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# **Using alienation to understand the link between work and capabilities**

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# Using alienation to understand the link between work and capabilities

Simantini Mukhopadhyay<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract:**

The last five decades have witnessed sociologists formulating various scales to measure and assess the degree of alienation of workers. Critical Marxists, however, argue that de-ideologisation and value-neutrality cannot be seen as desirable properties of a reconceptualization of the Marxian notion of alienation. Most Marxist scholars are not in favour of a comparative-quantitative analysis of Marx's theory of alienation. Nevertheless, Sen situates Marx's theory in the category of those which carry out "realization-focused comparison" (as opposed to "transcendental institutionalism"), by comparing societies that actually exist or may evolve. This paper articulates the need for an operationalization of the concept of alienation in empirical terms and calls for a meaningful dialogue the capability approach to meaningful work and the emerging and significant body of literature on alienation and capabilities. This paper argues that alienation, translated to the capability vocabulary as "impairments in responsible agency to attain the capabilities one has reason to value" may also be

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mapped onto failed social relationships. Even when we do not limit the concept of alienation to the system-anti-system binary, we need to understand it in the context of the failures of economic institutions existing in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** alienation, capabilities, work, agency

**JEL Classification:** B14, B51, O15, J08

## 1. Introduction

Albeit Joseph Schumpeter regarded the distinction between productive and unproductive labour as passé (“a dusty museum piece”: Schumpeter 1954: p.628), debates and discussions in Economics continue to hover around it (Montani 1987; Mazzucatto 2018; Perrotta 2018). Adam Smith used the terms ‘productive labour’ and ‘useful labour’ interchangeably and anything which did not add to the annual produce (or ‘wealth’) of the nation was considered unproductive (Smith 1776). John Stuart Mill, recognizing that ‘unproductive’ did not mean ‘useless’, still regarded productive labour as labour that contributed to the production of wealth (Mill 1844). The advent of the marginal utility theory obliterated the need for a distinction between productive and unproductive labour. All labour that produced goods which were useful and scarce (in other words, ‘economic goods’) was productive labour. These included both ‘means of production’ and ‘durable sources of enjoyment’ (Marshall 1890:56; Montani, 1987). Alfred Marshall, however, cautioned that the use of the phrase ‘productive labour’ was to be eschewed, since it was ‘a slippery term’ (Marshall 1890:56).

Studies using the capability approach have advocated for a shift from productivity to substantive freedoms that human beings

have reason to value or capabilities as the evaluative space for the assessment of labour market regulations and policies (Dean et al 2005; Bonvin 2012; Weidel 2018; McGranahan 2020). A recent article by Bueno (2022) argues that the regard for productive labour in Classical Economics guides modern day labour policies, both at national and international levels. Using the capability approach, he attempts to assuage the misplaced focus on prioritization of productive labour over unproductive labour. Likewise, Bonvin (2012) highlights that both opportunity and process aspects of freedom need to be considered as the informational basis in judging how just a labour policy is. To articulate the process aspect of freedom in the context of work, he argues that individuals as workers must have the capability for voice. Arguing that the crucial difference is that between “capability-enhancing” and “capability-reducing” work, Bueno (2022) questions if the existence of a market for labour should be the sole normative criterion to determine its usefulness. He systematically summarises the capability literature and points out that there may be three ways in which work may be related to capabilities, namely: “capabilities *through* work, capabilities *in* work and capabilities *for* work” (Bueno 2022: 358).

Agreeing with these studies on the importance of using the capability approach to define useful work, particularly from the standpoint of local and global labour policies, this paper argues that the Marxian notion of alienation of labour may be an entry point in theorizing the link between capability and labour – labour cannot be self-fulfilling or capability-enhancing if there is alienation. A recent study by Weidel (2018) refers to the omission of “a central facet of Marx’s image of truly dignified humans: the importance of meaningful labor” in Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities as a serious limitation, without using alienation as the analytical frame. Bueno (2022), refers to Weidel (2018) but presupposes the alienation narrative and silences it to sever the links with Marx. Mere allusion to Karl Marx’s critique of the idea of productive labour in classical

economics places his problematic at odds with Nussbaum's exposition of capabilities, firmly rooted in the ideas of Aristotle through Marx. Again, McGranahan (2020) extends the ideas of Weidel (2018) and points out that the capability approach must study the ownership and management structures of businesses to address the issue of meaningfulness at work.

Studies have discussed how the idea of alienation may be translated to the vocabulary of the capability approach (Bagchi 1999; 2000; Gangas 2014; Mukhopadhyay 2019). This paper discusses the possibilities of using such a translation while wielding the capability approach to explore the links between work and substantive freedoms and also to assess the strengths and limitations of labour policy. Acknowledging the extreme complexities inherent in the notion of alienation and the practical difficulties in operationalizing the concept in actually observed empirical contexts, it analyses the studies which have attempted to delineate the ways to do so. The paper argues that the discourse on alienation with its recent interesting turns and that on work and capability need to engage in a meaningful dialogue, since they may be addressing similar questions in an isolated way.

Both orthodox conceptions of alienation and those processed through capabilities are elided in the studies exploring the links between work and capabilities (Dean et al 2005; Bonvin 2012; Weidel 2018; McGranahan 2020), while they actually constitute the implicit groundwork and may anchor the extension of the capability approach to study the work-capability links. Moreover, the shift from the distinction between productive and unproductive work to that between capability-enhancing and capability-reducing work which these studies call for, needs a greater articulation of the foundations of capabilities. Discerning moments of alienation that are implicit or residual in these works, the paper expounds how the alienation narrative is presumed but left unmentioned, possibly because Sen's theory places a

high importance on freedom of transaction in the labour market.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that the capability approach to work and alienation needs to draw from both Marxian narratives and sociological methods, even in the face of the orthodox and critical Marxist position that de-ideologisation and value-neutrality cannot be seen as desirable properties of a reconceptualization of alienation, since under such a guise the dominating values of a capitalist system are validated (Musto 2021). Recent works using the lens of capability to study alienation argue that such strong “system-anti-system” duality in Marxist thought, focusing exclusively on the problems of the capitalist system, has rendered the notion of alienation powerless in policy making by stripping off its explanatory strength (Gangas 2014). Even in the writings of some Marxist scholars, we find the attempt to define the “unalienated” or “universal” man in terms of certain observable and objective conditions (Schaff 1980).

While Section 2 summarises the discourse on alienation, Section 3 discusses how the notion of alienation has been reinvented in the capability literature. Despite such reinvention, Section 4 expounds how recent advances in the capability literature on the question of work have eschewed a dialogue with the alienation narrative, both traditional and recent. Section 5 concludes the discussion pointing out the usefulness of such a dialogue, particularly from the standpoint of global and local labour policies.

## **2. Alienation: Traditional and Newer Approaches**

While labour is treated as pain (and leisure as pleasure) in standard economic approaches to welfare, Marx makes a crucial

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2. Sen (1999) categorically distinguishes Marx from the precapitalist, anti-market radical thinkers and points out that Marx approved of the freedom of employment offered by the capitalist society. Both Sen and Nussbaum draw heavily from Aristotle, Smith, and Marx in their conception of substantive human freedoms.

departure by regarding labour as self-expression of human beings, by which they modify the external world (Chakraborty 1995). Marx regards “free, conscious activity” as the “species-character” of human beings, distinct from animal functions like eating, drinking and procreation. The human being in a capitalist society is *alienated* or *estranged* from this species-character. Marx constructed the concept of “alienation” in his earlier writings (mostly *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (1845–1847)), while translating the Hegelian notion of dialectics from the realm of ideas to that of political economy. “Alienation”, in Marxian terms, is understood as a complete lack of connection (Mukhopadhyay 2019) between a human being and the product of her labour, the process of production, the inanimate nature, her own species being and other human beings.

Marx ([1844] 2010: 281) notes that in capitalism, “realization of labour appears as a loss of realization for the workers, objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation, and private property as “the material, summary expression of alienated labour.” Human beings are defined in terms of the “exclusive sphere of activity” — “a hunter,” “a fisherman,” “a shepherd,” or “a critical critic” (Marx and Engels 1845-47: p 47). However, communism would end alienation and empower people to “to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Marx and Engels 1845-47: p 47).

A section of scholars of Marxism, the most prominent among them being Louis Althusser, argued that there was an “epistemological break” in the writings of Marx in 1846, following which Marx became silent on and even disowned his idea of alienation (Bell, 1959; Althusser 1965; Cowling 2006). However, a larger and stronger section including Althusser in his later works (Althusser



2006) contends that even the mature Marx's writings on capital are founded on his earlier ideas of species being, human nature and alienation (Ollman 1971; Geras 1983; Musto 2021). Bagchi (1999) claims that even Sen does not believe in any such epistemological break and draws profusely from the writings of both early and late Marx. Nevertheless, both schools ironically agreed on one thing – comparative-quantitative analysis of Marx's theory of alienation was not to be conducted (Archibald 1978; Musto 2021).

Marx's proposed solution to the problem of alienation seems to be utopian to many. In communism (and only in communism), human beings would have such "control and conscious mastery" over the domineering powers that controlled them and were alien to them (Marx and Engels 1845-47: p 51). Mill (1879: 744) wrote, "[c]ommunists generally propose that all should work by turns at every kind of labour. But this involves an almost complete sacrifice of the economic advantages of the division of employment". The explanatory power of the concept of alienation has probably not been harnessed fruitfully in empirical and policy research because its "remedies" are often considered "outside the feasible set" (Archibald 1992).

In the 1960's the concept of alienation gained a lot of traction in academic debates and became the subject of numerous books and journal articles, so much so that Musto (2021) writes, "alienation thus became an empty formula ranging right across the spectrum of human unhappiness—so all-encompassing that it generated the belief that it could never be modified" (p. 22). Nonetheless, the famously ambiguous concept of alienation has both normative and descriptive connotations. As Archibald (1978) notes, "[o]n one level of abstraction alienation does indeed mean the separation of the individual from his or her human potential, but on another it connotes an empirically identifiable feature of his or her relationship to work and other individuals".

Assuming that alienation or estrangement is a conscious experience, works in sociology have constructed various scales to measure the intensity of alienation resulting from newer forms of exploitation that accompany technological progress. Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) summarise the literature in sociology and psychology on the measurement of alienation and show that studies have attempted to assess the degree of alienation of children in schools, teachers in schools, workers in public and private corporations and also in jokes, hospitals and prisons. Several indices were formulated for the empirical assessment of alienation. Srole's Anomia Scale (Srole 1956), for instance, included five items, namely

1. Nowadays, a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself.
2. In spite of what some people say, the lot (situation/condition) of the average man is getting worse, not better.
3. It's hardly fair to bring a child into the world with the way things look for the future.
4. Most public officials (people in public office) are not really interested in the problems of the average man.
5. These days a person doesn't really know whom he can count on.

A binary response (yes/no) was collected on each item and a composite score was calculated. The anomia rating was higher for a greater number of "yes" responses. A number of scales have been built ever since, typically with a much larger set of items, using more sophisticated statistical methods of arriving at a composite score (see Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) and Nair and Vohra (2009) for an extensive summary). Nair and Vohra's recent study specifically constructed a scale for measuring alienation in work, administering it to management executives from India. They used the following eight items after

testing their validity using exploratory factor analysis:

1. I do not enjoy my work
2. Facing my daily tasks is a painful and boring experience
3. Work to me is more like a chore or burden
4. I feel estranged/disconnected from myself
5. I often wish I were doing something else
6. Over the years I have become disillusioned about my work
7. I do not feel like putting in my best effort at work
8. I do not feel connected to the events in my workplace

A Likert scale from 1 to 7 was used as responses, in the increasing order of agreement. The alienation score was the simple sum of the scores on each item, for the ease of interpretation.

Most of the later applied works drew on the original framework proposed by Seeman (1959), who defined “alienated work” as “work which is not intrinsically satisfying (p 31)”. Seeman (1959) identified five domains in which the consequences of alienation were manifested, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, and anomie or normlessness. Seeman, who used the ideas of Marx, Durkheim, Mannheim and Weber to construct this framework, was however criticised by even the school which believed in Marx’s life-long adherence to the notion of alienation (Ollman 1971; Archibald 1978). Musto (2021) notes that instead of looking into alienation from the vantage point of social relations, such works of mainstream American sociology considered alienation a problem of the individual human being. In this version, alienation affected human consciousness and was linked to the system of industrial production, capitalist or socialist. Moreover, the solution to such alienation depended on the coping capacity of the individual, not on collective efforts to change the existing social order. Marxist theorists argued that this approach led to “hyperpsychologisation”

of the notion of alienation and undermined the historical and social factors which were the real causes of alienation (Schweitzer 1996; Musto 2021).

Sociologists highlight another problem of measuring alienation in terms of self-reports of its signs or dimensions is that in presence of structural alienation, workers may be unaware of the degree of alienation in work. They may even say that they are satisfied with their jobs (Erikson 1985).

Rahel Jaeggi's recent and influential work on alienation distinguishes between two types of theorizations of alienation, namely the Hegelian/Marxist and the existentialist (Jaeggi 2014). While the former makes an exposition in terms of the flaws of a capitalist society, the latter understands alienation as a psychological or even spiritual malaise. Jaeggi critiques both strands of theory as essentialist, paternalist and objectivist. Previous notions of alienation, she argued, presupposed a notion of *the good* (what was good for human beings could be objectively determined) based on the inherent properties of human nature. Nevertheless, modern notions of morality and liberalitarian principles are rooted in the idea that an individual should be able to choose how she should live her life. Thus, alienation theories that are based on "objective perfectionist ideals" claim to "know better" and are paternalist. It would thus be perfectly possible for a person to be subjectively satisfied while being integrated into relations of objective alienation, something which according to a section of Marxist scholars may be due to "a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood" (Herbert Marcuse, cited in Jaeggi 2014). Jaeggi's formulation gets rid of this problem and also the poststructural critique of the subject by starting from the position that the self is not something *given* to the individuals and self-relations are *fluid and constructed*. Individuals are capable of differentiating between success and failure in the process of appropriating themselves and the external world. Jaeggi is thus opposed to the

idea of deriving a list of essential, objective criteria that would determine the good life. She is even critical of Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities (Jaeggi 2014: p. 30).

Jaeggi's conceptualization of alienation does not characterise human nature in terms of distinct aspirations. It is laid out on a parsimonious foundation drawn from a notion of freedom "that looks to the functional conditions of human willing and of executing what we will" (Honneth 2014: p. ix). Alienation occurs because of the diminishing probability of being able to appropriate (or make one's own) one's own self or the external world. It is thus an impairment of willingness to appropriate one's own desires or social roles. Moreover, Jaeggi's framework, unlike some of the psychological models, does not limit the scope of social analysis since the impairment of willingness can be traced back to failed social relationships (Jaeggi 2014; Honneth 2014).

Jaeggi (2014) draws from Tugendhat's principles of modern ethical theory seeking to define the good life. First, individuals cannot be denied their autonomy and interpretive sovereignty. Also, it should be possible to evaluate and compare well-being, irrespective of the person's actual perceptions. Tugendhat provides an "unproblematic" definition of psychological health in terms of the functional capacity of willing and its impairment (Tugendaht, cited in Jaeggi 2014). Jaeggi formulates alienation as obstacles in volition which render a person relationless with oneself and the external world. She traces such a conception of alienation to its Hegelian roots – "becoming a person for Hegel means 'putting one's will into something,' and that also means giving oneself specific properties by willing something in the world. In such a relation to the world, the person first realises herself as a person, and in that her freedom first becomes concrete" (Jaeggi 2014: p.148).

### 3. Alienation in the Capability Approach

This paper shows that newer conceptions of alienation and the capability approach to work have addressed similar questions without speaking to each other. Schaff (1980), for instance, defines “unalienation” in terms of “all-sided development of man’s capabilities and skills.” Rahel Jaeggi’s formulation of alienation draws from Isaiah Berlin’s conception of positive freedom and contends that this freedom connotes not only the absence of coercion in the external world, but also the “capacity to realise valuable ends” (Jaeggi 2014: p. 35). She defines alienation as a loss or obstruction of this positive freedom. Sen too refers to Isaiah Berlin (along with T.H. Green) and formulates his understanding of “positive freedom” as an individual’s “ability to do the things in question, *taking everything into account* (including external restraints as well as internal limitations)” (original emphasis, Sen 2002: p. 286). One may find an analogy between Sen’s focus on capabilities of individuals to “to lead the kind of lives *they value-and have reason to value*” (Sen 1999: p. 18, emphasis mine) and Jaeggi’s “ability to will in a free or *self-determined* manner” (Jaeggi 2014: p 34, emphasis mine). It is to be noted here that both Jaeggi and Sen discard the formulation of a complete list of central, objective criteria for the good life, based on an essentialist idea of human nature. Impediments in such volition or willing constitute alienation in Jaeggi’s terms and this paper translates it to the vocabulary of the capability approach as obstruction of responsible agency to attain the capabilities that one values. This is an improvement over Bagchi’s definition of Marx’s notion of alienation to the language of the capability approach as “a systematic failure to attain the functionings a human being requires to be fully human” (Bagchi 2000: 4418), since it no longer hinges on an understanding of human nature.

Links between alienation and capability can be traced back to Lukes (1967), who pointed out the overuse of the term “alienation” to connote myriad forms of disenchantment and emphasised the need to go back to its origin. His later work (Lukes 2005: p. 117)

seems to address this need, when he writes,

What, as Marx might have put the question, are the preconditions for human beings to live in a truly human way? What this question asks for is an account of the material and social circumstances that must obtain to enable people to live lives that meet certain normative standards: lives fit for human beings, who are treated and treat one another as ends, have equal dignity and an equal entitlement to shape their own lives, making their own choices and developing their gifts in reciprocal relations with others. The most promising contemporary attempt to work out such an account is the so-called ‘capabilities approach’.

Recognising that Marxian narratives of alienation often fail to identify the “intermediate levels of normativity” between the extremes of “system” and “anti-system”, as a consequence of which the interpretation of alienation becomes “further removed from the explanatory and policy-building function”, Gangas (2014) too proposes a reconstruction of the concept using the capability approach noting Marx’s contention in *Grundrisse*: “the capability to consume is a condition of consumption, hence its primary means, and this capability is the development of an individual potential, a force of production” (Marx, 1993 [1857–1858]: 711).

Interestingly, Gangas (2014) makes a point similar to the recent works in the Marxist discourse (Musto 2021, for instance) and points out that the alienation narrative has been unnecessarily fragmented under non-intersecting and diverse banners of reactionary social theory, critical theory, existential philosophy, psychoanalysis and philosophical anthropology. In *Future of Alienation*, Richard Schacht proposed that the prospect of alienation would have to be searched in value theory and quality of life theory (Schacht, 1994: 141). Extending that argument, Gangas (2014) pointed out that a better conceptual tool for

conceptualizing alienation was offered by Sen and Nussbaum's understanding of human capabilities. Gangas (2014) looks at "alienation" as capability deprivation since the concept of capability, though normatively robust, "is less burdened with the 'essentialist' load it carried for Hegel or Marx (as, for instance, in theories of 'human needs' or of 'human potential')". While alienation conceptually rests on negation, capability, being more open, provides a greater potential for being used in empirical analysis and policy. Moreover, the thrust of the capability approach on agency as empowerment ensures that its normative core may be mapped onto the Marxian notions of alienation and resistance, while simultaneously "lowering the bar in terms of the latter's overly ambitious explanations of social problems (Gangas 2014: p. 69)." The capability approach allows contestations against inequality, violence, deprivation and exclusion from a firm normative core, even without adhering to "transcendental proofs or to revolutionary agency" (ibid, p. 57). This is a point that many capabilities theorists (Nussbaum and Weidel in particular) would agree with and find relevant.

Gangas (2014) also revisits the categories of alienation built in the works of American sociology, particularly in the lines of Seeman (1959) and translates the five dimensions to the vocabulary of the capability approach. Powerlessness connotes not having the capability to exercise control over one's material and political environment. Meaninglessness is deprivation of the capability of affiliation and sociability. Normlessness relates to lack of capabilities of practical reason. Likewise, estrangement and social isolation may be related to the lack of human connection (Mukhopadhyay 2020) and the capability to choose the type of life one has reason to value. Such a conception of alienation as capability deprivation thus does not call for explanatory essentialism based on certain fixed and given categories. Gangas (2014) highlights the importance of partial orderings along with the emphasis on the freedom to choose multiple identities in Sen's theorization.



### **3.1. Work as Capability-Enhancement and Freedom from Alienation**

Chakraborty (2003) proposed that Nussbaum's "thick, vague conception" of human essence could be improved by explicitly recognizing "the centrality of 'free, conscious labour' as put forward by Marx". This section highlights how the alienation narrative, has been ubiquitous, though silenced in later works using the capability approach to link capabilities, work and meaningful work. We also discuss how existing studies in this area (Bonvin 2012; Weidel 2018; McGranahan 2020; Bueno 2022) may be complemented with the recent alienation narratives, both for strengthening the normative core and for empirical applications. Alienation, defined as hindrances in responsible agency to attain the capability for meaningful work, may serve as an entry point in theorizing the links between work and capability.

Bonvin (2012) made a systematic attempt to pose the capability approach as the ideal normative frame to formulate and assess labour policies. "Capability for work" (the capability to choose the job that a person has reason to value) and "capability for voice" (capability to participate effectively in collective decision making) are proposed as the information basis for judging the justness of labour market regulations. The idea of capability for work (real freedom to choose the job one has reason to value) resonates with the Marxian idea of a person being able to engage in multiple chosen activities in a society without alienation.

While speaking for the plurality of the informational basis of judgment in justice, the study advocates that collective decision making must not be held in a top-down mode, so that specific functionings are not imposed on the individual labourer. This maybe directly mapped onto the crucial idea of freedom from alienation in the process of work. Bonvin (2012) contends that process freedom needs to be promoted while stressing on the attainment of capability for work and capability for voice. Acknowledging that a job may be a disutility for a person, the

capability approach would focus on the possibility of transforming it to something the worker has reason to value. Workers must have “the capability to participate effectively in the definition of the work content, organization, conditions, modes of remuneration, etc” (Bonvin 2012: p. 15). While these may be excellent principles for capability-focused labour policy, there is no clear exposition of its empirical operationalization. This paper proposes that to fill this gap one may consider using an already existing and valid alienation scale like the eight-item scale developed by Nair and Vohra (2009).

The most important work trying to link capabilities and labour, going back to the Marxian origins, is perhaps by Weidel (2018), who points out that Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities crucially excludes Marx’s idea of meaningful labour, without which leading a dignified life would be impossible. While Nussbaum’s list of central capabilities draws heavily on Marx’s ideas, she cautiously distances herself from any metaphysical conception of human nature. She mentions that her work uses Marx for political purposes only (Nussbaum 2006:74). However, Weidel claims that the full connotations of Marx’s species being have been elided in Nussbaum’s work. Under “control over one’s environment” she includes “having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others” as a central human capability (Nussbaum 2000). Weidel (2018) points out that this capability “offers the person not even the remotest sense of labour worthy of a truly human person” (p.77). He thus suggests the inclusion of the capability to engage in meaningful labour as a central human capability. To wit, this is the capability to “freely and successfully pursue an avenue by which a person can engage in meaningful labour, interacting with some aspect of nature (as well as other human beings) in a way that develops their faculties, utilises practical reasoning, and provides them with a sense of dignity” (p 79). He suggests two strategies to achieve this practically – the conditions for paid work must be made better and paid work itself should be made less necessary. This paper notes that how

far these strategies are effective can be assessed and compared with alienation scales of the kind developed by Nair and Vohra (2009). Weidel (2018) notes, “[W]hile Nussbaum has moved in the direction of recognizing and appropriately incorporating a Marxian-influenced capability for meaningful labour, she has not gone far enough” (p.79). This paper extends that argument and suggests that Weidel (2018) too does not go far enough in exploring the potential of harnessing the idea of alienation for operationalizing the capability approach in the context of labour, particularly for the assessment and evaluation of labour policies. Weidel maps the Marxian idea of species being onto Sen’s notion of human freedom in deriving the importance of meaningful labour, but fails to connect it to the notion of alienation that is being parallelly reinvented so creatively in capability research. This paper extends Weidel’s thesis and argues that “unalienation” in the capability vocabulary would correspond to the capability to engage in meaningful work. Interestingly, Weidel (2018) only makes a passing reference to alienated labour as undignified labour in Nussbaum’s parlance and ascribes the ideation of species being to the early Marx. He fails to note that the alienation narrative can be traced throughout the continuum of Marx’s works (discussed in detail in Section 2 of this paper).

Though the discussion by McGranahan (2020) of the paper by Weidel (2018) does not acknowledge alienation as the analytical frame, it is perhaps the clearest advance towards integrating the Marxian notion of alienation or “unalienation” as defined by future scholars using the capability approach regarding the question of labour. It is shown that to accept meaningful work as a precondition for leading a dignified life, one needs to critically examine the structure of ownership and management of businesses in which the workers are engaged. Conventional business enterprises under the capitalist system are “centrally planned autocracies, even when they populate a free market” (p. 3). Both conventional capitalist firms and conventional socialist firms are owned, governed, and managed by non-workers. Three

real-world examples of alternative, unconventional employment are discussed, namely the Yugoslav worker-managed firm, the employee stock ownership plans and worker cooperatives. Ownership, governance and management are in control of workers only in the case of worker cooperatives. McGranahan (2020) argues that high inequality in the distribution of capital erodes human capabilities. Private ownership of major productive assets in the hands of a few capitalists reduces political and economic freedom and increases inequality in all spheres. Indeed, John Rawls, who has a major influence on Sen and Nussbaum, argues that a “property-owning democracy”, where capital ownership itself is distributed, is the single acceptable version of capitalism (Rawls 2001). Again, democracy in the workplace is shown to have a synergistic effect on other human capabilities. Although McGranahan (2020) does not explicitly refer to alienation as the analytical frame, it actually synthesises the alienation narrative with the capability approach in stating that promoting democratic, employee-owned firms as the ideal model of business should be an agenda of the capability approach. Note the reference to the excerpt from John Dewey’s 1930 book *Individualism Old and New*.

Most of those who are engaged in the outward work of production and distribution of economic commodities have no share—imaginative, intellectual, emotional—in directing the activities in which they physically participate. ... it is still impossible to foresee in detail what would happen if a system of cooperative control of industry were generally substituted for the present system of exclusion. There would be an enormous liberation of mind, and the mind thus set free would have constant direction and nourishment.

By invoking this description in Dewey (1930), McGranahan (2020) essentially integrates the alienation narrative within the capability approach. Indeed, there is a lot of romanticism around employee-owned firms. Sauser (2009) notes that in

such a business model, employees are no longer mere inputs into the process of production. They are now recognised to have value and potential and can act as responsible agents. Unions would need to make workers conscious about self-management and democratic practices and would have to assume the transformational role so that there is freedom from alienation. This paper argues that alienation scales may be used to assess capability for meaningful work in alternative ownership and management structures. Such exercises would perhaps strengthen McGranahan's position that the capability approach should push for employee-owned democratic businesses.

The most recent attempt to link work and capabilities is that by Bueno (2022), which calls for replacing the distinction between productive and unproductive work with that between capability-enhancing and capability-reducing work, particularly from the standpoint of local and global labour policy. However, though Bueno (2022) refers to Weidel (2018) and McGranahan (2020), it fails to integrate the discussion of capability-enhancing work with the Marxian idea of meaningful work through the end (or reduction) of alienation. This paper attempts to winnow out the alienation narrative which is tacit in Bueno's own account.

The idea of "capability through work", following the classification in Bueno (2022), is quite straightforward — work which is paid for is capability-enhancing since income enables a person to achieve higher levels of functionings, though one needs to account for the social constraints in the conversion of income to functionings. It can be shown that both "capabilities through work" and "capabilities for work" call for freedom from alienation in Marxian terms. The idea of "capabilities in work" seems to mimic the Marxian idea of labour as free, conscious activity for the expression of the self. Nussbaum seems to translate the Marxian idea of species being to the language of the capability approach and writes of "a higher threshold, the level at which a person's capability becomes what Marx called 'truly human,'

that is, worthy of a human being” (Nussbaum 2000: p. 31). Moreover, “work, to be a truly human mode of functioning, ..., must involve being able to behave as a thinking being, not just a cog in a machine; and it must be capable of being done with and toward others in a way that involves mutual recognition of humanity (p. 82). While Bueno (2022) refers to Weidel’s addition to Nussbaum’s list, he does not recognise that the notion of alienation may be the crucial entry point in theorizing the link between work and capabilities.

Bueno uses capability to address meaningful work. While he refers to slavery as an example (ibid: p.359), he does not acknowledge that meaninglessness at work is the defining feature of Marx’s notion of alienation from the human potential, which Marx gleaned also empirically from the factory inspector’s reports in the chapters on the Working Day in Capital Vol. I. Marx notes that the labourer is reduced to labour-power, whose disposable time is devoted to the self-sustained expansion of capital. “Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free-play of his bodily and mental activity, even the rest time of Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarians!) — moonshine!” (Marx 1867).

When Bueno addresses the risk of “instrumentalizing human beings to generate social outputs” (ibid: p. 361) in an exercise to evaluate the impact of work on the capabilities of others in the society, he implicitly acknowledges the relevance of an alienation narrative to understand such instrumentalization. Yet he attributes to capability approach a cautious stance that would not undermine the choices of what people want to produce in a free market economy.

Moreover, the idea of socially capability-enhancing work also resonates with Marx’s idea of social man – with the abolition of private property (and alienation of labour), “the senses and

enjoyment of other men have become my own appropriation. Besides these direct organs, therefore, social organs develop in the form of society; thus, for instance, activity in direct association with others, etc., has become an organ for expressing my own life, and a mode of appropriating human life” (Marx, [1844] 2010). Bueno even refers to “capability deprivation” (2022: 363) and to potential “human losses occasioned by unemployment” (Weidel in Bueno 2022: 363). Again, the reference to Veltman’s dimensions of meaningful work that include honour and pride, personal or social purpose and connection of a worker to “an environmental or relational context with which she deeply identifies” (Veltman in Bueno 2022: 360) seems to be restating the alienation narrative. As discussed in Section 2, alienation scales attempt to capture similar dimensions of connection in work.

Finally, Bueno (2022) highlights the thrust of the existing labour policies on full and productive employment and calls for wider acceptance of the capability approach to labour law. Common critiques of this are also mentioned: the goals specified by the capability approach do not lead to any well-defined programmes. Moreover, it merely restates the already existing labour rights in developed economies. Integration of the alienation narrative with the capability approach may fill these gaps by strengthening the normative imperative which Bueno implicitly operationalises when he bifurcates productive labour to serve capabilities or to undermine them. More emphatically even, “the waste of human potential in terms of capabilities” (2022: 367) is a straightforward anchoring on Marx’s idea of the alienation from human potential. This paper posits that Bueno’s argument needs to be engaged with the newer conceptions of alienation as capability deprivation within the realm of labour. The definition of alienation that we put forth, namely the obstruction of responsible agency to attain the capability for meaningful work, may guide the capability approach to labour law and policy.

#### 4. Conclusion

The capability approach argues that labour policy should be sensitive to the fact that increases in labour productivity may have differing effects on the capabilities of others in the society. For instance, the invention of the tractor boosted the availability of food by reducing production costs, which in turn may enhance the capability for being well-nourished (provided the distributional issues are taken care of). It simultaneously increased the capability for recreation of some by reducing work-time. However, production of pesticides would have similar impact on food availability and leisure. Though productivity-focused approaches to labour policy would stop here, the capability approach would further look into the effect of pesticide production on the access to unpolluted water and the capability for good health (Bueno 2022). Further, it would also assess if the gains in economic efficiency would offset the costs in terms of losses in capability caused by unemployment (Weidel 2015). To make such arguments convincingly for shaping labour policy at global and local levels, the normative imperative needs to be laid out more firmly. As Sen (1999: p.254) argues, policy thinking needs to recognise “evident injustice in preventable deprivation”, without searching for a “complete ordering over choices.” For this we would arguably need a revisable list of central capabilities. This paper proposes that Weidel’s addition of capability for meaningful labour to Nussbaum’s list may be interpreted as the capability for unalienation. Such an interpretation would not only fortify the moral foundation, but also aid empirical applications, given the already existing huge body of work on the assessment of alienation in work.

Sen (2009) distinguishes between two distinct approaches to the question of justice in moral philosophical discourse. The first, namely “transcendental institutionalism”, focuses on defining perfectly just (*the just*) institutional arrangements, without attempting to compare actually existing societies as *more unjust* or *less unjust*. He places Immanuel Kant and John Rawls in this



group of theorists. Sen, however, places Marx in the second group of theorists (comprising Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Mary Wollstonecraft among others) who were in favour of “realization-focused comparison”, distancing themselves from a transcendental search for the perfectly just society. They were engaged in “comparisons of societies that already existed or could feasibly emerge”. This strengthens our argument that an operational notion of alienation (as opposed to that reinforcing the system-anti-system binary) translated to the vocabulary of the capability approach may actually inform and guide policy thinking in the context of labour (Sen 2009: p7).

As this paper argues, Sen’s theory can accommodate alienation, particularly in its newer interpretations such as Rahel Jaeggi’s, since his theory allows one to map the impairments in responsible agency to attain the capabilities one has reason to value onto failed social relationships. Even when we do not limit the concept of alienation to the system-anti-system binary, we need to understand it in the context of the failures of economic institutions existing in the contemporary world. As Bagchi (2000) notes, the normative thrust of Sen’s analysis is compromised since his theory is not situated in the context of actually existing capitalist institutions. He imploringly asks, “even if we ignore all other problems associated with an assetless person’s freedom to engage in wage labour is it a good thing for all the poor women of the world to be thrown on the world market and compete for near-starvation wages (p. 4412)?” Bagchi (1999) draws from Hegel, Marx and Keynes and shows that the sum-total of individual actions may lead to consequences that nobody intended. Since Sen remains silent on the salience of his “micro-solutions” in the macro context (p. 4413), it is left open for those endorsing his position to situate his analysis in actual national and global contexts. Thus, to argue for the achievement of substantive freedoms or unalienation, one would have to first clarify which aspects of the existing economic order are to be considered given and which ones are to be challenged.

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