

The UK Alienation Factor

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Introduction: A Small Word with a Long Shadow

The word alienation began its life among the philosophers, and it has since taken up residence on the high street. You hear it in the warehouse, where the pick-rate on the screen counts for more than the person doing the picking. You hear it in the town where the pub, the bank and the youth club have all gone dark. You hear it at the bus stop as an aside about politics: it is the settled belief that none of it is aimed at you.

This essay takes that everyday reportage seriously. It distinguishes three meanings of alienation that public argument tends to run together: the Marxist account of estranged labour; the sociologists' narrower, measurable conditions; and the looser sense in which people in Britain today describe being priced out, passed over and talked down to. It then asks why any of this should concern us, and answers that the costs are not sentimental. They appear in the rewards of work, in the coherence of communities, in the credibility of democratic politics, and in the age-old question of whether persons are treated as ends in themselves or merely as tools.

George Orwell supplies the long view, and the final section asks what can be done. The claim throughout is blunt. **Alienation is not a mood; it is a measurable condition, produced by arrangements.**

Development: Three Meanings, One Malady

Marx's account remains the deepest of the three. Writing in 1844, before he had built the economic apparatus for which he is remembered, he asked what happens to a person at work when the work belongs to somebody else (Marx, 1959 [1844]).

His answer had four strands.

- 1) The worker is estranged from the **product** of her labour, which is sold away from her while its value accumulates in another's hands.
- 2) She is estranged from the **process**, because the work is commanded, timed and surveilled rather than chosen;
- 3) She labours, in his famous phrasing, "*outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself*" (Marx, 1959 [1844]). She is estranged from her distinctively human powers of deliberate, **imaginative** making, which the job employs only as instruments.
- 4) She is estranged from her **fellows**, whom competition sets against one another.

Private property, Marx concluded, is not the root of this estrangement but its accumulated result: the institution that turns the fact of estrangement into property.

The sociologists inherited the idea and did it a lasting service: they made it observable. Durkheim, investigating why the comfortable sometimes despair, named the condition **anomie**, a state in which society's norms no longer bind and the rules fall silent exactly where life is most demanding

(Durkheim, 1951 [1897]). Weber came at it from the other direction: the rational organisation of modern work builds what he called an iron cage, **efficient, calculable and disenchanted** (Weber, 1930 [1905]). Later, Seeman (1959) cut the concept into five dimensions that can actually be measured in a survey:

- **powerlessness**: outcomes lie beyond one's control;
- **meaninglessness**: means and ends no longer connect;
- **normlessness**: common standards no longer hold;
- isolation: one is shut out from valued company and purpose;
- **self-estrangement**: one's activity expresses someone else's purposes, not one's own.

The gain from all this knife-work is considerable. If alienation can be measured, it can be studied; and Blauner's Factory studies showed it varies with the design of the work itself: the assembly line estranged by design, while craft printing did not (Blauner, 1964). The machine is not fate. What is measurable can be changed, and that is the quiet hope buried in the sociology.

Then there is the third meaning: the looser one, and the one that moves elections. When most folk in Britain today say they feel alienated, they mean something brutally simple: they feel surplus to requirements in their own country.

The workplace version is documented with unusual precision. In Gallup's latest global survey, using data collected across 2025, just ten per cent of UK employees reported being engaged at work, against a global average of twenty per cent (Gallup, 2026). Nine in ten British workers, by that measure, are getting through the shift without connection to it.

Beyond the workplace the picture barely improves. Seven per cent of adults in England, roughly 3.1 million people, report feeling **lonely** often or always (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025), rising to ten per cent among adults aged 16 to 24. Events have done the teaching. In the Post Office Horizon scandal, sub-postmasters were prosecuted on the strength of a computer's errors while the institution they served defended the machine rather than the people; it stands as the national case study in estrangement from authority.

People register all of this in phrases older than any opinion poll: that it doesn't matter what you vote for; that it is not for the likes of us; that the country works for somebody else. When the 2016 referendum campaign offered the estranged a slogan, "*Take back control*", it was heard, whatever one thinks of its promises, as the opposite of alienation: an offer of belonging (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

Why should any of this concern us?

Begin with work, because most adults spend the greater part of their waking lives in it, and because alienation strikes first at the rewards that work is supposed to bring, which are wider than the wage. Labour answers needs for identity, mastery and belonging; a job that feeds none of them must be endured rather than enjoyed, and endurance is expensive. Britain pays the bill quietly.

Real wages in the mid-2020s are barely above their 2008 level, a stagnation without precedent in the post-war record (Resolution Foundation, 2024), and productivity has crawled since the financial crash. More than 700,000 people are employed on contracts that guarantee no hours at all (Office for National Statistics, 2024); the courts have had to confirm that a gig driver is a worker rather than an app's costume of entrepreneurship; and the official review of modern working practices conceded that workers' voices have been stripped out of whole sectors of the economy (Taylor, 2017).

When management analysts gave the resulting disengagement a name, calling it "*quiet quitting*", they imagined they had diagnosed a staff problem. What they had measured was an estrangement: labour delivered at the lowest level the monitor can detect. That is precisely the condition Marx described, in the man who feels most himself only when he is not working.

The coherence of the community pays next, and by ordinary arithmetic. Fellowship lives in what Oldenburg called third places: the pub, the club, the chapel hall and the library; places that are neither home nor work (Oldenburg, 1989). These have been closing for a generation. Chronic loneliness carries a mortality risk comparable to recognised clinical risk factors (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

A society of strangers, therefore, pays **twice**: once for the damage, in health services and in policing; and once again for the repair, in the programmes that attempt to rebuild what the arrangements dissolved. There is a cost no ledger captures at all: the slow loss of the everyday assurance that one is noticed and that one would be missed.

Political credibility erodes on the same schedule. The 41st British Social Attitudes report records that 45 per cent of the public almost never trust governments of any party to place the nation's needs above their party's interest, and 58 per cent almost never trust politicians to tell the truth when in a tight corner; both figures are the highest recorded (Curtice, Montagu and Sivathasan, 2024). Nor does the distrust respect party boundaries: nearly half of those who voted Leave in 2016 now almost never trust governments, as do more than four in ten of those who voted Remain (Curtice, Montagu and Sivathasan, 2024). Alienation of this depth does not stay at home on polling day. Where it votes, it votes in protest; where it abstains, it vacates the field to whoever remains.

Here Kant supplies the moral ground beneath the sociology. The formula of humanity in the Groundwork reads: *"So act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means"* (Kant, 1997 [1785]). In that light, exploitation has an exact meaning, and it is not a Marxist metaphor: it is the treatment of a person as an instrument, a cost line, a residue to be managed. The alienated workplace breaches the formula methodically, shift by shift. So did the institution that ruined its sub-postmasters rather than admit its computer was at fault. Kant and Marx arrive at the same verdict by different roads: a society that organises people as instruments will, in time, find it cannot ask anything of them.

From credibility lost, the road bends darker. Cynicism is the bend. Cynicism poses as sophistication, but it is better understood as the surrender of judgement: a population that concludes all truth is spin and all politics is a racket has handed its attention to whoever shouts the loudest. Arendt identified the mechanism in advance: *"What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses"* (Arendt, 1951). Extremist movements rarely begin by persuading; they begin by organising the lonely and the estranged, offering membership where a person feels invisible and meaning where the world feels arbitrary. Fascist encroachment in a tired democracy does not usually announce itself in uniform. It arrives as an answer to somebody's loneliness, and the cynic's shrug is its invitation.

Capital, meanwhile, runs a contradiction of its own, and it is the engine room of the whole malady. To hold down costs, the firm extracts more labour for less reward. The worker, estranged from product and process alike, withholds what no contract can compel: care, initiative, attention. Output falls short of its potential, so margins are recovered from wages once more, and the squeeze deepens the estrangement that occasioned it. The loop turns, and each turn tightens. Marcuse marked the next twist: the system offers consumption as the consolation, so that the worker is invited to buy back, on credit and alone, what she made in company and in vain (Marcuse, 1964). Even the language cooperates; *"flexibility"*, once an engineering term, now names the insecurity of the employed and is presented as a benefit. None of this is conspiracy. It is an equilibrium.

Orwell gives the whole argument its panorama. In the chapters of his 1949 novel presented as the smuggled treatise of Emmanuel Goldstein, he sets out both the promise and the threat of the machine. Machinery, the passage argues, made drudgery and therefore inequality dispensable: if it were used deliberately for that end, hunger, overwork, dirt, illiteracy and disease could be abolished within a few generations. And yet the very abundance the machine creates endangers hierarchy,

because, as Goldstein's text concludes, "*In the long run, a hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and ignorance*" (Orwell, 1949). Keynes had made the friendly version of the same forecast a generation earlier, calculating that his grandchildren might need to work fifteen hours a week (Keynes, 1931). Productivity did in fact rise as both men hoped. Hours did not fall as promised, and distinction did not dissolve; it changed currency. Education became the gate; housing became the moat; time itself became a luxury, bought by those who can afford to work less and sold by those who cannot. The poverty is subtler than hunger and the ignorance subtler than illiteracy, but the architecture Goldstein described still stands, and it is maintained not by a secret committee but by arrangements nobody remembers making. The danger is not that somebody plans the estrangement; it is that nobody has to.

Conclusion: What Can Be Done

If alienation is produced, it can be unwound; Britain has even rehearsed the remedies. Begin with the machine, Orwell's first subject, and put it back on the side of the people who operate it.

The world's largest trial of the four-day week, run across 61 British organisations in 2022, found improvements in wellbeing with revenue holding steady, and 92 per cent of participating firms kept the change after the trial ended (Autonomy, 2023). Add worker voice in firms and unions, guaranteed hours, and genuine transparency in algorithmic management: measures of exactly this kind are gathered in the current Employment Rights Bill (Department for Business and Trade, 2024).

The direction of travel is plain. **Technology exists to shorten drudgery; where it is used instead to squeeze, that is a decision, and decisions can be legislated against.**

Then mend the middle places, where citizenship actually happens. The experience of Preston and other towns shows that procurement and investment can be redirected toward local and cooperative ownership, rebuilding an economy of employers with a stake in the place that employs them. Third places deserve planning protection and community ownership, not just nostalgia. Deliberative institutions can be grown deliberately: the Climate Assembly UK (2020) showed that a representative group of citizens, properly informed, will argue its way to sensible answers on questions that Parliament has spent a decade avoiding. Devolution that moves decisions within walking distance of the people they affect is not a constitutional nicety; it is anti-alienation policy in the most literal sense.

Which brings us to adult education: the oldest remedy, and the most radical. Goldstein's hierarchy rests on poverty and ignorance; adult education is the deliberate **unmaking** of the second pillar and the practical rebuttal of the first. Freire separated education practised as storage from education practised as freedom, and insisted that only the second kind produces people able to act upon their world (Freire, 1970).

The Workers' Educational Association has been running the second kind, quietly and without spectacle, for over a century. To teach an adult that her experience counts as evidence, that her judgement is welcome and her voice audible, is to undo alienation at its root. It is also, not incidentally, the habit of mind on which every other remedy in this essay depends. A democracy that invested in the thinking of its adults would be attacking the Goldstein architecture at its foundation, with the very tools the hierarchy fears most: literacy, confidence and the expectation of being believed.

Coda

Orwell's imaginary theorist got the long run right: hierarchy is possible only on a basis of poverty and ignorance. He drew the conspiratorial conclusion, but the plainer truth is that these foundations are not fate to be awaited; they are arrangements that can be unwound by choice.

What a hierarchy needs, a democracy can withhold. The opposite of alienation is not happiness; it is

agency: the settled knowledge that one's work counts, one's street is one's own, and one's vote weighs something. A country that set out deliberately to provide those three would find the machinery of estrangement rusting within a generation. The machine, as Orwell insisted, was never the enemy. Left to the accountants, it alienates; returned to the people it serves, it remembers its first promise.

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