
Original Article

A psychopolitical interpretation of de-alienation: Marxism, psychoanalysis, and liberation psychology

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Abstract In his pioneering work on liberation psychology, Ignacio Martín-Baró describes de-alienation as a subjective process of recovering fragmented historical pasts for the purpose of reconstituting and liberating ourselves from an oppressive, alienating present. In this article, I argue that although de-alienation is typically understood as a political concept, it also lends itself to psychoanalytic readings. To this end, I draw on Marxist notions of material alienation, as well as Lacanian conceptions of subjective alienation, to offer a psychopolitical interpretation of de-alienation. More specifically, I use Marx and Lacan to consider how liberation psychology work can advance de-alienating processes within political organising, the production of art, and knowledge creation. I conclude by urging those working within the liberation psychology paradigm to consider how other psychopolitical lenses might avail emancipatory insights into collective resistance. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-021-00220-w>

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Introduction

Drawing on numerous disciplines and progressive political traditions, Ignacio Martín-Baró's (1994) pioneering work on liberation psychology sought to develop an emancipatory paradigm from which to practise

psychology. The purpose of this article is to offer a psychopolitical interpretation of Martín-Baró's concept of de-alienation, which he defined as a political process of retrieving fragmented pasts for the purpose of collectively reconstituting and liberating ourselves from an alienating present (see Montero, 2007; Watkins and Shulman, 2008). To do so, however, requires us to approach de-alienation as a relational construct. Indeed, we surely cannot develop a comprehensive understanding of de-alienation unless we have a clear idea of what is meant by alienation. Yet, when we attempt to read the psychological constitution of alienation with and through its political consequences (as is requisite for any liberation psychology analysis), we run into some conceptual difficulties. Where many involved in the progressive political sciences are partial towards Karl Marx's (1844/1978) understanding of alienation as an oppressive but surpassable set of social conditions, a considerable number of those working in the psy-disciplines favour Jacques Lacan's (2001) conception of alienation as fundamental to human subjectivity. Accordingly, it is through a necessarily fraught dialogue between these two thinkers – both of whom have been drawn upon to analyse Martín-Baró's (1994) work (see e.g. Malherbe, 2018; Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013) – that I offer a psychopolitical interpretation of de-alienation.

Drawing Marx and Lacan into liberation psychology raises a number of issues. For instance, various Eurocentric readings of Marx and Lacan have insufficiently attended to feminist and decolonial concerns (Eagleton, 1983; Hook, 2020; Malherbe, 2018), whereas such concerns are of central importance to liberation psychology and de-alienation (see Lykes and Moane, 2009; Watkins and Shulman, 2008). In Marx's work, the capacity for the lumpen proletariat to enact meaningful social change is much derided, whereas for liberation psychology, contra its Marxian influences, the emancipatory agency of all classes is privileged (Malherbe, 2018). In the case of Lacan, his elitism, baroque writing style, focus on the individual, and insistence that psychoanalysis is not psychology rubs up against liberation psychology's clarity, progressive politics, emphasis on the collective, and paradigmatic identity (see Parker, 2003; Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013). Thus, one might argue that, because Lacanian and Marxist strands of thought are incompatible not only with one another (see Salerno, 2018), but also with liberation psychology, using Marx and Lacan to interpret de-alienation needlessly complicates things. I disagree with this view. Marx and Lacan have been drawn into decolonial and feminist projects by those working in and with psychologies of liberation in a number of important ways (Fanon, 1967; Hook, 2020; Laboria Cuboniks, 2018), just as psychologists and psychoanalysts on the so-called Lacanian Left have long relied on Lacan's work to advance progressive, oftentimes Marxist, political agendas (Parker, 2011; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). Therefore, despite their political and conceptual contradictions, there are crucial points of connection between the writings of Marx, Lacan, and Martín-Baró, including scepticism



towards mainstream institutional practice, ideological critique, a fascination with consciousness and dialectics, and an interest in the functioning of dominant power structures. It is through these conceptual linkages that I seek in this article to develop a psychopolitical understanding of de-alienation.

In what follows, I begin by outlining what Marx meant by material alienation, what Lacan meant by subjective alienation, and how these two seemingly incompatible formulations have been considered alongside one another. I then briefly summarise what Martín-Baró wrote about de-alienation, after which I offer a psychopolitical interpretation of de-alienation by reading this concept against Marxist and Lacanian thought. More specifically, I consider how those working from within the liberation psychology paradigm can enact de-alienation through their involvement in political organising, the production of art, and the creation of knowledge. In each instance, I demonstrate how de-alienation can function dialectically by embracing, rejecting, and reconstituting facets of alienation for the purpose of psychosocial justice. Finally, I conclude by urging those working within the liberation psychology tradition to consider how other psychopolitical lenses might avail emancipatory insights into collective resistance.

Alienations

Historically, the definition of alienation has been rather unstable. In his influential book *Keywords*, Williams (1988) demonstrates that by the early twentieth century, alienation came to refer to an estrangement from deities, political authority, property, affective relations, and even one's own mental faculties. At its most rudimentary, though, alienation denotes a psychopolitical lack of being (Eagleton, 1983), and in this sense offers a salient category of lived experience under racial and patriarchal capitalism (see Fanon, 1967; Laboria Cuboniks, 2018; Long, 2017; Patterson, 1982). While this lack of being has been conceptualised in myriad ways, Marx and Lacan have been especially influential here.

Marx's material alienation

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx (1844/1978) writes that we show ourselves to be human through our labour, which is to say that labour is our 'life energy' (see Singer, 2018). He argued that when workers do not own the means of production, they are forced to sell their labour-power to capitalists, who pay workers a fraction of the surplus value that they (the workers) have generated. In turn, workers become estranged – or alienated – from their productive powers. Workers' creative energies and the surplus value

that they create are, in other words, subsumed into the production of capitalist exchange value, rendering them unable to self-actualise (Sayers, 2013). The labour process is thus made into a joyless routine that necessitates a ‘submission of the soul’ (Berardi, 2009, p. 108).

Marx (1844/1978) postulated that workers experience four aspects of alienation: estrangement from the product of their labour; estrangement from the process of their labour; estrangement from their species-being (i.e. their distinctively human ontology); and estrangement from one another (see also Worrell and Krier, 2018). Harvey (2018) has added that under today’s neoliberal capitalism, we are also alienated from the dominant political structures (and, subsequently, daily life) which are made to work for a small ruling class (see also Long, 2017). Marx (1844/1978) does not, however, describe the painful division of the self that we experience under capitalist alienation as a subjective category (Berardi, 2009; Harvey, 2018). Instead, he posits that it is an objective social relation that stems from oppressive labour conditions (Sayers, 2013).

Although one (*viz.*, the worker and the capitalist) can be alienated at the point of production, Harvey (2018) notes that we are also alienated at the point of realisation (*viz.*, buyers and sellers). In the latter case, the very products of our labour come to represent the instrumentalisation of our ‘life activity’ (Sayers, 2013), with the relations between people made to seem like relations between things (Žižek, 1989). Consequently, the commodity form becomes fetishised in the hope that it will deliver us from alienation, when in fact it only intensifies it (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). Communal bonds are, in this sense, structurally severed (Marx, 1844/1978; Sayers, 2013), and human interaction comes to signify ownership and utility (Sayers, 2013), with the Other made into an object of suspicion that represents competition for resources (Long, 2017). Various apparatuses of capitalism may then make use of discourses of otherness (e.g. racism, sexism, xenophobia) to create societal divisions which obscure the ways by which inequality is structurally generated under capitalism (Wendling, 2009).

Although capitalist labour relations are fundamentally alienating, Marx (1844/1978) argued that they would not be so under a democratic political economy where workers controlled the means of production as well as the surplus value (here, he had in mind socialism). This is not to say that unsatisfying work would be eliminated under socialism, but rather that if working and profit sharing are made into collective enterprises, our motivation to work will change (Sayers, 2013). We can, therefore, restore our life activity, Marx (1844/1978) proclaimed, by bringing our productive activity into social control, which would necessarily mean abolishing private property along with the capitalist mode of production (Singer, 2018). Yet, to reach this emancipatory goal, Marx (1844/1978) maintained that we need to first pass through capitalist alienation, arguing that increased productivity was a precondition to



engendering the collective consciousness required to build socialism (Freire, 1972; Mouzelis, 2014). The realisation of this consciousness is not, however, inevitable. Capitalist alienation oftentimes institutes economic instability, a politically deflated citizenry, right-wing nationalism, and authoritarian populism – none of which is conducive to building socialism (Harvey, 2018). Therefore, in what we might understand as Marx’s open dialectic (see Lowy, 2000), our experience of capitalist alienation enables us to build de-alienated social relations, but this is not a guaranteed outcome (see also Freire, 1972).

Lacan’s subjective alienation

Lacan (2001) believed that the human subject is – at its core – split; alienated from itself without the possibility of unification. Although the subject experiences varying degrees of alienation (Evans, 2006), for Lacan (1958–9), alienation remains constitutive of subjecthood (Mouzelis, 2014). He posited that there are two kinds of alienation (Lacan, 1958–9), both of which are precipitated by the big Other’s (i.e. an imagined social authority’s) false promise of psychic fullness (Bloom, 2013). The first kind of alienation is observed during ego formation, whereas the second develops when the subject enters into the symbolic order (Evans, 2006; Homer, 2005).

In considering Lacan’s first point of alienation, we must turn to what he called the mirror phase. When children see themselves in the mirror for the first time, they are presented with an image of wholeness which is at odds with their experience of themselves; indeed, because the child does not yet have full motor control, the self is experienced as fragmented (Bloom, 2013). In turn, the child misrecognises the self as this alienating mirror image (Lacan, 2001). Here, the ego – which, it must be emphasised, is not the self – refuses the truth of fragmentation, that is, the alienating subjective lack which lies at the heart of human subjectivity (Homer, 2005). Although the child’s misrecognition of the fragmented self as the mirror image can give rise to feelings of elation and self-mastery (Lacan, 2001; Lutz, 2009), the child ultimately remains alienated – split from itself – precisely because the self is being realised in an *other place* (Eagleton, 1983).

The mirror phase enables the infant to begin perceiving the self through symbolisation, which facilitates the conditions necessary for moving into the second kind of alienation. For Lacan, this second kind of alienation occurs when the subject enters into the symbolic order, which is also when the unconscious develops (Parker, 2003). The symbolic order represents the structure of socio-sexual relations and roles which constitute society, in which language is fundamental (Bloom, 2013; Eagleton, 1983). Within the symbolic order, the Real of who we are eludes symbolisation, meaning that the symbolic order perpetuates our subjective alienation. In other words, the languages and



identities offered to us by the symbolic order fail to possess our subjective fullness, and we are only ever offered symbolic modalities of non-meaning (Eagleton, 1983). Although our unconscious desires attempt to fill this non-meaning (i.e. our inherent lack), they always fail to do so. Our desires thus exist within this failure (Lacan, 1958–9, 2001). For Lacan (2001), we oftentimes enjoy this perpetual failure to obtain psychic fullness (Žižek, 1989). In short, it is within the symbolic order that the subject becomes split between consciousness and repressed desire (Eagleton, 1983).

Engaging the two kinds of alienation described by Lacan can provide us with insights into various identity-based oppressions. For example, Fanon (1967) demonstrates how the Lacanian mirror stage assists us in understanding the ways by which racism, far from signifying a purely psychological construct, constitutes various cultural schema which are propped up by a colonial symbolic order (Hook, 2020). A mirror of whiteness is thus held up as a colonising ideal by which subjects are measured, and indeed may measure themselves. It follows, then, that if the Lacanian subject's desire for self-mastery always takes place in and against an alienation of identification (Bloom, 2013), the decolonising imperative compels us to break from identifications with whiteness (Hook, 2020).

Lacan posits that, as we develop, our illusionary sense of wholeness moves from the metaphorical world of the mirror to the metonymic world of language (Eagleton, 1983). It is crucial, however, to note that, although extreme cases of alienation can give rise to psychosis (Evans, 2006), alienation also has productive qualities. The idealised self-image is said to motivate some (Bloom, 2013), while our experience of lack may inspire creativity (Chaitin, 1996). Further, our failure to attain the ego ideal makes possible constructive identification and intersubjective connection (Bloom, 2013). Therefore, although human subjects remain divided and alienated, they can be consciously so. Through psychoanalysis, subjects can attempt to understand the Real of their unconscious desires and reduce feelings of alienation by learning to live with the splitting inherent to their subjectivity (Mouzelis, 2014).

Marx with Lacan: Formulating a psychopolitical alienation

The stark differences between Lacan's subjective alienation and Marx's material alienation raise a number of conceptual challenges for those attempting to engage alienation through a psychopolitical frame. Certainly, some theorists have argued that because Lacan was not concerned with class analysis, and because Marx already to some degree prioritised the psychological in his work, the Marxist project not only has little need for Lacan, but Lacan's work has the potential to depoliticise Marxian conceptions of alienation (Salerno, 2018). Similarly, some psychoanalysts may well argue that one can develop situated



understandings of the psyche without Marx's critique of political economy (see Malherbe, 2018). Some might even argue that the psychoanalytic tradition is perfectly capable of critiquing political economy without Marx (see e.g. Freud, 1927/1961, 1930/1961). Others have insisted that Lacan's universal alienation ignores the specificities of material alienation (see Hook, 2020). Yet, perhaps the value of these two thinkers need not be arrived at via a perfect theoretical union, but rather through a move towards an uncomfortable synthesis. Indeed, Harvey (2018) insists that understanding the subjective consequences of material alienation is crucial for ensuring the broad appeal of progressive politics. In the same register, Sawyer and Gampa (2020) argue that through a mixture of psychological and Marxist theories, we can understand labour relations, class dynamics, working conditions, political consciousness, and activism in terms of their alienating properties.

Within the stark differences between Marxian and Lacanian approaches to alienation, we are able to, somewhat paradoxically, observe echoes of similarity. Mouzelis (2014), for instance, draws attention to how Marx's insistence that we are alienated by forces that we create, but cannot control, resembles Lacan's argument that we are alienated by unconscious linguistic mechanisms that are unknown, and therefore uncontrollable. Mouzelis (2014) goes on to note that, for Marx, we can traverse alienation through understanding how ideology distorts reality whereas, for Lacan, the subject weakens (although never fully eliminates) alienation when signifiers are connected to symptoms. In drawing from Marx's (1844/1978) four aspects of alienation, Worrell and Krier (2018) attempt to explicate how each is implicated in Lacan's (1958–9) model of subjectivity, noting that alienation from the product and process of labour falls under subjective alienation from the symbolic order (e.g. the way that the legal language of employment becomes a tool for advancing capitalist oppression). Alienation from our species being and from others, therefore, falls under the subject's alienation from primary relations in the mirror stage. Arguments such as these seem to highlight that the key to thinking through alienation with Marx and Lacan is to consider how the symbolic acts alongside our material existence in mutually constitutive ways. This is to say, Marxism may allow for insights into how capitalism influences the material conditions and economic categories to which the alienating symbolic order is bound (Lutz, 2009).

In the Marxian formulation of alienation, we do not have a human subject *per se*, but rather an inhuman, asocial, and inert object. We can better understand this dehumanised object of labour by imposing it onto Lacan's model of subjectivity (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). In this way, it is through Lacan's alienated subject that we are provided with a materialist account of the conditions of production that produce the subject under capitalism (Parker, 2011). Here, alienation functions as the necessary outcome of subjective reproduction under capitalism (Mouzelis, 2014; Parker, 2011). An example of



this can be observed in Bloom's (2013) study of workers' desire for employability, which found that attempts to satisfy desire through employee identity failed to eliminate subjective alienation, all the while reinforcing material alienation. Here, the exacerbation of symbolic and material lack occurs together, highlighting how our commodification can tie in with our fundamentally alienated subjectivity.

Lacan and Marx have also been used to understand how alienation interacts with capitalist ideology. In critiquing Marxian conceptions of alienation (or what is sometimes referred to as Marxist humanism), Althusser (2014) draws on Lacan to explain how ideology acts to 'resolve' the inherent contradictions of capitalism, thus offering the subject a false sense of wholeness (see Eagleton, 1983). Drawing critically from Althusser's work, Žižek (1989) understands alienation as an objective social relation to which we relate through the commands of the big Other, with ideology forming an unconscious fantasy that structures our alienating social reality. In this regard, the more we attempt to fill our subjective lack with ideological fantasies of wholeness, the more alienated we become. Capitalism, in turn, exercises much of its coercive power through such ideological fantasies. Although there is no pre-existing subject that can be retrieved through ideology (Parker, 2011), the subject under capitalism assumes a sense of importance by filling its lack with ideology, all the while potentially deriving enjoyment from ideological transgression (Žižek, 1989). However, ideology and alienation also function at the micro-level via the subject's interaction with the commodity form. Indeed, the commodity capitalises on ego formation by offering to the subject the promise of self-mastery, despite being formed through dependency, servitude, alienation, and psychological fragmentation (Lutz, 2009). In this sense, the fetishised commodity promises to return to us what we lost in producing it, that is, what has been repressed and is experienced as alienating (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017).

Ensuring that psychoanalytic accounts of alienation are attentive to collective exploitation means that we do not consider alienation merely as a measurable psychological experience (Parker, 2011), or as a unique psychological disturbance within the subject (Long, 2017). Instead, through Marx and Lacan, we can begin to understand alienation as a force that takes form through the dialectical interaction between the material world and our subjective lifeworlds. While we might understand human relations as *de facto* fraught *à la* Lacan, it is with Marx that we can gain insight into how these fraught relations are aggravated in lethal ways under capitalism (e.g. collective solidarity and sense of community being displaced by individual competition). The fantasies of psychic fullness offered by capitalist ideology may then further subjugate our desires and exacerbate feelings of alienation. Perceived in this way, alienation represents a psychosocial patterning that influences communication, ego formation, desire, political economy, and labour. This psychopolitical



formulation of alienation, I argue, indicates to us how we can challenge and reconstitute alienation.

Martín-Baró's De-alienation

Martín-Baró argued that dominant discourses endorse a 'permanent psychological present' (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 30). By this, he meant that the present-day status quo is continually represented as eternal, and without historical precedent. This severing of the past, he argued, results in a collective alienation and fatalist acceptance of oppression (Malherbe, 2020). In rejecting this state of affairs, Martín-Baró (1994) described de-alienation as an explicitly political mode of remembering which endeavours to recover fragmented individual and collective histories (Watkins and Shulman, 2008). More explicitly, de-alienation entails a collective consciousness-raising process that seeks to understand how history finds form in an oppressive present so that we might change the present (see Freire, 1972; Montero, 2007). In this way, de-alienation resembles Fanon's (1967) notion of disalienation, which speaks to the decolonial imperative to break from static and racist images of blackness (Hook, 2020). However, the distinctiveness of de-alienation lies in its historicising thrust which emphasises the ability of oppressed subjects to collectively take back power and reconstitute society for purposes of liberation (Watkins and Shulman, 2008).

Martín-Baró's (1994) avowed anti-essentialism meant that he did not anticipate that de-alienation efforts would recover 'whole' memories or ego formations (which would, ultimately, entrap – rather than liberate – people). Instead, by uncovering collective memories for the purpose of informing contemporary struggles (Malherbe, 2020), de-alienation calls for psychologists to shift their focus from behaviour and cognition to consciousness, history, ideology, and collective knowing (Martín-Baró, 1994). Martín-Baró (1994) argued that 'the task of the psychologist must be to achieve the de-alienation of groups and persons by helping them attain a critical understanding of themselves and their reality' (p. 41). Thus, de-alienation is always willed towards the de-ideologisation of oppressive social formations (Montero, 2007), which is to say that de-alienation looks to avail insights into the alienating socio-historical structures which are responsible for the psychological anguish of majority populations (see Fanon, 1967; Long, 2017).

De-alienation presupposes a political commitment which centres the interests of the oppressed (Montero, 1997). Through de-alienation, we can recover fragmented historical memories and project these onto individuals, nations, and communities (Martín-Baró, 1994). This is not to make a fetish of fantasies of a 'whole' past (Malherbe, 2020), but to harness cultural symbols for the purpose of re-authoring and healing social and subjective relations (Montero, 2007; Watkins and Shulman, 2008). De-alienation can offer us images of a fair, just,

equal, and free society towards which collective resistance efforts may strive. Action and reflection thus occur together as a means through which to address the psychosocial, material, and symbolic constitution of alienation (see Freire, 1972).

Towards a Psychopolitical Reading of De-alienation

Although Martín-Baró (1994) was well-acquainted with the works of Marx, and was certainly influenced by psychoanalysis (e.g. his consideration of the unconscious and societal defensive processes), his concept of de-alienation is usually attributed solely to a Marxian influence (Malherbe, 2018; Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013). While there are several possible reasons for this, one of the most obvious is that the prefix ‘*de-*’ is typically used to denote separation or complete reversal (think *detract* or *deforest*). It would follow, then, that de-alienation implies a Marxian eradication of capitalism’s alienating social conditions. However, the ‘*de-*’ prefix can also signify a lowering of intensity, as with words like *degrade* and *debase*. The dual meaning of this prefix (that is, elimination *and* reduction) opens up de-alienation to a psychopolitical interpretation (i.e. the uncomfortable synthesis of Marxist political praxis and Lacanian psychoanalysis). In what follows, I consider political organising, artistic production, and knowledge creation in an attempt to offer an applied psychopolitical interpretation of de-alienation.

Political Organising and De-alienation

Alienation, so the Marxist argument goes, can serve as a point of common experience around which to collectively mobilise against capitalism (see Long, 2017; Sayers, 2013). This kind of political organising is, however, not without its complications. In their study, Sawyer and Gampa (2020) found that although feelings of alienation gave rise to collective political action among workers, this action did not necessarily decrease workers’ alienation. While there could be myriad reasons for this, I wish to focus on how social action can (perhaps unwittingly) reproduce alienating relations, and how we can address this. The issue of solidarity across different (seemingly distinct) social struggles is important here. It is difficult to establish connections between and across different arenas of struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Class consciousness, for instance, does not necessarily give rise to feminist, ecological, or anti-racist consciousness (see Fromm, 1989, for a useful analysis here). Those of us who are engaged in political struggle against capitalist alienation may, therefore, continue to feel alienated if these struggles are inattentive to the multiple, but interlinked, dimensions of our alienation (e.g. alienation that is at once raced,



sexed, *and* classed). Thus, if we do not create solidarious links (i.e. a ‘chain of equivalence’; see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) across these various political struggles which are falsely segregated under capitalism, then our collective resistance against capital will remain politically weak, which in turn is likely to redouble feelings of alienation. Seeking to connect different anti-capitalist struggles does not, however, represent an attempt to resolve our inevitable subjective alienation, but is instead an historically grounded effort to collectively mitigate material alienation in ways that are attentive to subjective alienation.

The Lacanian response to the problem of building political solidarity across struggles has been to advance a chain of equivalence from our shared experience of subjective lack. Žižek (1989) argues that although we cannot know the Other, we also cannot know ourselves, and it is this intersubjective lack that can serve as a point of mutual (un)connectedness. In other words, through the common experience of unbridgeable subjective alienation, one is able to access the Other as a comrade in the fight against material alienation (see Dean, 2019). It is precisely because the Other, like the self, lacks that this Other is not a closed subject from which the self is *de facto* barred. There are, however, various problems when we attempt to engage the universal properties of subjective lack for political ends in this way. The symbolic system from which we are alienated is embedded within particular ideological apparatuses that are, under capitalism, commanded by the big Other in racialised and gendered ways (Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013). Although every subject experiences lack, the manner by which a subject is symbolically hailed by capitalist apparatuses will determine how such lack is experienced (see Althusser, 2014). For instance, Patterson’s (1982) notion of natal alienation explicates how the Black subject’s humanity is, from birth, systematically violated through structures of coloniality. This is not to say that identities like race are, in every instance, operating on entirely different tracts to Marxian notions of class, but rather that both coalesce to form particular experiences of alienation. Taking note of the complex constitution of subjective lack is important if we are to harness lack in ways that trouble individualist notions of the universal which map onto the logic of capitalism (Walls, 2004), and if we are to push back against the ways by which our psychic attachment to identity is exploited under capitalism.

I wish to argue that psychologists of liberation who are concerned with psychopolitical de-alienation should remain attentive to those historically rooted modalities of ‘lived alienation’ (Long, 2017), which is to say, modalities that valorise an alienating and essentialised conception of the white, able-bodied, masculine capitalist subject (Laboria Cuboniks, 2018). Indeed, an individual’s psychic investment in such an identity is related to the material, symbolic, and social value that is placed upon this identity under racial and patriarchal capitalism. Thus, even though such identification exacerbates rather than alleviates our material alienation, this alienation nonetheless persists through its ability to obscure how an individual subject’s exploitation is

connected to the alienation and exploitation of others. If one looks, for instance, at the gender pay gap, a male worker who is overinvested in his masculinity is unlikely to seriously question the fact that he earns more than workers of other genders who are employed to do the same job. He may even draw chauvinist and/or fatalist conclusions from this, and become further attached to how the capitalist system hails this alienating male identity which promises (but never delivers) psychic fullness (see Roediger, 1991, for a well-known analysis of how whiteness functions in comparable ways under capitalism). Therefore, in what Martín-Baró (1994) calls the social lie, capitalism uses our psychic identification with various Lacanian mirror images (e.g. masculinity, whiteness, heteronormativity) to its advantage by making individual progress appear incompatible with collective freedom. This is to say that our subjective alienation is made salient and enjoyed in particular ways under capitalism, so that the collective will to organise against material alienation is deflated.

De-alienation requires that subjects not only disinvest in the ways by which the capitalist system hails, degrades, and rewards particular identities, but also that we collectively de-ideologise the kinds of individualist approaches to progress that such a system encourages. While collective anti-capitalist resistance may not be *a priori* de-alienating (Sawyer and Gampa, 2020), it is when it is successful (even marginally so) that subjects may begin to value de-centring the self and prioritising collective political agency in the fight against material alienation (Dean, 2019). De-alienation, in this respect, appreciates that for solidarity-building to occur, we must refuse capitalist modes of enjoying identity (see Žižek, 1989).

De-alienating political organising should, however, not be understood in simplistic, didactic, or class reductionist terms. It is imperative that de-alienation efforts draw upon thinkers like Fanon (1967) and Patterson (1982), as well as collectives like Laboria Cuboniks (2018), for whom lived alienation is of fundamental importance. Although we cannot ever attain a complete understanding of the Other, let alone the self (Lacan, 2001), we can embrace lived alienation in a manner that draws out how different struggles connect under capitalism. Not everyone experiences gendered or racialised oppression, but our common subjective alienation, which is hailed in different ways by capitalism and feeds into the material alienation of the vast majority, can allow for empathetic modes of solidarity-building. In this way, we can work with activists to reconfigure understandings of universal lack from the ground up (Laboria Cuboniks, 2018), intervening in the alienating makeup of society so that we might change the form that our subjective alienation assumes (Lutz, 2009). We might, in this register, harness our subjective lack in terms of Asad Haider's (2018) conception of insurgent universality which 'does not demand emancipation solely for those who share my identity but for everyone; it says that no one will be enslaved' (p. 113).



I wish to emphasise that de-alienation does not call for political organising to eschew intersubjective tensions. In working with activists to create spaces wherein they are encouraged to articulate personal experiences of alienation (see Walls, 2004), psychologists of liberation do not wish to dispel intersubjective antagonisms, but to draw on these antagonisms for the purpose of solidarity-making. We do not have to like the comrades with whom we struggle, but the subjective alienation of individual comrades can inform how we collectively resist material alienation (see Dean, 2019). In this sense, our resistance politics need not pursue an illusionary wholeness that promises the absence of conflict and alienation, but, through solidarity, it can look to build a society where conflict and alienation do not arise from economic exploitation (Lutz, 2009; Parker, 2011). In the words of the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*: ‘We want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls, neither virtue nor terror. We want superior forms of corruption’ (Laboria Cuboniks, 2018, p. 47). In striving for superior forms of corruption (i.e. an antagonistic solidarity across struggles), we can begin to break our identification with, and potential enjoyment of, capitalist – and even socialist – ideological fantasies that promise, but always fail, to alleviate conflict (Bloom, 2013).

It would seem, then, that our approach to de-alienating political organising rests, in large part, on a dialectical reliance on – and scepticism towards – language. Although language can assist us in acknowledging the particular manifestations of universal lack, we can nonetheless never *know* our lack. As Lacan (2001) puts it, language fails to capture the meaning of the social (Žižek, 1989), and yet there is a kind of freedom here. Our inability to symbolise our subjectivity, or to stabilise identity, means that we do not cohere with the subjectivities hailed by capitalism and its attended psychologies (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017); we are not, in other words, fully observed in the world (see Dean, 2019). We can, however, resist the oppressive constitution of this world by harnessing what Berardi (2009) refers to as an ‘active estrangement’ that disinvests our libidinal energy from oppressive sign systems (p. 46; see also Marx, 1844/1978), and looks instead to collective struggle as the form through which to render psychosocial emancipation a practical and appealing concern for all (see Williams, 1985). In so doing, we can reconstitute communication through new anti-capitalist fantasies which take seriously solidarity, comradeship, and the intersectional nature of alienation (see Bloom, 2013; Dean, 2019).

De-alienation Through Art

As a mechanism of depoliticisation, excessive alienation can function to produce deactivated, psychotic, unmotivated, hopeless, and/or depressive subjects who are denuded of their ‘life activity’ (see e.g. Evans, 2006; Harvey, 2018; Sawyer and Gampa, 2020). Yet, at the same time, Marx and Lacan in their different

ways recognised alienation's productive potential. For Lacan, the subject could fill its alienating lack with motivation and creative energy (Chaitin, 1996), whereas Marx postulated that capitalist alienation served as the precondition for generating class consciousness (Sayers, 2013). Although there are numerous points at which these Lacanian and Marxian conceptions of productive alienation connect, I wish to focus here on artistic movements. For instance, those involved in the 1960s Chicago Surrealist Group sought to create cultural products that reflected 'new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community' (Kelley, 2002, p. 5). Similarly, although usually in a less explicitly political register, the Romantics of nineteenth-century England endeavoured to create art for its own sake, thus rejecting the utilitarian ethic of industrial capitalism (Eagleton, 1983). In both cases, alienation was harnessed to create liberatory visions of the future via a re-symbolisation of the present (see Malherbe, 2020; Watkins and Shulman, 2008).

It would seem, then, that art is able to reflect and draw upon alienation for purposes of de-alienation. We can think of this through the so-called 'alienation effect', a Brechtian concept that denotes the use of art to render the familiar strange, and provoke audiences to think – and potentially act – in accordance with emancipatory politics (Caishu, 2015). Exemplary here is the global trend of manipulating public monuments that glorify colonial violence. By making alien that which many people take for granted within public spaces, such art can draw attention to the injustices that these monuments celebrate within the everyday. However, art which draws on the alienation effect for de-alienating ends is most effective when it connects to organised resistance politics. In South Africa, for example, the political street art produced by the Ngamanye Amaxesha Collective¹ is powerful precisely because it evokes the material demands of labour activists and student movements in that country. Art, therefore, holds de-alienating potential not by rejecting alienation as such, but by using it to engage with the political in creative, stimulating ways.

Although we might wish to create de-alienating artwork in isolation, it should be kept in mind that such art begins to accrue political potential only when it is subject to the conscientising collective. Indeed, bringing de-alienating artworks into political spaces can inform the concrete goals of social movements by shifting particular reality-bound chains of signification into creative realms of the emancipatory. Art's grounding in both history and the present can therefore become a means through which the conscientising collective strengthens internal bonds and articulates its political vision. Even art that exists primarily for its own sake reminds us that pointlessness, leisure, and taking joy in aesthetic beauty are liberatory demands that should not be absent in our politics. And yet, the history of artistic production under capitalism demonstrates how even the most radical kinds of art can and have become recuperated; made into consumable cultural commodities (Eagleton, 1983; Williams, 1985). We must,



therefore, also work with conscientising collectives to guard against the kinds of recuperation and political compromise that have afflicted so much progressive artwork. For those working from within the liberation psychology paradigm, then, a psychopolitical approach to de-alienating artwork requires that we rethink the political and the historical through imagination and the symbol, which is to say, through the psychological (see Watkins and Shulman, 2008), and also to ensure that our politics is not made into aesthetics.

De-alienating art should not be considered a political endpoint, but rather a process of politicisation that speaks to – and harnesses – the subjective and material facets of alienation. Through art, the subject can draw upon feelings of subjective and material alienation to reimagine the world, and how we might go about rebuilding it for purposes of liberation. In other words, artistic cultural production allows us the freedom to re-symbolise our alienation through emancipatory imagery that need not embody linearity (*à la* surrealism) or explicitly political content (as with the Romantics). Rather than making a fetish of creativity, art of this kind seeks to harness visions of liberation and engagements with history that do not restrict the subject's voice to hegemonic linguistic conventions (see Malherbe, 2020; Salerno, 2018).

De-alienating Epistemologies

Like Marx (1844/1978), 'truth' was for Martín-Baró (1994) not confined to postmodern relativism. Rather, it lay in the oppressed majority's ability to liberate itself from the alienating social conditions of racial and patriarchal capitalism (Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013). However, as with the psychoanalytic encounter, Martín-Baró (1994) also approached knowledge and truth as contingent constructs (Walls, 2004). In this sense, the truth of collective struggle rejects the false notion of a 'permanent psychological present' (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 30) – the conviction that our reality is natural or unchanging – for a future-oriented praxis that emerges from an understanding of the past (see Malherbe, 2018). If we understand de-alienation as a process through which to engage this truth, de-alienation itself comes to embody an epistemological form. In a psychopolitical register, such a de-alienating epistemology locates the truth of collective resistance in self-reflection and consciousness-raising (see Freire, 1972; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017), both of which are required to de-ideologise illusions of self-mastery that repress our recognition of capitalist domination (Bloom, 2013). For instance, within neoliberal conceptions of corporate feminism (Hillary Clinton, Sheryl Sandberg, and Marissa Mayer represent some well-known proponents here), a feminised master of economic and political power wields the language of gender equality to mask capitalist exploitation (see Malherbe, 2020). In contrast to this, de-alienation looks to harness a radical 'feminism for the 99%' (see Fraser *et al.*, 2019) that rejects

illusions of self-mastery and derives a vision of feminism that is attendant to knowledges and practices of, as well as identifications with, historically rooted conceptions of psychosocial justice.

In liberation psychology, consciousness-raising and self-reflection are typically undertaken through reflexive knowledge-work (i.e. reflexivity). Reflexivity denotes taking responsibility for how one's subjectivity, identity, beliefs, and background influence the work with which one is involved (see Lykes and Moane, 2009; Malherbe, 2018). Considering reflexivity through a psychopolitical de-alienating epistemic frame, I posit, requires an interrogation of how unconscious desire – and its attendant ideologies (see Walls, 2004) – affect the truth of liberation (see Žižek, 1989). To engage the unconscious – which, under conditions of coloniality, is always a colonial unconscious (Fanon, 1967; Hook, 2020) – is to challenge a particular subject's relationship to oppressive social systems. In what ways, for instance, might some feminist-identifying men harbour unconscious psychic investment in patriarchal relations? Similarly, because the legitimacy of the discipline of psychology has for so long depended on capitalist apparatuses (Parker, 2011), might psychologists of liberation unconsciously oppose the material progress of the activists with whom they work (see Long, 2017)? To ask questions like these is not to evoke shame or to rely on pseudo-progressive language that masks alienating capitalist exploitation, nor is it to allude to a mythical ego ideal that requires us to repress our unconscious desires. Instead, by making conscious – or seeking to symbolise – our desires, we act to weaken the politically destructive power of the unconscious. To attempt to speak our desire means that we can work with comrades to hold these desires accountable, and to prevent us from returning to and acting on them. In Lacanian phraseology, we might say that working with others to advance symbolisation allows for the Real of our desires to recede in our political activity (Mouzelis, 2014). Psychoanalysis can in this way function to strengthen the ways by which we honour our political commitments to our comrades in the fight against capitalist alienation (see Dean, 2019).

It is also important that de-alienation processes attend to (un)conscious emotional knowing (i.e. the manner by which our feelings afford to us ways of understanding the world, some of which elude symbolisation). At the same time, capitalist social relations structure our feelings (see Williams, 1985). Indeed, our emotional knowing is repressed, delegitimised, rewarded, acknowledged, and/or ignored in accordance to capitalism's profit-making mandate. Subjects may feel in whatever ways they wish, so long as these do not impede on capital's relentless expansion. Certainly, workers are permitted to loath their employers. This loathing only becomes punishable when it translates into the kinds of strike action or trade union militancy that pose a direct threat to capital. Feeling alienated enables us to rationally know this feeling, which is a necessary requirement for changing it (see Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). If our de-alienating efforts are to honour emotional knowing, we should reject false distinctions



between rationality and emotionality, and delink how we feel from capitalist rationality. In the context of our political activity, de-alienation is able to harness the conscientising potential of emotional knowing. Referencing their community-engaged psychological work, Ratele *et al.* (2020) explain how community-building efforts can attend to material injustices by working with people's emotional knowledge. They note that because capitalism determines 'how, when, if, and where the gendered, raced, and classed subject is able to feel' (p. 8), organising against capitalism requires that these feelings are, to some degree, symbolised. Indeed, it is through feeling that we can come to realise our collective experience of subjective and material alienation. More specifically, though, it is our shared feelings of subjective alienation that may foster the kinds of intersubjective connection required to work with others to change the conditions of our material alienation. Speaking to this, Ratele *et al.* (2020) note that attempts to symbolise feelings of alienation in concert (which may be material, subjective, or both) can result in what they refer to as affective solidarities, wherein resistance politics are not organised around bogus attempts to comprehensively *know* the subjective alienation of the self or the Other, but instead through a shared emotional knowledge of one another's material alienation (which is, at the same time, sensitive towards individual lack). In other words, giving form to emotional knowing – rather than repressing this or deeming it superfluous – the de-alienating knowledge form has the potential to foster affective bonds between comrades, which may in turn build upon the political connections which have been established through the linguistic sign (Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013). In this way, we begin to take seriously our emotional faculties whose political legitimacy is repeatedly denied under capitalism (see Pavón-Cuéllar and González Equihua, 2013), and to validate how we resist not only the material conditions of capitalist alienation, but also its unacceptable emotional consequences (Williams, 1985).

The kinds of reflexive, unconscious, and emotional knowledge recounted above are rarely considered legitimate epistemological forms by capitalist institutions. Even more than this, the dehumanising mechanisms of capitalism, particularly its colonial formations, require that these forms of knowledge – which point to the rich psychic life of capitalist subjects and can be used for politically dissident purposes – are systemically denied. This process of asphyxiating, and even destroying, particular knowledge forms is known as 'epistemicide', and functions to deny people's inner lives (i.e. their humanity) so that the ravishing of their material lives can appear legitimate (see de Sousa Santos, 2016). If, then, we consider liberation to be a never-ending task (see Montero, 2007), we are committed to continually seeking to rediscover the truth of liberation through insurgent de-alienating epistemological formations. De-alienation rejects epistemicide and its attendant violences by reconnecting people to humanising (albeit fragmented) epistemological formations, so that we might recognise and build connections through our subjective alienation in

an effort to fight material alienation. It is in this sense that de-alienation can offer us ways of historicised knowing that are both psychological and political.

Conclusion

De-alienation assumes a necessarily ambitious form when we take seriously the ways by which its political components connect with its subjective consequences. I have argued in this article that the work of Marx, Lacan, and Martín-Baró provide us with important psychopolitical insights into de-alienation. Within the liberation psychology literature, however, de-alienation as such is rarely afforded extended consideration, but is more often interpreted alongside other concepts within the liberation psychology tradition (e.g. critical consciousness, de-ideologisation, denaturalisation, and participatory action work). I have not sought to divorce de-alienation from these other concepts; to do so would surely impoverish its political impact. Instead, I have tried to imagine how we might enact liberation psychology praxes through a psychopolitical reading of de-alienation. I have, in short, attempted to advance a dialectical formulation of de-alienation, wherein alienation is drawn upon, resisted, accepted, acknowledged, and reconstituted for purposes of psychosocial emancipation.

I wish to conclude by calling for future work to consider liberation psychology, and its associated techniques and approaches, through other kinds of psychopolitical interpretation. How, for instance, might we understand de-ideologisation through decolonial feminisms? What are the political implications of an anarchist approach to consciousness-raising? Indeed, how might the psychoanalytic insights of Homi K. Bhabha, Jacqueline Rose, and Renata Salecl, alongside the Marxist analyses of Angela Davis, C.L.R. James, and Samir Amin, inform liberation psychology praxes? There are, in short, numerous ways of engaging the psychopolitical from within the liberation psychology paradigm. Work of this sort is imperative if we are to advance a necessarily ambitious, ongoing, expansive, and dialectical approach to liberation from within psychology.

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Note

1. For some examples of work produced by this collective, see <https://ngamanyeamaxesha.tumblr.com>.

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