, above all, the ontological and categorical plane, since alienation “never encompasses, despite its significance, the entire totality of human social being. Nor does it reduce (except in subjective distortions) to an abstract antithesis between subjectivity

and objectivity, between the individual and society, between individuality and sociality. There is no form of subjectivity which, in its deepest roots and determinations, is not social. This is demonstrated irrefutably by even the most elementary analysis of human being, labour, and praxis" (Lukács, 1981: 304–305).

Parallel to the international debate, the study of alienation has also been extensively addressed within Italian scholarship, with contributions from Petrucciani (2022, 2023), Piromalli (2023), Musto (2018, 2023), Romagnoli (2023), and Fazio (2020). These scholars have provided valuable insights into the historical and conceptual development of alienation, offering detailed textual analyses and theoretical syntheses. However, their interpretations remain fragmented and often confined within specific disciplinary boundaries, lacking a broader interdisciplinary integration that would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of alienation in contemporary society. This critical phase highlights the strengths and limitations of these contributions, emphasizing the need for a renewed and expanded theoretical framework. To move beyond traditional interpretations and provide a more nuanced understanding of alienation, this study proposes three analytical frameworks that allow for a structured and multi-perspective reconstruction of the debate. These frameworks facilitate a deeper exploration of alienation's speculative dimensions while also considering its practical and methodological implications for contemporary research:

1. The Structural and Conceptual Dichotomy Between Objective and Subjective Alienation

This framework examines how different theoretical traditions have engaged with this dichotomy, assessing the implications of maintaining an economic-political critique of alienation while simultaneously making it more accessible and applicable as a general critique of modern society. The challenge lies in preserving alienation's critical function without reducing it to an individualized psychological state, which risks depoliticizing its structural dimensions. By bridging these perspectives, this framework seeks to provide a more comprehensive and operationalizable conception of alienation.

2. Ontology and the Immanent/Transcendental Critique of Alienation

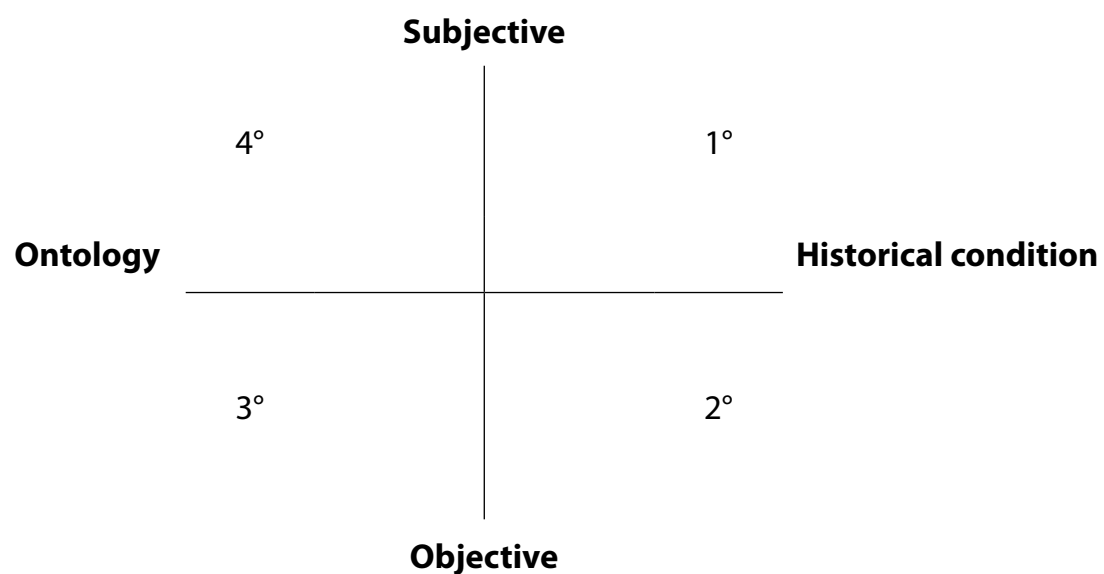
From this viewpoint, alienation is seen as an immanent aspect of human self-realization, manifesting in the tension between autonomy and constraint, creativity and repetition, recognition and estrangement. This ontological alienation exists beyond the critique of political economy, suggesting that estrangement is a pre-existing condition of human subjectivity rather than solely a consequence of capitalist production. This interpretation has profound implications for understanding freedom, social psychopathology, interpersonal relationships, and the very essence of human nature through natural rights and self-identity. It challenges the traditional economic reading of alienation by situating it within a broader philosophical framework, which allows for connections with contemporary debates on recognition, affect theory, and post-humanism.

3. Operative dimensions and model proposals. Sociological evolution of Alienation

By analysing how American and European sociologies of work have historically engaged with alienation, this framework reconstructs the shifts in theoretical

focus: American sociology initially sought to deconstruct and redefine alienation, often detaching it from its Marxian origins. European labour sociology, on the other hand, has progressively reintegrated alienation into discussions on market transformations, labour organization, and the role of social actors. This framework highlights the implications of alienation for job quality, industrial relations, and collective action, illustrating how contemporary markets generate new forms of estrangement and control. It also considers how platform capitalism, digital labour, and the gig economy have reshaped alienation, requiring an updated theoretical and methodological approach, as it can be observed in business ethics, labour process theory or psychopathology of work.

By reconstructing the historical and conceptual development of alienation and integrating these three analytical frameworks, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary interpretation of the concept. The challenge moving forward is to refine these perspectives, incorporating empirical analyses and interdisciplinary dialogues that can further develop alienation as a key concept in critical social theory, as we can imagine in the structure below:



These quadrants of meaning, reminiscent of Croce's system and its affinities with neo-Hegelianism, can be conceptualized as a black hole of significance, where space-time itself twists and bends in response to the dynamics of theoretical reflection and conceptual evolution. At the very centre, at the zero-zero (0; 0) coordinate of the Cartesian plane, within the event horizon of this theoretical singularity (the bulk, the hidden pearl) lies the core concept: alienation. This central point represents both a universal abstraction and a paradoxical void, a space where meaning is continuously reshaped by the gravitational pull of competing interpretations. Orbiting around this conceptual nucleus are the various theoretical perspectives that seek to define, contest, and reinterpret alienation. These perspectives function as quantum data points, interacting with and influencing the structure of the concept itself. Just as in quantum mechanics, where observation alters the state of a system, the act of analysing alienation modifies its theoretical contours, revealing its multidimensional and evolving nature. When analysed through a Cartesian coordinate system, the axes' extremes represent opposing conceptual categories, namely subjective-objective and ontological/

immanent-historical dynamics. Within this structure, the four quadrants of the plane enable a classification of specific combinations of alienation, each reflecting distinct theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches:

1. In the first quadrant, alienation is understood as a subjective-historical condition, meaning that its historical-economic dynamics are grasped through the direct experiences of individual actors. This view aligns with the operational interpretations of American sociology and the actor-centred approaches of Alain Touraine and Robert Blauner. In this perspective, alienation is an individual phenomenon, yet one that remains deeply embedded in a materialist conception of history, where economic power relations directly shape subjective experiences. The interplay between structure and agency is central here, as alienation cannot be separated from the broader historical transformations of labour and production.
2. In the second quadrant, alienation is interpreted as an objective-historical condition, meaning that it emerges as a social phenomenon that arises specifically in periods of radical socio-economic transformation and revolution, as theorized by Mészáros (1974). In this view, alienation takes shape when structural changes redefine power relations and reshape labour organization. Theories within this quadrant include Frankfurt School critical theory and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. In this framework, alienation is not merely an individual experience but a collective, historical, and economic reality. It functions as a social fact in the Durkheimian sense, causally linked to the transformations of capitalism. Therefore, any universal critique of alienation must engage in a rigorous analysis of objective economic relations, recognizing alienation as a systemic consequence of capitalist restructuring rather than a contingent individual experience.
3. The third quadrant defines alienation as an objective-ontological condition, meaning that while it remains a determined social phenomenon shaped by socio-economic transformations, it is also structural and immanent to human existence and interpersonal relationships, independent of political economy. Here, key interpretations include Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance, which draws from Simmel's relational sociology, as well as Rahel Jaeggi's idea of alienation as a "relation without relation", where relationality is an immanent structure of existence, regardless of the subject's engagement with the world. Additionally, this perspective integrates normative and formal aspects related to criteria for a "good life", particularly through Christophe Dejours' concept of "deontic activity" in the clinic of work. According to Dejours, cooperation is an ontological necessity for the functioning of an organization, transcending managerial prescriptions and emerging as a synthesis between intelligence and operation. In this framework, alienation is not only a socio-economic condition but also an existential structure that fundamentally shapes human interactions, regardless of historical contingencies.
4. In the fourth quadrant, alienation is conceived as a subjective-ontological condition, meaning that it is structural and endemic, tied to the very essence of the subject and the development of individual identity, independent of external

world relations. This interpretation aligns with French existentialist thought and Heidegger's metaphysical analysis, where alienation is described as a state of suffering and existential distress in response to one's being-in-the-world. This framework also includes Jaeggi's theory of self-reappropriation, influenced by Isaiah Berlin, where alienation is understood as an intrinsic, pre-existing burden carried by the individual. Similarly, Dejours' concept of "living labour", which highlights the physical and material relationship between body, work, and product, fits within this category, as it underscores the deeply personal and subjective nature of alienation.

This theoretical system should not be understood as static or rigid, nor as a finalized classification. Instead, it represents a dynamic and interconnected model, where different interpretations interact, overlap, and share common elements. Rather than focusing solely on a single definition of alienation –which may shift depending on the theoretical approach– this framework aims to highlight the conceptual depth of alienation, making it adaptable to different research contexts. Ultimately, the goal of this reconstruction is to provide a general critique of alienation, identifying its structural dimensions and core spheres of alienation. This approach serves as an analytical tool for understanding contemporary transformations in digital labour markets, offering new insights into how alienation operates in the age of platform capitalism and technological acceleration. Thus, alienation is not merely a static philosophical category but a dynamic and relational construct, shaped by the tensions between historical materialism, existential phenomenology, and critical social theory.

2.2. Three Perspectives in Order to Reconstruct a Debate

In the first interpretative framework, the concept of alienation has historically been shaped by a fundamental dichotomy between subjective and objective dimensions, a tension that has informed some of the most significant debates in Marxist theory, critical philosophy, and social sciences. This chapter examines the evolution of this conceptual distinction, tracing its development through various intellectual traditions and assessing its implications for contemporary theories of alienation and justice. The early Marxist humanist interpretations, particularly in the works of György Lukács, István Mészáros, and Herbert Marcuse, emphasize the dual nature of alienation: while alienation operates as an objective structural condition under capitalist relations of production, it also manifests as an internalized, subjective experience. Marcuse, in particular, extends this framework to critique consumer society, arguing that alienation is not only a function of economic production but also of the ideological mechanisms that shape individual desires and social relations. The underlying objective is to construct a universal theory of consumption based on alienation as a fundamental category of critique.

Following the 1932 rediscovery of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a new wave of scholarship emerged, including Schaff, Kojève, Hyppolite, Bloch, Althusser, and Schacht, who debated whether the concept of alienation represents a continuous thread in Marx's thought or rather a philosophical category abandoned in his mature works (Musto, 2018, 2019). This debate fuelled divisions

between orthodox Marxist approaches and revisionist interpretations, highlighting the shifting role of alienation in historical materialism. In the Frankfurt School tradition, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Fromm sought to integrate alienation into a broader critique of modern society, exploring its intersection with mass culture, rationalization, and the formation of subjectivity. Their work introduces a distinction between tragedy and routine, conceptualizing alienation both as a structural force shaping economic and political institutions and as a psychological condition affecting individual agency. Their ultimate aim was to resolve the dichotomy in favour of a unified framework for the social sciences, where alienation serves as a critical tool to diagnose systemic contradictions.

A parallel trajectory developed within French existentialism, particularly in Sartre's *Cahiers pour une morale* and later in the works of Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze. These perspectives emphasized the primacy of individual subjectivity in the alienation process, laying the groundwork for postmodern critiques of capitalism. Baudrillard and Bourdieu, in different ways, questioned whether alienation should be understood as a structural force or an ideological construct, arguing that modernity has obscured traditional class identities and replaced them with fragmented, market-driven forms of subjectivity. This perspective aimed to make alienation comprehensible in relation to the dynamics of individual identity and modern contradictions. The Habermasian paradigm and the Neue Frankfurt School introduced a communicative turn, reframing alienation within theories of recognition and social pathology. From Habermas's communicative action to Axel Honneth's ethics of recognition, this approach seeks to overcome the limitations of classical Marxist alienation theories by integrating them into a normative framework of social justice. Honneth's project, influenced by Hegelian and neo-Hegelian perspectives, attempts to redefine alienation as a form of social pathology that can be addressed through institutional mechanisms of recognition and democratic participation. This approach suggests that alienation is not merely an economic issue but a structural failure in the moral and social order, particularly in the domain of labour relations.

In transitioning from a solid Marxist tradition to the diverse landscape of neoliberal capitalism, scholars such as Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi and Hartmut Rosa have delineated a path that integrates insights from both the social sciences and what they term as social philosophy. Consequently, alienation is to be located within the organization of work (both spatially and temporally), rather than solely within the produced output. Contrary to the communicative and normative framework championed by Habermas, the primary risk inherent in this discourse lies in the potential exclusion of political and economic influences, which significantly shape the dynamics of industrial relations, management practices, job quality, and productivity. In contrast, Honneth, along with Jaeggi, opts to direct attention towards what they term as social pathologies (Honneth, 2017; Jaeggi, 2005, 2017) –inequalities and alienations that manifest across various societal roles, transcending mere production tools. Although the concept of pathology implies a need for diagnosis and remedy, it necessitates a thorough examination of every facet of the ailment, recognizing our immersion within it (Honneth, 2017). In essence, Honneth's focus extends to the ways in which new technologies and marketing strategies reshape perspectives on work and its participants, linking novel forms of alienation to exclusion from innovations and digital accelerations (Fuchs, 2016; Piromalli, 2012).

Honneth's perspective presents several compelling reasons that render it particularly intriguing for sociology and the broader social sciences. Firstly, he contends that there exists a significant emphasis on individualism, wherein the notion persists that future work should be devoid of all forms of alienation. Honneth observes that efforts aimed at improving working conditions often centre on the ethical well-being of the individual worker, focusing on concepts such as self-realization and personal improvement. Consequently, the paradigm of alienation fails to adequately address how working conditions impact broader aspects of social life, such as family dynamics, civic engagement, and participation in public discourse (Tekin, 2023: p. 3). Moreover, while Marx theorized two interrelated dimensions –work and emancipation– whose relevance has been questioned by the evolution of capitalism, Honneth posits that the category of social work should inherently imply a possible normative content. Specifically, a theory of alienation striving for greater equality must uphold the relationship between work and normative objectives. At this juncture, this vision suggests the necessity of adopting a critical perspective on work, in contrast to a depowering tendency that has emerged within post-Marxist philosophical traditions (Piromalli, 2012: pp. 26-27).

The Italian Society of Critical Theory, involving scholars such as Musto, Petrucciani, Carnevali, Piromalli, Solinas, and Fazio, has sought to integrate philosophy, sociology, and political science in an effort to defend alienation from oversimplified objectivist interpretations. Their work emphasizes the need for a renewed critique of alienation as a social phenomenon, moving beyond its classical formulations to address contemporary labour transformations, digital capitalism, and political economy. The practical implications of this theoretical discourse lie in the reconceptualization of recognition theory –particularly through an economic re-reading of Hegel, Polanyi, and Parsons– as a theory of justice capable of fostering an “ethical capitalism” and a moral economy. This vision suggests a shift toward an egalitarian and inclusive model of labour policies, in which recognition functions as a mechanism for redistributive justice. In this sense, Honneth's moral functionalism, informed by Polanyi's and Parsons' critiques of market fundamentalism, seeks to replace the indeterminacy of Habermasian consensus theory with a democratic ethics oriented toward institutional transformation (Honneth, 2014). This trajectory ultimately positions alienation not as a fixed or static category, but as a dynamic concept that continues to evolve in response to new economic, technological, and political conditions. Understanding alienation in this way provides a critical tool for diagnosing the contradictions of contemporary capitalism and envisioning alternative models of social organization that go beyond the limitations of both classical Marxism and liberal individualism.

In the second framework, the concept of alienation has often been framed as a historical and economic phenomenon, but a critical ontology perspective allows for an alternative reading –one that considers alienation as a pre-existing, constitutive aspect of human existence rather than merely a byproduct of capitalist structures. This ontological dimension of alienation, which spans existentialism, critical theory, and labour psychology, provides a deeper understanding of how subjectivity, identity, and work-related suffering shape contemporary experiences of estrangement. A first approach emerges from Heidegger's existentialism in *Being and Time*, where alienation is deeply linked to the question of technology and the essence of human existence.

In this framework, alienation is not merely an economic condition but a structural feature of modernity, intertwined with technological advancement and instrumental rationality. Similarly, Karl Jaspers' psychologism explores alienation as an existential condition rooted in the individual's experience of separation and fragmentation, while Schacht's critique of political economy's neglect of subjectivity underscores the need to reintegrate the phenomenological experience of estrangement into economic and social analysis (Schacht, 1970). This perspective suggests that alienation is inherent to the human condition, preceding and shaping economic and social realities rather than being exclusively a consequence of them.

This second approach reflects the contributions of a new generation of critical theorists, including Charles Taylor, Robin Celikates, Luc Boltanski, and Nancy Fraser, who expand the Frankfurt School's legacy by integrating alienation into contemporary debates on identity, justice, and recognition. In this context, Rahel Jaeggi's reinterpretation of alienation offers a pivotal shift: rather than seeing alienation merely as dispossession, she conceptualizes it as an interrupted process of self-appropriation, a failure in the subject's ability to establish meaningful relations with the world. Hartmut Rosa's transition from the paradox of acceleration to alienation further reinforces this perspective, arguing that the intensification of social speed disrupts our capacity for resonance, deepening the experience of alienation. This approach frames alienation as a constitutive moment in the search for identity and the "good life", opposing the structural distortions imposed by capitalist rationalization.

A third analytical dimension is introduced through Christophe Dejours' work psychopathology, which examines the deontic dimension of alienation –how work-related suffering shapes subjective and embodied experiences. Dejours' research, alongside scholars like Stéphanie Roza and Nial Tekin, moves beyond Honneth's recognition theory by emphasizing the corporeal and ontological aspects of work identity. This perspective highlights how alienation manifests as a form of embodied suffering, capable of leading to isolation, depression, and even workplace suicides. By linking alienation, work identity, and subjective distress, this approach provides a more nuanced understanding of how labor conditions shape human vulnerability beyond purely economic dimensions.

Finally, Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory and his pedagogy of resonance offer an alternative reading of alienation –one that transcends political economy and reorients sociological inquiry toward the search for a "good life". Drawing upon Georg Simmel's relational sociology, Rosa conceptualizes alienation as a disruption in an individual's capacity to form resonant relationships with the world, be it through work, social interactions, or engagement with nature. This perspective aligns with contemporary neo-materialist theories, particularly those of Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti, which emphasize the non-human and ecological dimensions of alienation. By extending alienation beyond the sphere of human labour relations, this framework suggests that estrangement is not only a socio-economic issue but a fundamental aspect of how humans interact with their environments and technological landscapes.

The theoretical advancements discussed above have direct operational consequences, particularly in relation to workplace pathologies and policies aimed at countering alienation. Jaeggi's research on work-life balance, Rosa's application of

business ethics to corporate policy, and empirical studies on the perception of social acceleration all contribute to the development of strategic tools for disalienation. Additionally, pedagogical models, such as Rosa's pedagogy of resonance and Dejours' work psychopathology, provide qualitative methodologies (e.g., structured interviews, workplace ethnographies, and psychological assessments) to investigate and mitigate alienation in contemporary labour conditions. These insights offer a new paradigm for organizational interventions, emphasizing the role of recognition, collective agency, and social policies in restoring a sense of autonomy and meaning in work.

In the third framework, the third strand is rooted in the social sciences, from American to French sociology, seeking to define an operational and empirical framework for analysing alienation and its consequences in the domains of labour and society. Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Melvin Seeman launched what was, in many ways, a provocative and potentially revolutionary empirical study: an attempt to demonstrate the feasibility of "measuring" an individual's degree of alienation based on a set of theoretical considerations and a structured questionnaire administered to a general sample of participants. Seeman himself asserted (1967: 274) that, concerning mass society, a theory of alienation alone was insufficient. Instead, he advocated for a scientific and quantitative approach to assessing its real effects on individuals:

The theory sets out, in effect, a tripartite scheme: social structural conditions (e.g., the decline of kinship, the emergence of rationalized work procedures) are presumed to have alienative effects (in any one of various alienative modes –e.g., isolation, powerlessness, self-estrangement), and this in turn leads to determinate consequences in attitude and behaviour (e.g., political withdrawal or mass movements). The present work focuses on the "alienation has consequences" feature of this mass society model: it asks whether work which is self-estranged, in the sense that it provides little intrinsic satisfaction, has the attitude and behaviour correlates that the generalization theme would predict.

This tripartite scheme (initial social conditions, alienating phenomena, and behavioural consequences), combined with the survey of a sample of the workforce in the Swedish city of Malmö, led to the formulation of an interpretative and predictive model of the primary forms of social exclusion. Naturally, this model was not without its weaknesses and contradictions—among them, the arguably arbitrary selection of survey questions and a concept of alienation that was overly tied to the fluctuating notion of "life quality." Subsequent scholarly critiques highlighted these limitations through various analytical approaches. The most significant critique came from David L. Harvey and his research team, who emphasized the discrepancy between the initial theoretical framework and its empirical developments. In particular, they questioned the epistemological and mathematical orientation of the model, arguing that it risked overlooking the specific philosophical nature of alienation, thereby reducing it to a mere cumulative and positivist parameter (Harvey *et al.*, 1983: p. 17):

What we do challenge, however, is the positivist epistemology that grounds most modern sociological research and which equates, for the most part, empirical enquiry with the Procrustean philosophical rules of modern positivism. Such a restrictive epistemology consciously encourages the researcher to construct partial conceptions

of alienation that reify the subjective moment of alienation at the expense of its structural moments. Unlike those positivist attempts that reduce a manifold human reality to a mathematically manageable but one-sided set of formal explanations, we feel that such social facts as alienation must be grasped as a dialectically unified set of irreducible moments whose full reality can only be understood as part of a larger historical movement. Seeman's initial premises had clarified several historical and philosophical aspects (Seeman, 1959). However, according to critics from the University of Nevada, these premises were largely abandoned in favour of a study that prioritized accurate predictions of inequalities not within society as a whole, but specifically within the labour market.

Among the key contributions of 1980s scholarship was the assertion that alienation must be examined through a combined sociological and philosophical approach, one that harmonizes historical tradition with the economic and political transformations of Western powers. The initial theorization proposed by Seeman was widely appreciated and rarely contested, as it attributed to alienation an empirical and universal dimension beyond its traditionally philosophical and political significance. However, the sociological implications of this framework necessitated a rigorous methodological approach that could meet both academic and social demands. The fundamental question at that point concerned whether the social sciences should engage with a topic often dismissed as too broad and abstract—incapable of providing decisive elements for a comprehensive and effective critique. What was needed then—and remains necessary today—was a clarification of the concept of alienation itself, its structures, its consequences, and its field of application. Which alienation? The traces of this concept have been periodically lost, only to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by various disciplines, as evidenced by the works of Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi, and Hartmut Rosa.

Indeed, as early as the 1960s, Luciano Parinetto, in a seminar held at the University of Milan during the 1966-1967 academic year, sought to connect the concepts of “alienation” and “utopia,” arguing that an ontological dimension was already present in the early writings of Hegel as well as in the works of Marx and Engels. Parinetto was undoubtedly influenced by the broader intellectual climate of revision and retrieval, particularly in light of Italy's post-war economic boom and the flourishing international debate in academic journals and publications. However, this wave of renewed interest proved to be short-lived and failed to instigate a deeper awareness of the potential inherent in reconstructing a fundamental domain of Western thought—one closely linked to both institutional and global market developments. Instead, alienation as a concept gradually fell into academic oblivion, partly due to a tendency to prioritize research more aligned with the rapid pace of industrial and capitalist progress. As Piromalli (2023) recently observed:

Beyond the categorical confusion, other factors—especially in the European context—contributed to the decline of alienation as a concept after the 1970s. One major reason was the perception that alienation was inextricably linked to Marxism; with the collapse of real socialism and the transition from an economy based on heavy industry to the so-called service capitalism, the idea of alienation seemed irreversibly outdated. Consequently, as recent studies and the growing Italian debate suggest, the challenge today lies in re-establishing a dialogue between this allegedly obsolete theory and contemporary contexts. Alice Romagnoli (2023: 15) echoes this sentiment, stating:

It is crucial to clarify what the term alienation means today and whether it still holds any relevance. [...] On the one hand, after the decline of Fordism and the Taylorist notion of the worker as a “monkey-worker,” the concept of alienation might appear outdated in today’s increasingly ‘smart’ labour environment. On the other hand, contemporary society is permeated by contradictions and estranging dynamics from multiple directions. Exploited, uprooted, disoriented, and eroded by an exacerbated individualism, the contemporary subject appears both vastly different from, yet strikingly similar to, the wage labourer whose condition originally gave rise to the critique of alienation.

If we consider both the ontological interpretations present in early Hegelian writings and the American sociological tradition from the 1960s onward, it becomes evident that the development of the concept of alienation has engaged two disciplines that, despite their differences, have yet to meaningfully collaborate in revitalizing the study of alienation in relation to the transformations of labour and capitalist society. The current need—both theoretical and empirical—lies in analysing alienation at the intersection of neo-criticism and labour process theories. The digital revolution, where perceptions of the world and ongoing social transformations intersect, represents a critical site for examining alienation in innovative ways.

In other words, if alienation is to be redefined, understood, and reevaluated as a necessary paradigm for social, political, and moral philosophy, it must be analysed in domains where it operates in new and invasive ways—particularly within the sphere of digital technologies, which are deeply embedded in both professional and personal life. Philosophy must also, to some extent, accept a collaborative role alongside sociology in the shared pursuit of new interpretative and investigative frameworks. As Honneth (2017: 77) argues:

Only at that point does the theoretical situation arise in which anthropologically derived thought structures or those linked to a philosophy of history take on the specific task of justifying the universalistic claims made by social philosophy. The appeal to human nature, or to an anticipation of future knowledge, serves to demonstrate that beyond all cultural barriers, individual life depends on certain fundamental conditions that, as an absolute ideal of society, provide the critical framework necessary for social critique.

Thus, a renewed analysis of alienation is indispensable—not merely as a conceptual revival, but as a question of whether it can be operationalized for sociological and empirical study in the digital age. Rahel Jaeggi herself considers the emergence of new forms of work as both a theoretical and methodological challenge, emphasizing the necessity not only of redefining the concept of alienation but also of rethinking labour itself and its interpretations (Jaeggi, 2020). One of the central aspects of developing a renewed critique of alienation, therefore, lies in recognizing a crisis in the very idea of labour and in the ways, individuals relate to it. Jaeggi further asserts that «in order to speak of pathologies of work, it is necessary to demonstrate that such forms of labour are objectively pathological—that is, that the suffering subjectively experienced is caused by the organization and conditions of work. In addition, another criterion must be developed: these conditions must contradict the intrinsic nature of labour itself» (Jaeggi, 2020). This perspective highlights the need for a conceptual framework that

moves beyond traditional notions of alienation and labour, making room for an analysis that accounts for the transformations of work in contemporary society.

However, as digital transformation and artificial intelligence experiments in workplaces have rapidly expanded, it has become necessary to rethink the concept of alienation beyond a rigid philosophical dichotomy—one capable of engaging with ongoing transformations and the emergence of so-called “new jobs,” which are increasingly fragmented and standardized. While contemporary sociology of labour has paid growing attention to issues of space, office dynamics, and professional recognition (Albano, 2018; Fullin, 2023; Tirabeni & Miele, 2020), alienation in the digital sphere is no longer limited to the worker-product relationship but also extends to the worker/consumer-client/consumer relationship—shifting from alienation from the product to alienation from relationships. Consequently, this reconfigured concept of alienation within digital labour has repercussions in both objective terms (working conditions) and subjective terms (its impact on the individual), positioning it as a social phenomenon intrinsically linked to what is often referred to as technological acceleration (Rosa, 2013, 2020).

III. NEW POSSIBLE PERSPECTIVES AND FIELDS OF STUDY ABOUT ALIENATION

In 2011, Marcello Musto undertook the editorial work of a volume aimed at reinterpreting Marx and various Marxist traditions in light of different schools of thought and recent transformations in the labour market. Notably, it was during the 1950s that Marx’s concept of alienation forcefully entered North American sociological thought, not as a framework for collective practices aimed at transforming society, but rather as a means of analysing individual adaptation to the existing social order (Musto, 2011: 327-328). Following Musto, the main effect of that metamorphosis about alienation consisted in a consequent depowering of theoretical and structure concern; from a general phenomenon relating labour and intellectual conditions of man, alienation ended up reduced as a limited category, in which found reason only academical and empirical inquiries (Musto, 2011: 330-331):

American sociologists argued that this kind of methodological approach would have allowed to remove from alienation any political and dogmatic issues, thus conferring scientific objectivity. Nevertheless, that assumed apolitical revolution implied strong and evident ideological connotations, considering that behind neutrality and scientific approach a clear endorsement to establishment and neo-liberalism principles was hiding.

At the same time, the debate initiated within the American Sociological Review and the arguments presented by its key contributors (Clark, 1959; Dean, 1961; Miller, 1967; Nettler, 1957; Neal and Rettig, 1967; Seeman, 1959, 1975) reveal a clear divergence in the interpretation of the concept of class. For American sociologists, the concept required stratification based on context and its specific applications, whereas for European scholars, class remained an essential element in any form of analysis (Giddens, 1975: 21; Seeman, 1975: 92-93).

Considering this dichotomy in thought, along with its specific historical and disciplinary foundations—as well as the various definitions of alienation that emerged over time—it becomes evident that the discussions within the *American Sociological Review* highlighted both the necessity and the attempt to propose an empirical investigation into alienation and its characteristics within the labour market. Despite interdisciplinary critiques and controversies (Braverman, 1974; Schacht, 1970; Touraine, 1973), the discourse on forms of alienation has managed to bridge the gap between Marx's early writings and his analysis in the *Grundrisse*, ultimately serving as a key analytical tool for examining labour transformations in the era of digital transition (Rosa, 2013, 2022). The reconstruction of the debate surrounding the concept of alienation has deep and multifaceted roots. Beginning with an analysis of Marx's texts and the subsequent interpretations by scholars from both Marxist and non-Marxist traditions, this debate has primarily revolved around the difficulty of overcoming a dichotomy between subjective and objective alienation—namely, the tension between the relationship of labour and production on the one hand, and the inner psychological experience of the individual on the other (Musto, 2018; Petrucciani, 2023; Piromalli, 2023).

Three main strands have characterized the literature from the post-war period to the present day. The first can be identified within the Marxist and post-Marxist tradition, spanning from Lukács to Marcuse and later influencing French existentialism, which conceives alienation as an individual condition of the subject (Piromalli, 2023; Romagnoli, 2023). The second develops through the subsequent phases of Critical Theory, following the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno, in pursuit of a universal social theory that frames alienation as a historical and collective process (Fazio, 2020). Finally, the third strand is rooted in the social sciences, from American to French sociology, seeking to define an operational and empirical framework for analysing alienation and its consequences in the domains of labour and society. The concept of alienation has occupied a central position in the development of social theory since the early works of Karl Marx and his philosophical predecessors. From its origins as a critical tool to interpret the contradictions of industrial capitalism, alienation has undergone significant transformations, both in its conceptual structure and in its application within empirical research. In particular, the American sociological tradition of the post-World War II period, as reflected in the debates hosted by journals such as *American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*, represents a decisive turning point. The attempt to operationalize alienation – notably through the works of Seeman, Blauner, Nettler, and Braverman – led to an unprecedented focus on its empirical measurability. Yet, this shift toward empirical fragmentation also entailed a progressive detachment from the critical and systemic ambitions that originally animated the concept.

While American sociology contributed to making alienation empirically visible and measurable, it simultaneously risked neutralizing its critical thrust. As alienation became defined through a series of discrete psychological and social dimensions – powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, self-estrangement, and normlessness – its connection to systemic transformations in capitalist societies appeared increasingly tenuous. In this context, the critical force of alienation, intended as a tool to diagnose and challenge structural inequalities and contradictions, was diluted into a fragmented set of individual experiences. By contrast, recent developments in European social

theory have sought to reclaim alienation as a powerful critical concept. Drawing on the legacies of Critical Theory, labour process debates, and existential phenomenology, scholars such as Hartmut Rosa, Rahel Jaeggi, and Christophe Dejours have elaborated new frameworks that reintegrate alienation into the analysis of contemporary transformations. Rosa's theory of social acceleration and resonance, Jaeggi's normative reconstruction of alienation as a relation of relation lessness, and Dejours' psychosocial critique of work collectively signal a revitalization of the concept, now seen as crucial to understanding the profound reconfigurations of labour, subjectivity, and social structures in the digital era.

The impact of alienation on organizational contexts and teamwork in remote work can be analysed through the dimensions of autonomy, contemporary workspace configurations, and perceptions of exposure to economic risk factors. Companies often intervene in these areas to sustain efficiency and productivity levels. In this regard, remote work does not adhere to the ontological dichotomy of alienation as traditionally described in the literature. Instead, it accelerates decision-making processes and managerial strategies, affecting both individual workers and employed organizations (Klur & Nies, 2023; Menz & Nies, 2024). This dynamic compels alienation to reveal elements of both continuity with past practices and innovation in occupational structures. Definitions of alienation increasingly give way to varied applications that are critical to morality, economics, and job security. Technological acceleration (Rosa, 2013, 2022) suggests that alienation must be reconstructed on both organizational and systemic levels, offering empirical explanations for transformations in work conditions and sectoral segmentations. More specifically, this implies that sociology should now frame the relationship between remote work and alienation as a specialized analytical lens. This lens can identify future implications for digitalized labour markets and work-life balance, moving beyond the narrow producer-product dichotomy and addressing the broader socio-economic complexities of remote work.

Autonomy in the sociological literature, entails implications that are not always clearly defined in theory; rather, it signifies both an opportunity and a risk within the realm of employment. This term encompasses various circumstances that categorize autonomy, delineating internal processes within organizations, management structures, and teamwork dynamics. On one hand, autonomy is associated with the capacity to regulate one's actions and foster independence, rather than merely reacting against imposed orders. On the other hand, it pertains to the freedom and decision-making space that a specific group seeks to establish and assert (Terressac and Maggi, 2022). Moreover, autonomy strives to evade organizational surveillance mechanisms that seek to influence the behaviour of executive groups (Reynaud, 1989). In the context of remote work, autonomy is manifested as the absence of surveillance and control, which fosters a sense of "freedom" and recognition, particularly on psychological and union levels. Conversely, it also manifests as the automation and standardization of processes to enhance efficiency, minimize errors, and provide workers with clear procedures, thereby reducing their fear of making mistakes and mitigating their responsibility in case of malfunctions. However, digitalization, despite remote work's utility in managing activities and achieving specific objectives, introduces the hypothetical risk of employers encroaching upon workers' autonomy.

Sociology has historically depicted autonomy as a matter of intervention possibilities and criteria for evaluating work situations (Rouvery and Tripier, 1973; Dubois *et al.*, 1976; Susman, 1972; Chave, 1976), the ability to influence production orders, modify work regulations, and prescribe methods (Durand, 1959; Chabaud and Terssac, 1987; Bernoux *et al.*, 1973), as well as a process of self-organization whereby acting subjects construct order through strategies developed to address deficiencies in the formal structure (Terssac, 1992; Mariné and Navarro, 1980; Mercure *et al.*, 1987; Francfort *et al.*, 1995). In the case of remote work, it serves as both a crucial skill for organizing and optimizing employment and a potential risk, as it intersects with digitalization and alienation through difficulties in accessing technological implementations and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal spaces. In any case, these argumentations, applied to digital transitions, confirm that remote work, alienation and autonomy are linked at an operational level and an objective general discourse, considering that autonomy is concerned with collective decisions and project-makings.

In addition to highlighting the issue of the overlap between work and leisure spaces, the analysis incorporates both legal considerations and organizational theory, which manifests both elements of continuity and disruption. It is notable to observe that “a dense discussion immediately opened up about the differences between ‘agile work’ and ‘telework,’ as well as about the rights and duties incumbent on the parties, concerning, for example, the so-called ‘right to disconnect,’ or conversely, the fixing of specific time frames for checks, relations, and directives, or even about salary and welfare profiles. Overall, however, it was a rather stifling debate, aimed at specifying rules, guidelines, and distinctions, without real openings to understanding the exceptional importance, for individuals, for culture, for society, for companies, and for the economy, of the existence of a different way of producing and working, and therefore also of living” (Alleva, 2020: 80). Whether remote work diminishes autonomy or not is a separate issue from considering the role of the office and the recognition it affords to workers in general.

Indeed, throughout its history, the office has been conceptualized as an identity space for work, encompassing both physical and moral dimensions—a repository of materials and projects linked to goals and ideas. Moreover, while the office symbolizes self-determination for the occupant, recognition of their role, and freedom of action, it also fosters a culture of competitiveness and hierarchization (Fullin, 2023). However, with the advent of digitalization, the office space becomes virtualized and de-spatialized, thereby partially augmenting the sense of autonomy or engendering identity loss through spatial detachment. This perspective has spurred sociological critique to reflect on the notion of work and the autonomy it entails (Bianconi *et al.*, 2024; Tirabeni, 2023). Consequently, remote work tends to render the traditional concept of an office obsolete and redundant, as the workspace becomes defined by specific activities, objectives, and organizational structures dictated by management and administration. Thus, digitalization and alienation, viewed from this angle, may manifest new dimensions of concern regarding the presence or absence of a physical workspace conducive to fostering employment without compromising autonomy and fulfilling aspirations.

Social acceleration, alienation, and remote work appear to be closely interconnected on both operational and emotional levels, particularly when examining business ethics and the development of effective management strategies aimed at balancing efficiency

while mitigating perceptions of constraint and risks—both physical and psychological. As highlighted in the literature, the rapid pace of technological acceleration, embodied in digital platforms, can induce anxiety often referred to as technostress (Boyer-Davis, 2018; Hollstein & Rosa, 2023). Specifically, during the pandemic, employees working remotely could “reach the whole world from a single room” via video conferencing, leading to work conditions perceived as increasingly condensed and accelerated (Hollstein & Rosa, 2023: 712–713). In this context, remote work exemplifies alienation as a structural and objective phenomenon, shaped by the economic and financial imperatives of navigating the pandemic crisis. However, this adaptation also exacerbated wealth disparities and stress, driven by shifting schedules and evolving goals. Decision-making in business thus becomes a critical factor, accelerating technological planning, intensifying time scarcity, and driving frequent reinventions to meet rising demands (Rosa *et al.*, 2016; Hollstein & Rosa, 2023). Stakeholders and diverse markets are also implicated in this process, as the need to enhance production, wages, and workforce—often via temporary contracts and on-demand skills—alienates labour itself. This alienation not only stresses job conditions but also undermines collaboration among colleagues, further fragmenting workplace dynamics.

The issue extends beyond technostress—manifesting as job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, burnout, and high turnover rates—or endemic workplace competition. It encompasses a pronounced acceleration of feelings of insecurity and exposure to potential future health risks, as evidenced by recent European data (see figure below). These findings highlight how rapid digitalization and intensified work demands exacerbate anxieties about both occupational stability and physical well-being.

Table 1. Persons reporting exposure to risk factors that can adversely affect mental well-being by sex, age, and educational attain level. Percentage of total employment (Eurostat, 2023)

TIME	2007	2013	2020
GEO (Labels)			
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	25,0	29,0	44,6
European Union - 28 countries (2013-2020)	26,8	29,8	:
Euro area - 19 countries (2015-2022)	26,2	31,9	44,0
Belgium	14,6	33,8	51,9
Bulgaria	12,8	13,1	45,7
Czechia	14,5	19,6	33,8
Denmark	21,2	17,0	39,6
Germany	15,8	16,8	25,7
Estonia	17,5	22,6	37,6
Ireland	13,3	24,9	53,2
Greece	15,0	32,7	69,1
Spain	25,8	26,6	46,5
France	49,0	60,8	53,5
Croatia	15,6	20,2	38,4
Italy	17,7	27,2	39,1

TIME	2007	2013	2020
GEO (Labels)			
Cyprus	43,1	24,7	47,9
Latvia	:	23,9	46,4
Lithuania	18,7	17,4	26,7
Luxembourg	6,0	54,1	67,4
Hungary	14,2	20,8	35,1
Malta	27,8	13,2	44,5
Netherlands	36,4	:	56,2
Austria	32,5	40,8	59,8
Poland	24,9	18,0	45,3
Portugal	:	38,6	55,2
Romania	18,3	14,9	49,4
Slovenia	40,2	32,0	35,8
Slovakia	13,7	26,8	52,4
Finland	40,3	41,8	58,1
Sweden	40,2	44,3	76,4
Iceland	38,7	:	67,4
Norway	10,1	18,2	73,7
Switzerland	:	41,4	64,7
United Kingdom	38,0	:	:
Türkiye	:	7,9	:

Source: Eurostat, Eurostat Metadata, Quality of employment (2007-2020)

As illustrated in Table 1, the period between 2013 and 2020 witnessed a significant rise in the percentage of workers reporting exposure to risk factors with adverse mental and physical consequences across several major countries. Notable increases are observed in Belgium (33.8% to 51.9%), Greece (32.7% to 69.1%), Italy (27.2% to 39.1%), the Netherlands (36.4% to 56.2%), Poland (18.0% to 45.3%), Portugal (38.6% to 55.2%), Sweden (44.3% to 76.4%), Norway (18.2% to 73.7%), and Spain (26.6% to 46.5%). These nations experienced accelerated digitalization and a shift towards remote work in response to sectoral demands during the pandemic crisis. While the Euro Area as a whole shows an increase from 31.9% to 44.0%, emphasizing a widespread trend, the most pronounced effects are evident in countries like Germany. There, burnout diagnoses contributed to a “rise in incapacity-for-work days per 1,000 insured individuals under the AOK (Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse, one of Germany’s largest health insurers), climbing from 96.9 days in 2011 to 131.7 days in 2020” (Hollstein & Rosa, 2023: 712). This data underscores a growing intersection between workplace conditions and the erosion of boundaries between private/emotional life and professional responsibilities. Alienation thus emerges not merely as an individual experience but as a systemic organizational challenge requiring coordination among various stakeholders to mitigate its effects.

This ultimately highlights the pressures and directives that contemporary capitalism—particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19—imposes on companies as they

seek compromises to sustain production levels while maintaining the moral and physical well-being of their workforce. Structural alienation, driven by acceleration and remote work, compels management to navigate significant digital transformations in labour markets. At the same time, it demands organizational arrangements that enable employees to operate in environments optimized for comfort and efficiency within budgetary and economic constraints. Building on the classical dichotomy between producers and products—a foundational aspect of alienation—remote work underscores the necessity for a normative and objective framework. This framework must integrate diverse actors, including industrialists, capitalists, investment groups, supply chains, and recruitment systems, to address the systemic challenges of contemporary labour dynamics. In this context, corporations, stakeholders, trade unions, and other associations “must contend with intensifying pressure to process multiple tasks within ever-shorter and denser timeframes, creating stress and adversely affecting employee well-being. Simultaneously, they experience a de-synchronization with natural rhythms, which hampers ecosystems’ regenerative capacities. Corporations must operate faster, produce or deliver services more efficiently, innovate continuously, and ‘reinvent’ themselves to maintain their market position and preserve the status quo” (Hollstein & Rosa, 2023: 713).

Over the past three to four years following the pandemic crisis, companies have not only demonstrated a significant connection between acceleration and alienation through the implementation of digital platforms and remote work, but they have also prioritized digitization over qualitative parameters. This shift has fostered alienated perspectives within organizational structures and skill development (Hayward & Osborne, 2019; Hollstein & Rosa, 2023). Consequently, this phenomenon compels managers and stakeholders to increasingly engage in reorganization programs and the frequent introduction of new guidelines and regulations, which in turn devalue quality, routine, experience, and knowledge (Hollstein & Rosa, 2023). In other words, organizational leadership and human resources departments strive to navigate these conditions by balancing productivity and efficiency with the creation of a prosperous and comfortable environment for employees. These dynamics underscore the risk that accelerated alienation poses to investment projects and job quality. Specifically, Hollstein and Rosa (2023: 715) argue that “companies need a conception of their purpose in relation to a vision of the good life or the common good. Narratives formulating the goals of a business company in a purely instrumental way (making profit) lose all connection to the ideal of a good life and the common good and hinder the development of resonant relations in relation to the company’s goals.” Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Honneth (2011) posits that normative progress within the capitalistic labour market sphere emerges when mechanisms successfully pursue their objectives, even when such normative institutionalizations are distorting and do not consider social and public pressures (Honneth, 2011; Jaeggi, 2020). Consequently, normative approaches and strategies become essential to address both technological transformations and issues related to quality of life. In our case, remote work, accelerated digitalization, and the resultant alienation threaten the balance between employee well-being and production.

By the way, this research project aims to bridge the gap between sociology and philosophy by integrating Labour Process Theory with a qualitative empirical

investigation of alienation. The interdisciplinary approach (especially discussed at the International Labour Process Conference hosted by the Georg August Universität of Göttingen, special stream on alienation), grounded in critical theory and recognition theory, could represent a conceptual framework to reinterpret alienation beyond the traditional subjective-objective dichotomy, especially in the context of digital labour transformations. The first step involves examining “new imaginaries of labour”, which reflect the evolving nature of work across diverse professional environments. By exploring the logic of social competitiveness, where individual performance prevails over collective solidarity—as criticized by Axel Honneth—this study highlights the erosion of union power and the fragmentation of social cohesion. At the same time, the notion of “active productivity” emerges as a pathway for workers to regain control over production processes without succumbing to digital transformation’s alienating effects.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that alienation is not merely subjective or objective but rather a collective phenomenon tied to labour organization and decision-making processes. In this sense, organizational alienation becomes particularly evident in environments where digitalization plays a key role in shaping work dynamics. The study emphasizes two critical aspects: recognition (avoiding the mere replacement of human labour with machines) and control over new technologies, which are essential for developing new skills in the digital labour market. By adopting this interdisciplinary approach, this research seeks to move beyond traditional interpretations of alienation and critically assess the risks posed by digital transformation to labour relations, ultimately contributing to both sociological and philosophical discourse on alienation in the digital era. The integration of Labour Process Theory and philosophical perspectives on alienation offers a unique opportunity to bridge sociology and philosophy through three key analytical lenses, allowing for a qualitative empirical investigation of alienation in contemporary work environments. This interdisciplinary approach aims to explore how new forms of labour organization and digital transformations reshape workers’ experiences and social relations. A central aspect of this analysis is the concept of “New Imaginaries of Labour”, which captures the emerging narratives and perceptions within different professional contexts. These imaginaries reflect how workers navigate the evolving market, responding to the challenges posed by digitalization and changing organizational structures.

Moreover, the study delves into the phenomenon of “Social Competitiveness”, which highlights the dominant logic of individual performance in the labour market. This dynamic alienates workers from collective solidarity and weakens traditional forms of union representation, reducing them to mere protectors of specific categories—a critique strongly articulated by Axel Honneth’s recognition theory. Finally, the concept of “Active Productivity” emerges as a potential strategy for reclaiming control over the labour process. By fostering a sense of engagement and participation, workers can reappropriate the means of production without succumbing to the alienating effects of digital transformations. This approach not only challenges the passive acceptance of technological changes but also revitalizes workers’ agency within increasingly automated environments. Through this framework, the research aims to move beyond the traditional subjective-objective dichotomy of alienation, emphasizing the collective and organizational dimensions that are crucial for understanding the transformations of employment in the digital age.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of alienation from its Marxian origins to its contemporary applications within digital capitalism reveals not only the resilience of the concept but also its capacity to adapt to profound transformations in the organization of work and the human condition. This study has attempted to synthesize a wide array of theoretical trajectories—from critical theory and recognition philosophy to sociological operationalization—in order to reassess alienation as a central analytical category in the study of labour, subjectivity, and digital transformation. The interdisciplinary approach adopted throughout this paper affirms the importance of bridging philosophical and sociological paradigms to more effectively grasp the multidimensionality of alienation in contemporary society.

At the core of this work lies the insistence that alienation cannot be adequately captured through either purely subjective or exclusively objective frameworks. Instead, alienation must be understood as a relational, structural, and historically contingent phenomenon that traverses individual psychology, labour organization, and social institutions. In this respect, the traditional dichotomy—alienation as either a personal condition of existential malaise or a product of systemic exploitation—is rendered obsolete in the face of technological acceleration, algorithmic management, and the digital fragmentation of work. The notion of organizational alienation, as discussed herein, points to a form of estrangement that is produced not only through economic structures but also through digitally mediated workplace cultures that disrupt processes of recognition, agency, and collective identity.

One of the key contributions of this study has been to reconceptualize alienation through the lens of “new imaginaries of labour.” This formulation serves as a heuristic device for examining how workers internalize and respond to the socio-symbolic transformations brought about by automation, remote work, and AI-driven surveillance. In contrast to the industrial paradigm, where alienation often stemmed from the severance of the worker from the product of labour, digital alienation is characterized by the erosion of social meaning, the compression of time, and the blurring of professional and personal boundaries. These imaginaries are not merely ideological; they shape concrete experiences of inclusion and exclusion, recognition and invisibility, autonomy and dependency within the contemporary workplace.

Moreover, the analysis has demonstrated how social competitiveness—a logic that privileges individual performance, metric-based evaluation, and entrepreneurial self-conception—constitutes a profound shift in the normative structure of work. As Honneth’s theory of recognition makes clear, the decline of collective solidarity and union representation transforms the social architecture in which identity and value are constructed. Rather than functioning as sites of mutual recognition, workplaces increasingly become arenas of comparative validation and precarity, wherein alienation emerges from the systematic denial of social embeddedness and reciprocity. Equally important is the counter-concept introduced in this research: “active productivity.” This term captures the possibility for resistance and reappropriation within digitally transformed labour environments. Active productivity entails the reassertion of human agency through participatory governance, skill formation, and ethical engagement with technology. It seeks to reverse the passivity imposed by algorithmic command

structures by fostering a culture of deliberative autonomy and co-determination. While this may appear utopian, it aligns with contemporary proposals for ethical AI governance, cooperative organizational models, and new frameworks of digital labour rights that prioritize worker empowerment over technical efficiency.

Through its triangulation of theoretical discourse, empirical findings, and normative critique, this study ultimately proposes a reconfigured theory of alienation—one that is historically aware, ontologically plural, and methodologically integrative. Drawing on the four-quadrant model (subjective-objective and ontological-historical), the concept of alienation is positioned as a dynamic structure, susceptible to various interpretative modalities. This theoretical architecture accommodates the diversity of alienation's manifestations, ranging from existential despair to systemic disenfranchisement, from epistemic injustice to the commodification of creativity. Furthermore, the incorporation of empirical research—particularly on the gig economy, education, and remote work—adds a necessary dimension to the theoretical reconceptualization. The findings illustrate how digital environments not only reframe the contours of alienation but amplify its psychological and organizational effects, intensifying feelings of powerlessness, disconnection, and surveillance. Yet, these same environments offer novel opportunities for sociological intervention, legal reform, and ethical recalibration. They invite a critical reflection on what constitutes meaningful work, human flourishing, and collective identity in a post-industrial, data-driven world.

In conclusion, alienation remains an indispensable category for understanding the complexities of labour and subjectivity in the digital age. However, it must be disentangled from its metaphysical baggage and revitalized through a praxis-oriented framework that integrates sociological, philosophical, and policy-relevant insights. The task ahead lies in operationalizing alienation not merely as an abstract theoretical concept but as an empirical, normative, and political tool capable of guiding interventions in a rapidly changing technological landscape. This reorientation is not only intellectually necessary but ethically imperative. As automation, artificial intelligence, and digital management continue to shape the future of work, the question is not merely how to adapt to these changes, but how to humanize them. Alienation, in this light, becomes both a diagnostic lens and a call to action: to reclaim work, technology, and society as spaces of agency, recognition, and solidarity.

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