Can sociology use another book on alienation? Considering the centrality and importance of the concept to critical sociology, one can never have too many contributions and Marx and Alienation is an outstanding addition to the field; indeed, it is the best volume I’ve seen in dealing with such a slippery idea in such a concise, clear, and penetrating fashion.

In nine chapters (and one appendix) Marx and Alienation explores the concept of alienation itself, the place of alienation in the thought of Hegel and Marx, and timeless sociological themes such as individuality, labor, freedom, and the division of labor. Two chapters also deal with property relations and communism. That so much of substance is covered in so few pages, without feeling compressed, is an impressive feat. Perhaps the best entrée into this book is the universal theme of objectification: humans engage in self-duplication (p. 34) in the domain of creative effort and ultimately humanize the world (pp. 17–25) as they strive, unceasingly, to overcome the contradictions of their own creations (p. 25). Rather than a pessimistic view that insists on the futility of freedom in the modern world, where, at best, people are socialized to want to do what they were going to be forced to do anyway, the emancipatory potential of Hegel’s thought, as it evolved over time in Marx’s writings, is mapped out and provides readers with lines of thought that might lead life beyond for-profit schemes into a world of rational needs satisfaction.

We see that, unlike simple animals that take what they can get (p. 36) in their immediate relation to nature (p. 67), humanity, with its being-for-self (p. 68), is engaged in a productive odyssey from the earliest days of hunting and gathering, to agriculture, craft manufacturing, and, beginning in the 18th century, large-scale industry where the tool-using person of previous regimes is transformed into an instrument controlled by machines (pp. 37–9). The contemporary shift in large sectors of western productivity toward ‘symbolic labor’ has confounded the imaginations of many. Sayers effectively neutralizes the errors found in Hardt, Negri, Habermas, and Arendt who cannot think straight on the nature of labor that, apparently, produces nothing concrete. We find, here, and in contrast to those writers, the basic sociological insight that all praxis is simultaneously material and immaterial and that something non-physical can have physical effects (pp. 40–4).

The liberal imagination, with its atomistic rendering of the person, as well as its reduction of society to the sum of its parts, where social organization revolves around private interests, leads, inevitably, to the naturalization of conflict (pp. 48–56) and assumptions about human nature and the division of tasks that obscures underlying social forces. Marx’s historical materialism comprehends social conflict within the dynamics and contradiction of the totality of social forms and relations, especially the division of labor into specializations – where Hegel saw a road to individuality
in the division of labor, Marx saw only a prison and the mutilation of the human being (p. 58). In other words, where liberal champions of capitalism paradoxically identify autonomy with necessity at the abstract level of being, Marx locates the dynamic interplay of autonomous and heteronomous logics linked in the exchange of goods (p. 59). Of course, the exchange of goods is the locus par excellence of fetishism and reification, both aspects of alienation. Importantly, for Marx, even though we are trapped to a certain extent in the domain of necessity our praxis can be free (p. 70) and can lead to social freedom. In other words, alienation is neither wholly negative nor, perhaps, a permanent condition in its sheer negativity as humanism and structuralism would have us believe (pp. 78–88). Alienated existence within capitalist society contains the seeds of its own negation (p. 93) not a natural and inescapable feature of life per se. However, this upward cancellation of capitalism is not merely an abstract negation but the class struggle toward communism and the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production (p. 104).

Marx’s position on private property marks a departure from Hegel’s synthetic transformation of natural rights and utilitarian theories of property. With Marx, the whole of bourgeois society confronts the individual, now isolated and powerless, as an alien monstrosity (p. 109). Communism does not spell the end of property in itself (p. 131) but the transfer of ownership of the means of existence and needs–satisfactions to the public. Marx was not a champion of leveling out the entirety of society, and communism as Marx conceived it is not a dystopia of barracks life devoid of individuality but, rather, the realization of actual individuality over the sub-divided person (p. 141). Sayers concludes:

> Even though [communism] is still a distant prospect, it is reasonable to believe that this system will eventually be superseded by another and different economic and social system, a communist system in which production will be organized not for private profit but for the common good, and the anarchic and uncontrollable mechanism of the market will be replaced by the conscious and rational regulation of economic life. (p. 172)

The overall presentation in *Marx and Alienation* is superb – one of the best I’ve seen. One point that may trouble some readers without grasping the larger argument is the construction of Marx’s transitional phase of communism, between capitalism and full communism, as, basically, something that looks at first glance like a forced labor camp. Of course, given the nature of work today, more work sounds terrible to most people who already work, especially to petit bourgeois egoists, but this is due to the nature of laboring to excess within the detailed division of labor where surplus value accrues to the owners of the means of production. Once we move into a epoch of free praxis and universal needs–satisfactions, work will no longer confront the individual as a life sentence of meaningless toil for the benefit of a few but something to be desired above all else. The only other complaint I have is directed at the thoughtless reproduction of the ‘iron cage’ of ‘rationalization’ chestnut attributed to Weber (p. 12, fn) and taken for granted in sociology. Weber’s ‘iron cage’ (bad translation but preferable to the recent, literal rendering) was not a reference to rationalization at all (or bureaucracy, for that matter). This, however, is a minor quibble.

As a side note, for those in no rush to shell out $80 for a book, a more affordable paperback edition of *Marx and Alienation* is forthcoming according to Palgrave.

A natural companion to *Marx and Alienation* is *The Vitality of Critical Theory* by Harry Dahms. In a new, single-author move, this volume constitutes the whole of Volume 28 of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*. Dahms has emerged over the last several years as an eminent light among social theorists and the papers appearing in this volume, spanning the years from 1997 to 2008, mark an important, condensed intervention in the field of critical social theory and critical sociology. Six chapters examine the early Frankfurt School, the wedding of Weber with Marxism,
the concepts of reification and alienation, globalization, basic income, and the indispensability of critical theory within the social sciences as a whole.

Dahms contrasts the work of the early Frankfurt School with contemporary strains of critical theory (from the 60s to the present) and finds that much has been lost compared to the analyses that emerged in the 30s and 40s from the currents and eddies of orthodox Marxism, the German Historical School and neo-Marxists like Lukács and Korsch (sorely neglected these days, in my opinion). The early Frankfurt School, really the ‘third wave’ of critical theory (p. 8) charted the contradictions of capitalism and authoritarian political reaction with an eye toward the explanatory power of concepts like alienation, reification, and fetishism.

Things were not all well with the evolution of the Frankfurt Institute when it relocated to the US, a land more or less devoid of kindred spirits (pp. 113–16). In addition to operating in an alien intellectual and institutional environment, Horkheimer and company got behind Pollock’s state capitalism thesis at the expense of Neumann’s critique of authoritarian capitalism, engendering a shift from the economic to the political and abstracted philosophy (p. 15), swerving over into the critique of instrumental reason (pp. 40, 49). Dahms thinks we need to reexamine what Neumann was up to and attempt a rejuvenated critique of political economy (p. 40) and also draw from neglected sociological elements (p. 79). In short, we need a new, collaborative and interdisciplinary program of critical social theory (p. 85).

When postmodern theory and feminism came to the fore, Marxism and the theorization of reification were both relegated to the margins (pp. 93–5) because, at the end of the day, both radical modernists and postmodernists, interested in power discourses and civil society (p. 96–7), and feminists interested in identities (p. 98) no longer took as much interest in capitalism (p. 97–8). In at least one sense, this is tragic; if we go back and examine the theory of reification from the standpoint of Lukács, for example, we find that the commodity form imposes itself on people such that they act, think, and feel like commodities (p. 102), that the commodity is their ‘second nature’ or that selves become constructed following the dictates and contradictions associated with the accumulation of surplus value. Further, with Adorno, the reified logic of capital accumulation and the drive toward surplus value, transforms our sense of identity in relation to value-bearing objects (p. 104) and, later, with Habermas, that our very communicative practices become warped and distorted (p. 100) such that we cannot work our way out of our self-imposed traps.

Adorno’s analysis of identity thinking provides an entry point to the issue of basic income, opposed by capital as well as organized labor (p. 147) but which, if not eradicating reified existence in whole, might at least ‘break the spell’ (p. 148) under which we live. Dahms projects sociology as a special kind of bridge between theory and practice that could assist in the transformation of our ‘iron cage’ or, as he prefers, our ‘glass casing’ (p. 165) into a self-reflexive and critical form of social consciousness – both as ordinary people in everyday life as well as at the level of scholarly analysis (more relevant today than ever, see p. xi, in this era of un-reflexive academic entrepreneurialism groping at random for some kind of understanding of social reality). The prospects are, frankly, grim for such an accomplishment as the era of globalization amounts to what Dahms refers to as ‘hyper-alienation’ (p. 167).

The battle against alienation is the front where critical theory must focus its energies:

This, then, is the very essence of critical theory: alienation is the seemingly inescapable, ever more pervasive corollary of the economic process in capitalism, an ongoing process of societal mediation and reconstitution which, as members of society captured in the minutia of everyday life, we are meant to experience and embrace, but not to detect. Yet as social scientists, we must embrace the responsibility for making the most determined and sustained efforts to discern and reveal the truly awesome force alienation has over our lives and our existence – as a constitutional feature of modern reality. (p. 278)
How does the current academic division of labor (pp. 286–7) enable us to confront this challenge?

Mainstream representations of modern society do not and never were meant to reveal its form of social organization as existing against the normative framework of modern society, but instead as it appears to itself within the normative framework of modern society. (p. 294)

As such, we will flail about in the dark until we locate, illuminate, and step beyond the barriers of mainstream social science and begin (once again) to shed light on the essential and core features of capitalist society and the reifying and alienating mechanisms that enslave everybody.

As a unified collection of essays on critical theory, *The Vitality of Critical Theory* is a tour de force that merits wide readership. My only quibble with this book is that theorists such as Reich and Fromm are shorted. Reich was not a member of the Frankfurt School but his early work was important for the work of critical theory that followed. Again, this is a minor issue, and does not detract from the outstanding accomplishment of the pieces in this volume.

The minor shortfall common to *Marx and Alienation* as well as *The Vitality of Critical Theory* hinges solely upon a personal and idiosyncratic program of critical sociology, namely, the intersection of the critical tradition with the Durkheimian school of thought. The fusion of Marx and Weber is an established current, yet, to my way of thinking, tremendous insights are still waiting to be mined from Durkheim’s oeuvre by those willing to suspend judgment and see what the founder of academic sociology had to say on the themes of reification, alienation, freedom, the division of labor, egoism, materialism, etc. Dahms actually points the way: tucked away in a footnote, he says:

Reading Marx’s writings as a critical theory of alienation, Durkheim’s as a critical theory of anomie, and Weber’s as a critical theory of the Protestant ethic, would engender a perspective on the beginnings of modern society … Such a co–reading of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, as critical theorists of alienation, anomie, and the Protestant ethic, appears to be the necessary foundation for a dynamic perspective on globalization as contradictory, contingent, and complex. (p. 216, fn, emphasis added)

Sayers might be surprised to find that Durkheim was, in certain respects, the 20th-century’s heir to the Hegelian spirit, no pun intended. Admittedly, Durkheim represents an anti-Marx in many ways, especially on problems such as the division of labor, but their oppositions are polar rather than diacritic, opening many opportunities for synthesizing their combined insights. When Marx speaks of the commodity as external, coercive, and irreducible, nobody bats an eye, it is obviously true, but when Durkheim makes the same observation regarding the nature of social facts, critical theorists denounce his hypostatizing tendencies rather than seeing in Durkheim an allied power in the struggle to grasp fetishism, reification, alienation, and life in the negative deregulated heaven driven by bourgeois monstrosities.

Mark Worrell
Department of Sociology/Anthropology, SUNY Cortland, USA
Email: worrellm@cortland.edu