

The Vicious Cycle: Alienation and Objectification in Contemporary Society

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Abstract: This paper employs an interdisciplinary conceptual analysis to argue that alienation and objectification form a self-reinforcing vicious cycle at the heart of contemporary social pathologies. While classical theory, notably Marx, rooted alienation in capitalist economic relations, this study demonstrates how this cycle is now amplified and perpetuated across political, cultural, and digital domains. We contend that individuals experiencing alienation - a state of estrangement from their labor, others, or themselves - become more susceptible to objectification, being reduced to mere instruments or commodities. This objectification, in turn, deepens the initial alienation, creating a feedback loop that erodes human dignity, agency, and social cohesion. The analysis traces this cycle through three key manifestations: its economic foundation in exploitative labor and consumerism, its political and cultural amplification through oppressive power dynamics and the culture industry, and its contemporary acceleration within globalized digital networks. Moving beyond critique, the paper concludes by exploring pathways for breaking this cycle, drawing on recognition theory (Honneth) and the capabilities approach (Nussbaum) to propose a framework for fostering resilience, inclusive communities, and a renewed ethics of human dignity. The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated strategies that address both the structural and phenomenological dimensions of this pervasive cycle in the 21st century.

Keywords: Alienation, Objectification, Vicious Circle, Social Theory, Power, Recognition Theory, Capabilities Approach.

The power structure precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-ends category. Hannah Arendt (1969)

Introduction

Alienation and objectification are not merely historical or philosophical concepts; they are pervasive forces shaping the terrain of modern existence. From the disaffection of the precarious worker to the curated self-presentation on social media, individuals in contemporary society navigate a world where feelings of estrangement and experiences of being instrumentalized are increasingly common. While Karl Marx's analysis of alienation under capitalism - where workers become estranged from their labor, its products, and their own human potential - provided the foundational critique, the manifestations of this phenomenon have proliferated far beyond the nineteenth-century factory (Marx, 1867). Similarly, objectification, the process of reducing individuals to the status of objects, tools, or commodities, is a persistent feature of social life, evident in consumer culture, political discourse, and digital interactions. The extensive literature on these concepts reveals a wide spectrum of terminology and application. Alienation encompasses a range of experiences, including *powerlessness*, *meaninglessness*, and *social isolation* (Sayers, 2011: 287; Seeman, 1959: 783), while objectification is described through related processes like *commodification*, *dehumanization*, and *instrumentalization* (Nussbaum, 1995: 249; Honneth, 2008). Scholarly attention has rightly expanded from the economic sphere to encompass political marginalization (Flohr, 2024: 361), cultural homogenization under globalization (Bauman, 2000: 205), and the psychological impacts of a hyper-real digital landscape (Baudrillard, 1994).

However, many analyses treat alienation and objectification as parallel or sequential phenomena. This paper argues instead that they are dynamically intertwined in a *vicious cycle*. Alienation, characterized

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by a disconnection from self, work, or community, creates a vulnerability to objectification. When individuals feel powerless or disengaged, they are more easily reduced to instruments for economic gain, political ends, or digital engagement. This very objectification - being treated as a means to an end - then deepens the original alienation, leading to further disempowerment and estrangement. This cyclical relationship, we contend, is the core mechanism through which these social pathologies reproduce and sustain themselves across various domains of contemporary life. This paper will critically examine this vicious cycle through an interdisciplinary lens. First, it will establish a theoretical framework defining the core concepts and their cyclical interplay. It will then trace the cycle's operation through three key domains: the enduring economic foundations, its amplification through political and cultural systems, and its accelerated expression in globalized digital networks. Finally, by integrating insights from recognition theory and the capabilities approach, the paper will explore potential pathways for interrupting this cycle and fostering social conditions conducive to human dignity and agency.

Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing the Vicious Cycle

This paper's analysis is grounded in the proposition that alienation and objectification are not discrete phenomena but exist in a synergistic and self-reinforcing relationship. This section elucidates this core theoretical framework by defining the key concepts and modeling their cyclical interaction.

The Anatomy of Alienation

The concept of alienation, most famously elaborated by Karl Marx, describes a state of estrangement or disconnection that fractures the individual's relationship to their world and themselves. For Marx (1867), this estrangement was fundamentally rooted in the capitalist mode of production, manifesting in four key dimensions: from the product of labor, from the labor process itself, from our fellow humans, and from our essential "species-being" or human potential. This foundational view understands alienation as a structural condition arising from specific social and economic arrangements.

We build upon this to define alienation in a broader, yet precise, sociological sense: *a state of disconnection that diminishes an individual's sense of agency, belonging, and meaning*. This encompasses feelings of powerlessness, social isolation, and a perceived loss of control over one's life and work (Seaman, op. cit.: 783-791; Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015: 916). It is the experience of being a passive object of external forces rather than an active subject of one's own destiny.

The Logic of Objectification

Objectification, conversely, is the process through which a person is rendered an object, an instrument, or a commodity. Drawing on philosophical traditions from Kantian ethics to critical theory, objectification involves treating a human being as a means to an end, disregarding their intrinsic worth and autonomy (Kant, 1785; Nussbaum, op. cit.: 291). In a sociological context, this process is systemic. It occurs when economic systems reduce workers to "replaceable cogs in a mechanistic system" (Lu & Ren, 2018: 1800-1803), when political rhetoric reduces marginalized groups to stereotypes, or when consumer culture reduces individuals to their purchasing power or physical appearance.

The critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1964) powerfully described how advanced industrial societies create a "one-dimensional" man, whose needs and desires are themselves shaped by the system, leading to a "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" (p. 1). This represents a sophisticated form of objectification where individuals internalize their own instrumentalization.

Modeling the Vicious Cycle

The central theoretical contribution of this paper is to model the dynamic interplay between these two concepts. We posit a *vicious cycle* wherein alienation and objectification are mutually constitutive and reinforcing.

The cycle begins with experiences of *alienation*. An individual who feels disconnected from their work, politically powerless, or socially isolated experiences a diminished sense of self and agency. This state of vulnerability and disengagement makes them more susceptible to *objectification*. A system - be it economic, political, or cultural - readily fills this void, treating the alienated individual as a passive object: a mere consumer, a demographic to be manipulated, or a data point to be monetized.

This objectification, in turn, *deepens and legitimizes the initial alienation*. Being treated as an instrument rather than a full person confirms the individual's powerlessness and estrangement. As Axel Honneth's (1996) recognition theory would suggest, this is a fundamental form of disrespect that damages self-realization. The individual's social world no longer recognizes or affirms their humanity, solidifying their alienated state. This deepened alienation then creates fertile ground for further, and often more intense, objectification, thus perpetuating the cycle. This model moves beyond a linear or causal chain (A causes B) to illustrate a recursive loop where each element intensifies the other. It is this cyclical dynamic, operating across multiple societal domains, that explains the persistent and pervasive nature of these phenomena in the contemporary era. The following sections will trace the operation of this cycle through the economic, socio-political, and digital spheres.

2. The Economic Foundation of the Cycle

The economic sphere, particularly under the global capitalist paradigm, serves as the primary and most documented generator of the alienation-objectification cycle. Here, the structural mechanisms that initiate and reinforce the vicious cycle are laid bare, affecting both the worker and the consumer.

Alienated Labor and the Commodification of the Worker

The Marxist analysis of alienated labor remains the cornerstone for understanding the economic origin of the cycle. Under capitalism, work for the majority ceases to be an expression of human creativity and becomes, instead, an external, coerced activity performed for survival (Marx, 1867). The worker is alienated in multiple ways: from the product, which is owned and controlled by another; from the act of production, which is often repetitive, fragmented, and meaningless; from their "species-being," as their creative potential is stifled; and from other workers, with whom they are placed in competition. This profound alienation creates a state of vulnerability. The worker, feeling disconnected from their own productive capacities and the fruits of their labor, is primed for objectification. The economic system readily treats this alienated individual as a *mere factor of production*, a "replaceable cog in a mechanistic system" (Lu & Ren, op. cit.). This objectification is evident in precarious work conditions, the erosion of workers' rights, and management strategies that prioritize efficiency metrics over human well-being. As Marx himself observed, there is a veritable "personification of things and reification of persons" (Marx, 1976: 1054), where capital is animated and workers are de-animated.

The Consumer Sphere: From Alienation to Objectification

The cycle does not end at the factory gate or office door. The same system that produces alienated workers requires objectified consumers. The sense of meaninglessness and powerlessness experienced in the workplace often creates a void that individuals seek to fill through consumption (Bauman, 2007). Consumer culture promises identity, community, and fulfillment through the acquisition of commodities. However, this "solution" is itself a form of objectification. The individual is reduced to their *purchasing power*, valued by the market not for their humanity but for their capacity to consume (Butler, 2021: 623). Advertising and marketing, as Marcuse (1964) argued, create "false needs" that bind individuals ever more tightly to the system. The consumer is objectified as a target market, a data profile, and a bearer of trends. This consumption, however, fails to address the underlying alienation from work and community, often leading to a "shallow sense of self" and a "diminished capacity for authentic connection" (Xincao, 2023: 104). The failure of consumption to provide genuine fulfillment then feeds back into a renewed sense of alienation, perpetuating the cycle as the individual remains trapped between unsatisfying work and compensatory, yet ultimately objectifying, consumption.

Beyond Capitalism: A Nuanced View

It is crucial to note, as highlighted above, that the cycle is not exclusive to capitalism. Historical experiments with state communism, while aiming to overcome capitalist alienation by collectivizing the means of production, often created a different form of the cycle. Here, alienation arose from a lack of political freedom and state repression, while objectification manifested in the individual being treated as a mere instrument for the goals of the party-state (Laqueur, 1996; Golubović, 1989: 95). This demonstrates the robustness of the theoretical model: while the specific mechanisms differ, the cyclical relationship between a disempowered, alienated populace and a system that objectifies them can

manifest across different economic structures. In summary, the economic sphere provides the classic template for the vicious cycle. Alienation, born from a lack of control and meaning in production, creates a subject ripe for objectification as either a disposable labor-unit or a target consumer. This economic objectification, in turn, deepens the existential and social alienation it purportedly seeks to cure, ensuring the cycle's continuance.

3. Political and Cultural Amplification of the Cycle

While the economic sphere ignites the cycle of alienation and objectification, it is within the political and cultural realms that this cycle is amplified, legitimized, and often contested. Power dynamics and cultural narratives do not merely reflect the economic base but actively shape how the cycle is experienced and resisted.

Political Power: Objectification and Alienation in the Public Sphere

Political systems can be potent engines of objectification. When political discourse and policy reduce individuals to stereotypes based on race, gender, ethnicity, or other identities, they engage in a form of public objectification that denies agency and intrinsic worth (Flohr, op. cit.: 385). Divisive rhetoric and exclusionary policies can make marginalized groups feel like problems to be managed rather than citizens to be empowered, directly fostering a sense of political alienation - a feeling of powerlessness and disconnection from decision-making processes (Finifter, 1970: 389). This political alienation, in turn, reinforces objectification. A populace that feels its voice does not matter is easier to govern as a passive mass. As Arendt's opening quote suggests, the power structure itself creates the condition for thinking in means-ends terms, and a disenfranchised citizenry becomes a *means* for legitimizing power rather than its *end*. However, politics also holds the potential for breaking the cycle. Social movements - from feminism and civil rights to anti-colonial struggles - are collective acts of resistance against objectification (Musto, 2021: 3). By demanding recognition and rights, these movements represent a powerful assertion of agency against the alienating and objectifying forces of the political status quo, striving to transform the public sphere into a space of authentic recognition and participation, as envisioned by Habermas (1989).

The Culture Industry: The Internalization of the Cycle

The Frankfurt School theorists provided a crucial link between economic structures and subjective experience by analyzing the "culture industry." Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) argued that in advanced capitalist societies, culture becomes a commodity, mass-produced to ensure passivity and conformity. The culture industry, they contended, does not fulfill or liberate individuals but instead prolongs their alienation in a sanitized, entertaining form. This commodified culture is a primary vehicle for objectification. It reduces individuals to *passive consumers* of pre-packaged ideas, aesthetics, and identities. As Marcuse (1964) described, it promotes "repressive desublimation," offering shallow pleasures that absorb discontent and stifle critical thought. The constant bombardment of advertising and media imagery that prizes specific forms of beauty, success, and consumption leads to "pseudo-personalization," where unique human qualities are flattened into marketable tropes. This cultural objectification leads to a profound internalized alienation, where individuals become estranged from their own desires and critical faculties, struggling to conform to idealized standards they did not set.

The Role of Public Law: A Contested Terrain

Public law occupies an ambiguous position within this cycle. It can be an instrument of objectification, for instance, when legal systems erect barriers to justice or systematically discriminate, alienating citizens from the promise of equal protection. Conversely, it is the primary institutional framework for *challenging* objectification. Robust legal frameworks that safeguard human rights, ensure privacy, and guarantee access to justice are essential for affirming human dignity and agency (Loughlin, 2010). Public law, therefore, is not a mere reflection of the cycle but a key battleground where the struggle for recognition is codified and enforced, offering a potential mechanism to interrupt the cycle's legal and political dimensions. In conclusion, the political and cultural spheres do not offer an escape from the economic cycle but rather deepen its hold. Through objectifying discourse and a commodified culture industry, they encourage individuals to internalize their own alienation. Yet, these same spheres are also

the sites of emancipatory struggle, where demands for recognition and justice can begin to break the cycle.

4. Acceleration in the Globalized Digital Age

The alienation-objectification cycle is not a static relic of industrial society but a dynamic process that has been radically intensified and globalized in the contemporary era. The intertwined forces of neoliberal globalization and digital platform capitalism have created a new, hyper-connected ecosystem in which the cycle operates with unprecedented speed, scale, and subtlety.

Globalization: Deterritorializing the Cycle

Globalization has extended the economic logic of the cycle across borders, while simultaneously creating new forms of cultural and social alienation. The outsourcing of labor to countries with lower production costs creates a "disconnection" where workers are objectified as mere instruments in a global supply chain, often alienated from the final product and brand (Harvey, 2020: 33-46). Concurrently, the global dissemination of a homogenized, often Western-centric, consumer culture can marginalize local identities and traditions, leading to a form of *cultural alienation* where individuals feel estranged from their own heritage (Vo, 2021: 160).

This cultural alienation creates a vacuum filled by the objectifying forces of the global market. Individuals are interpellated as global consumers, their identities increasingly defined by their ability to conform to market-driven ideals of beauty, success, and lifestyle (Singla, 2023: 1). The cycle is thus deterritorialized; one can be alienated by the loss of a local culture and simultaneously objectified by a global consumer culture that offers a shallow, market-based substitute for belonging.

The Digital Platform: The Factory of the 21st Century

The rise of digital media and social networking platforms represents a quantum leap in the cycle's evolution. These platforms are not neutral conduits but are themselves economic structures built on an attention-and-data extraction model (Zuboff, 2019). Users perform unpaid emotional and creative labor to generate content and social connections, a process that can be deeply alienating as authentic interaction is commodified and metricized (Verbeke & Hutzschenreuter, 2021: 606).

This digital alienation is the precondition for a pervasive new form of objectification. Users are *datafied*: reduced to bundles of data points, profiles, and predictable behaviors to be packaged and sold to advertisers. The curated self becomes a product, and the pressure to maintain a perfected "appearance" leads to intense self-objectification (Gill, 2017: 61). As Baudrillard (1994) foresaw, the "hyperreal" world of simulations - likes, followers, and filtered images - becomes more consequential than lived reality. In this environment, the failure to gain digital validation can feel like a profound personal inadequacy, deepening alienation, while the pursuit of that validation demands a constant performance that reinforces one's own objectification. The online self is both the alienated subject and the objectified product.

The Illusion of Connectivity

Paradoxically, these technologies of connection often foster deeper disconnection. The "digital overload" can lead to social isolation and a diminished capacity for face-to-face empathy, while algorithmic curation can create "echo chambers" that fracture the public sphere (Tutkal, 2022: 165). This digitally-mediated alienation makes individuals more susceptible to the objectifying pull of online hate speech, cyberbullying, and manipulative political propaganda, which thrive in environments of estrangement and anonymity.

In summary, globalization and digitalization have not created a new cycle but have supercharged the existing one. They have expanded its reach to a planetary scale, intensified its speed to the pace of a news feed, and embedded its mechanisms into the very fabric of everyday communication and selfhood, making the struggle to break free more complex and urgent than ever.

5. Discussion: Pathways for Breaking the Cycle

The pervasive and self-reinforcing cycle of alienation and objectification, as traced through the economic, political, cultural, and digital domains of contemporary society, presents a formidable social

pathology. Its power derives not from a linear sequence but from a feedback loop in which structural alienation creates a vulnerability to objectification, which in turn deepens the initial estrangement. This systemic nature dictates that the cycle cannot be broken by isolated interventions alone. Instead, confronting it requires an integrated strategy that targets its core mechanism: the denial of human agency and intrinsic dignity. The pathway forward lies in consciously cultivating a counter-cycle, one grounded in the normative frameworks of recognition and human capabilities, which can foster empowerment and dignity. A synthesis of the analysis reveals a consistent pattern. The cycle begins where structures - be they economic, political, or technological - deny individuals meaningful agency, connection, and self-determination. This state of alienation, whether experienced as powerlessness in the workplace, marginalization in the political sphere, or isolation in digital spaces, creates a void. It is into this void that objectifying forces readily expand, reducing the individual to an instrument of production, a target for consumption, a data profile, or a political pawn. This very process of being treated as a means to an end then confirms and intensifies the individual's fundamental sense of estrangement, thereby resetting and reinforcing the cycle. Understanding this recursive dynamic is crucial, for it demonstrates that efforts which only address the symptoms of alienation or objectification in one domain are likely to be undermined by the cycle's operations in another.

To dismantle this *vicious cycle*, society must actively foster its antithesis: a *virtuous cycle* of recognition and capability development. This endeavor can be powerfully guided by Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which posits that human subjectivity and agency are formed through intersubjective acknowledgment. Institutionalizing forms of social recognition presents a direct challenge to objectification. This entails, firstly, robust legal recognition that guarantees rights, dignity, and equal protection for all, thereby providing a foundational bulwark against institutional objectification. Beyond the law, it requires cultivating a culture of social esteem that values diverse contributions and identities within workplaces, communities, and online platforms, directly countering the homogenizing and objectifying forces of the culture industry. In this light, social and political movements can be understood as collective struggles for such recognition, demanding to be seen as agents rather than objects. Complementing this, Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach (2000) provides a tangible framework for evaluating and redesigning our social institutions. By shifting the focus from what people possess to what they are truly able to do and be, this approach offers a concrete benchmark for human flourishing. An economic system, a political institution, or a digital platform that systematically undermines fundamental capabilities - such as the ability to engage in critical reflection, to form meaningful social attachments, or to have control over one's environment - is, by definition, an engine of alienation and objectification. Therefore, public policy and institutional design must be oriented toward actively expanding these central human capabilities, creating conditions where individuals can exercise their agency and realize their potential.

These theoretical pathways translate into a set of practical, interdisciplinary imperatives. In the economic sphere, this means advocating for workplace democracy and job designs that foster autonomy, directly combating the alienation of labor. In the political realm, it necessitates strengthening participatory governance and protecting civil sphere to empower citizens against objectifying rhetoric and disenfranchisement. Within the digital domain, it calls for promoting digital literacy and enacting robust data governance to help users reclaim agency from architectures designed for extraction and manipulation. Concurrently, on a personal and community level, the conscious cultivation of authentic discourse, critical media consumption, and mindful technology use serves as a vital daily practice of resistance against the internalization of the cycle. In conclusion, while the vicious cycle of alienation and objectification is a powerful feature of modern life, it remains a human-made construct and is therefore susceptible to being unmade through deliberate, collective action. The task is to weave together structural reforms grounded in recognition and capabilities with individual practices of critical awareness. By doing so, we can begin to construct a social world where individuals are valued as ends in themselves, thereby breaking the cycle and paving the way for a future characterized by greater dignity, authentic agency, and meaningful connection.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the persistent social ills of alienation and objectification are not separate afflictions but are dynamically linked in a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle. This cycle finds its foundational model in the economic sphere, where alienated labor begets the objectification of the worker and the consumer. It is then amplified through political and cultural systems that reduce citizens to instruments and identities to commodities, and it is radically accelerated in the globalized digital age, where individuals are simultaneously datafied and estranged. The cross-domain persistence of this cycle demonstrates that it is a core logic of modernity, one that systematically erodes human dignity, agency, and the potential for authentic community. The critical contribution of this analysis has been to move beyond diagnosing isolated instances of alienation or objectification and to instead illuminate the synergistic relationship between them. Alienation creates a vulnerability to being objectified, and objectification, in turn, deepens the original alienation. This recursive dynamic explains the remarkable resilience of these phenomena; they perpetually renew each other within the structures of our economic, political, and digital lives.

However, to identify the cycle is also to identify the points at which it might be broken. The path forward, as this discussion has suggested, lies not in a single solution but in an integrated effort to foster a counter-cycle of recognition and capability. By building institutions - from workplaces to legal systems to digital platforms - that affirm human dignity, guarantee meaningful participation, and expand the real freedoms people enjoy, we can begin to dismantle the mechanisms of the cycle. The task is both structural and personal: to create societies that recognize individuals as ends in themselves, and to cultivate within ourselves the critical awareness and authentic connections that resist the logic of instrumentalization. The struggle against alienation and objectification is, ultimately, the struggle for a world where humanity is not a means to an end, but the only end that truly matters.

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