

# A critical review of the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation

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**Abstract:** The theory of consumption alienation in Western Marxism emerged from a specific social revolutionary context. Rooted in Marx's theory of labor alienation, scholars such as Lukács, Marcuse, and Baudrillard enriched its content from dimensions like reification, one-dimensionality, and symbolic consumption, revealing consumption alienation as an alienated phenomenon under the dominance of capital logic that deviates from genuine needs. In the contemporary era, this Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation inevitably has certain limitations and contemporary value. It needs to be viewed dialectically to maximize its role.

**Keywords:** Western Marxism consumption; Marx's alienation of labor; theoretical content; contemporary value

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Formative background

Western Marxism, as a social trend of thought formed in a specific historical context, was closely linked to socialist revolution practice and innovatively interpreted Marxist theory. The 1968 May Storm pushed it to the historical center and won wide recognition [1]. Against the background of highly developed capitalism in Western countries, consumption deviated from its original function of satisfying basic human needs and produced serious alienation. On this basis, Western scholars integrated Marx's labor alienation theory with consumption dilemmas, and thus constructed the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation [2-4].

### 1.2 Connotations

Alienation means an alien force dominating the subject, originating from Western theology and later introduced into politics. Marxism expanded it to the real world, proposing alienated labor based on Feuerbach's theory, which was elaborated in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and *Capital*. Marx held that alienated labor, the fundamental form of human essence (productive labor), has four characteristics under capitalism: workers' alienation from products, labor activity, species-being, and each other.

Consumption alienation, a Western Marxist achievement (represented by the Frankfurt School) [5], is an abnormal deviation where consumption becomes an end. In contemporary capitalist consumption-oriented societies, workers labor for higher incomes to buy commodities; material temptation intensifies their desire for goods beyond use-value to gain social hierarchy advantages. Driven by capital logic, it inverts human-thing relations, making humans appendages of consumption.

## 2 An overview of the Western theory of consumption alienation

## 2.1 Theoretical basis

Western consumption alienation theory is based on Marx's alienated labor theory proposed in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, which includes four dimensions: workers are alienated from their products (their wealth impoverishes them), labor itself (capitalist exploitation makes labor repulsive), species-being (mechanical labor stunts conscious activity), and human relations (exploitation intensifies contradictions). Marx regarded consumption as production's final stage for satisfaction; though he had no specific consumption alienation theory, his capitalist critique inspired related discussions.

## 2.2 Main content

Western consumption alienation theory is mainly represented by Lukács, Marcuse, Fromm and Baudrillard. Lukács' reification theory holds that capitalist commodity-object relations erode workers' subjectivity and foster irrational consumption. Marcuse argued that capitalists use advertising to trap people in false consumption, creating one-dimensional beings. Fromm pointed out consumption alienation stems from using individuals' attempt to prove self-worth through consumption, which is essentially conspicuous consumption. Baudrillard linked it to signs: sign-value overrides use-value, making people appendages of sign consumption. Overall, it distorts consumption's essence and hinders human all-round development.

## **3 Limitations of the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation**

We hold that the limitations of the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation can be summarized from the following three aspects.

### 3.1 A lack of in-depth understanding of the root causes of consumption alienation

Western Marxists hold that consumption alienation arises from material abundance driven by capitalist productive forces, yet attributing it simply to productive progress while ignoring capitalist private ownership — deviating from Marxism. Productive development itself is not the issue; the capitalist system's nature causes exploitation, and consumption alienation is a tool for capital accumulation. They also claim that consumption alienation delays economic crises, a view that contradicts classical Marxist theory. Capitalists accumulate primitive capital violently and extract surplus value for profits. The root of crises is the contradiction between private ownership and socialized production, manifesting in workers' insufficient consumption capacity. As long as capitalism persists, crises are inevitable.

### 3.2 Excessive neglect and even degradation of human subjectivity

Western Marxists argue that extreme reification in capitalist society leads to universal alienation and reified consciousness, making people unable to perceive their alienation, live mechanically, and lose the ability to reflect on reality (one-dimensionality). They view people as passive "machine gears", unaware of social control and consumption alienation, weakening human subjectivity — individuals passively submit to consumption alienation, with behaviors guided by advertising and blind purchases without real needs. Marxism, however, emphasizes human subjective initiative: people have rational judgment and resistance potential. Consumption alienation influences behavior, but its impact is overstated by Western Marxists, who exaggerate technology's role and undervalue human subjectivity, revealing theoretical limitations.

### 3.3 Utopian fantasies cannot be transformed into realistic practice

Utopia is merely unrealistic fantasy. Perry Anderson criticized Western Marxists for strong theoretical capacity but poor practical exploration, as their solutions to consumption alienation are utopian. They avoid examining capitalism directly, analyzing consumption alienation from non-institutional aspects and hoping to eliminate it through art and education—ideological changes cannot solve material contradictions. Henri Lefebvre shifted from optimism to pessimism,

noting "consumer-guided bureaucratic society" hinders revolution; changing only the consumption sphere is impractical.

#### **4 Contemporary significance**

I hold that the contemporary significance of the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation can be summarized from the following three aspects.

##### 4.1 Expanding the critical horizon of Marx's theory of alienation

Marx's alienation theory focuses on macro class-level alienation, while Western Marxists concentrate on individuals' daily experiences of consumption alienation. Their micro-analysis approach brings alienation critique closer to life, helping grasp new alienation forms and understand individual existential dilemmas. Western Marxist consumption alienation theory does not deviate from Marx's theory but innovates and expands it amid capitalist transformation. By integrating interdisciplinary resources and innovating methods, they shifted alienation critique from production to consumption, enriching the theory and deepening understanding of contemporary capitalism. In the era of globalization and consumerism, this expansion provides important theoretical reference for analyzing alienation and exploring human emancipation.

##### 4.2 Revealing the existing problems in contemporary society

The Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation reveals the contrast between material abundance and individual spiritual impoverishment in contemporary society. Alienation here is a subjective experience of the subject's mutation, permeating all life spheres to form a universal web of alienation. Western Marxists' core contribution is revealing new capitalist problems: spiritual impoverishment amid affluence, as rapid technological development brings material abundance but leaves people spiritually empty; and hidden unfreedom behind material abundance — apparent free consumption is manipulated by external forces, with alienation becoming a hidden domination that erodes critical consciousness. Their insight points out that contemporary suffering stems not from scarcity, but from hidden unfreedom in affluent society.

##### 4.3 Guiding the public to establish a healthy outlook on consumption

The Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation helps guide the public to establish a healthy consumption outlook [6-8]. Alienated values under consumerism, centered on capital accumulation, distort consumption from a means into an end in itself, with far-reaching negative consequences: individual spiritual emptiness and social ills like resource waste and class differentiation. A healthy consumption outlook, ecological and people-oriented, promotes green development and helps people break free from consumption alienation. By critiquing the capitalist consumer society, Western Marxists have put forward practical propositions that offer ideological resources and guidance for addressing consumption alienation and fostering rational consumption among the public [4][9].

#### **5 Conclusion**

Grounded in Marx's labor alienation theory and critical analyses of capitalist consumer society, the Western Marxist theory of consumption alienation has been enriched by scholars. It has broadened the horizon of alienation theory, revealed the contradiction between material affluence and spiritual impoverishment, and guided the formation of a healthy consumption outlook. Despite limitations — ignoring institutional roots, weakening subjectivity, and utopian paths — it offers key reference for analyzing consumption alienation and exploring human emancipation.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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