

## ALIENATION (draft entry for posthuman encyclopaedia)

Alienation is to be rendered alien or to be estranged from something. We can be alienated from home (exile), from illusions (in the theatre, in the arts), from ourselves (in Marxism, to be alienated from our creations). Alienation can imply dependence on a power other than ourselves; when we become a marketable commodity, or when we are manipulated by others through our feelings and affections.

Alienation can therefore be seen as a negative term, implying forced loss of proper possession and estrangement from who we really are, or who we should be. It would seem, therefore, that the posthuman is open to a negative judgement for the alienation it implies in moves away from the human. To become posthuman, in alliances with plants, animals, societies, materials and machines, would also be to become alienated. The posthuman might then be a place of exploitation, exile and loss.

Two senses of alienation begin to point to an answer to this criticism. For Brecht, the alienation effect in theatre is a way to divest the audience of an implicit acceptance of the illusions of classical theatre. In this alienation, distance is created between the audience and the action on stage by unfamiliarity and discomfort. This has a positive goal: the audience has to be estranged from the stage in order to then return to it afresh and more alert to its message. Alienation is a way to a greater truth.

For Marx, alienation is not estrangement from property but from powers, from our communal powers to transform our social worlds through joint work. We are alienated when we are enclosed and separated by modes of production; for example, when we only have access to, and a say in, a small part of a productive process, or when the product of our work becomes a mere commodity, rather than something of shared social use. We are alienated from ourselves, when we are either forced into, or acquiesce to, becoming a thing rather than a communal actor; for example, when we think of ourselves as our price, or as our marketability.

According to these points of view, alienation depends on what we really are and on how we are kept from that – by capitalism and by tradition, for instance. This more subtle understanding of alienation reverses the criticism that can be made against the posthuman as alienating idea and process. It is the idea of the human that is alienating, because it imposes a false representation of existence. We are not individual and self-contained beings, defined by a core essence, ideal, consciousness or body. We are multiple processes connected across different forms and places. When those processes are denied, when an alliance with animals, or a dependence on technology, or a multi-agent coalition, is defined as a distortion of a properly human core, then there is alienation.

True alienation happens when we cling to the human, against assemblages and forces that constitute us as posthuman processes of transformation. When alienation is defined in terms of being and property, we are led to think of the human as static, in the sense of having a particular fixed state or fixed belongings and characteristics. This thought is itself alienating, because in truth we are always going beyond states, properties and predicates. To be posthuman is to become alien in many different ways at the same time.

Alienation is therefore a useful critical concept for posthuman thought in three ways. First, it allows for a critique of the alienation forced upon us as multiple processes by false ideas of human essences and properties. Second, it allows us to track the positive kinds of alienation involved in becoming posthuman, where new assemblages and alliances increase our powers. Third, it allows us to pay attention to the ways we can still fall into the negative sense of alienation as destructive, when a process of becoming is taken too far or too fast and a line of transformation disappears or loses power, thereby leading us to be alienated from joint creative powers.

James Williams, Edinburgh, February 2016