

# **Alienation and the Human Interaction with Food:**

An Exploration of Marx's Concept of Alienation and its  
manifestations in the modern production and consumption of  
food

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the philosophical concept of alienation as formulated by Karl Marx with the aim of both clarifying the term and applying it to our modern interactions with food. Alienation is uncovered as a state of being in which human beings are reduced to something less than what their essence suggests they ought to be. For the purpose of application to the human interaction with food, essence is cashed out in Marxian terms. Doing so suggests that the modern industrial production and consumption of food is a realm dominated by alienation and alienated interactions. However, industrial production and consumption do not completely dominate our modern interactions with food. Many non-industrial interactions with food turn out to be unalienated interactions. The analysis as a whole reveals alienation as a viable candidate for explaining what is wrong with our modern industrial interactions with food and what is causing the numerous food related problems manifest in society such as disordered eating, diet crazes, obesity and the spread of food born illnesses.

**Note to the Reader**

About five years ago I began seriously thinking about food and ethics; that is, I began thinking about what we eat and what we should eat. It began with a conviction that there was something wrong about eating an animal when I did not believe that I could have personally killed the one that I was about to consume. My interest in what I personally should or, I suppose to put it more accurately, what I could justify eating branched out from there. The question of what we should eat brought me to such books as *Hope's Edge*, *Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Fast Food Nation*. These books expressed the same sort of conviction that I had when I initially realized the hypocrisy in my own act of consuming meat that I could not myself have obtained. Like me, they only pointed to the fact that there seemed to be something wrong with such interactions. The authors of these books spoke of children dying from E.coli that was spread due to a seeming lack of concern, food becoming the same in all regions of the world and having to go on journeys just to figure out where food even comes from. None of them pointed to what was wrong; they simply implied that there was something wrong with the way that modern people choose to interact with food and what to eat. My search for a general rule that would suggest to me how and what to eat turned into a search for what was truly wrong with our current interactions with food. The following project has aided me in answering this question and I hope that it will aid you as well.

## Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, Marx criticized both Hegel and Feuerbach's philosophical elaboration of the term 'alienation' for being applied too narrowly. According to him, Hegel had been too narrow in limiting self-alienation to the alienation of consciousness rather than to the whole person. Similarly, Feuerbach limits alienation to religious alienation whereas Marx "stressed that the religious alienation of [humans] is only one among many forms of [human] self-alienation" (Edwards, 1967). As such, Marx expands upon the philosophical concept of alienation in suggesting that it applies to various other spheres of human existence. Through his assorted works, Marx managed to examine and point out the alienation manifest in many of the major spheres of human life, including economics, politics, religion and more. Despite Marx's contribution in pointing out the pervasiveness of alienation in human existence, particularly in these fields, he has written precious little regarding the underlying concept of alienation from which he generated these descriptions. Furthermore, what little he does offer is rather vague and confusing. Thus, the first aim of this paper is to disambiguate the term 'alienation' as Marx intended it so that his statements regarding alienation and its application can be better understood.

Through this analysis we will come to find that alienation is the state of being in which humans are reduced to something less than they potentially could be. As such, they are cut off from the reality of their whole person. This state of comparative worthlessness results from alienated activity which denies some essential part of human

nature either directly by failing to recognize the natural physical, spiritual and social needs of humans or indirectly by reducing human beings to their products, be they widgets or even thoughts.<sup>1</sup> Contrarily, an unalienated state of being is one in which people are fully human and can recognize their unique relationship to nature, others and themselves. Similar to alienation, the state of being unalienated is the result of unalienated activity, which acknowledges the whole person. This type of activity meets all of the natural human needs and acknowledges every part of the person as fundamental; she is not reduced to her products.

Demystifying Marx's concept of alienation puts us in a position where we can search out manifestations of alienation for ourselves in places that Marx did not comment on. One major sphere of interest which Marx did not comment on is the one involving our interaction with food.<sup>2</sup> This sphere is an ideal candidate for hunting down manifestations of alienation for several reasons. First, the production and consumption of food plays an interesting role in our world in that it both unites us with and separates us from other living species at the same time. All living things must consume food of some sort in order to survive, but none of them do it quite like we do.<sup>3</sup> Second, we will see later that consuming food is an interesting human activity in that it is a traditionally uniting activity that has been transformed into an alienating one. Third, our activities surrounding the production and consumption of food are integral aspects of our daily

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<sup>1</sup> Thoughts, just as houses, jeans and other goods, are products of human activity; namely, they are products of thinking and culture.

<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons Marx may not have explored the realm of human interaction with food is because it was not such a prevalent and perplexing problem as it is today. Problems regarding food mostly concerned not starving rather than obesity and eating disorders.

<sup>3</sup> Humans don't merely consume their food; they engage in elaborate preparations, ceremonies and customs. Food plays a rather symbolic role in our lives compared to the role it plays in most species' lives.

lives and our identities. As such, discovering alienation in this realm identifies a huge source of human devaluation and a potentially equally large step towards a complete eradication of alienation. In other words the removal of alienation in the realm of food is equivalent to giving each person a greater sense of worth in this world. Finally, the identification of alienation in the realm of food provides an answer to the food crises occurring in our modern world.

Anyone who has spent a significant amount of time in the United States can attest to the fact that the country suffers from a very peculiar sort of food craze. Advertisements for indulgent sweets and greasy fast foods are followed by ones for diet pills and exercise equipment. The “mixed signals” represented by these ads reflect the confusion prevalent in the American food culture. To put it simply, when it comes to food, Americans are completely lost. New diets come out every few months claiming that miraculous weight loss can be achieved if we only stop eating carbohydrates or eat exclusively raw foods. Despite the prevalence of diets and weight loss techniques, about one third of Americans are obese (US Department of Health, 2007). On the other end of the spectrum, it is estimated that 10 million women and 1 million men suffer from eating disorders (National Eating Disorders Association, 2005), many of them resulting in life threatening weight loss and malnutrition. With such problems surrounding America’s eating habits and beliefs concerning food, it is not surprising that a plethora of literature exists on the subject. Everyone is searching for an answer to why this happened and how it can be cured.

In an effort to answer the above questions, authors have generally begun by examining our current food practices and comparing them with those of the previous decades. From there they have spread out to include cross-cultural diet comparisons along with scientific dietary analyses. Some authors such as Pollan and Lappé ventured even further, offering not just a dietary analysis and comparison, but a psychological one as well. Yet, our food problems persist, perhaps worse than ever. The failure of authors, researchers and doctors to provide answers regarding the nature of and cure for the food epidemic is not due to their inability to get their message out there to the masses; most of us have heard about how unhealthy our food habits are and how the once cherished family dinner is becoming a rarer and rarer occasion. It is also not a failure of description per se. These 'food authorities' are not missing the problem, they are simply dancing around it; they are describing the symptoms without identifying the underlying disease. Nothing about our food situation has improved because we are treating the effects rather than tackling the cause. Thus, the second aim of this paper is to show that alienation is a formidable candidate for being the underlying cause of our food problems; it is the reason that the symptoms described by those trying to answer our questions about food are allowed to and in reality do persist.

Before setting to work, a few comments ought to be made about what this project is and what it is not. First, it is not an argument in favor of Marx's picture and application of alienation; it is simply an interpretation and clarification of Marx's concept based upon his comments. Second, it is meant as a guide for distinguishing between and identifying alienated and unalienated activity; it is not a step-by-step guide

for eradicating alienation.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the examples of alienated activity mentioned in this paper by no means serve as an extensive list of the alienated activities taking place in the realm of food. Rather, they are meant to be a sampling of the types of activities which lead to alienation which are prevalent in our interactions with food.

In the first section you will find an examination of alienation which is based upon a picking apart and reconstructing of Marx's comments on alienated labor and human essence.<sup>5</sup> This analysis reveals alienation as a state of being resulting from alienated activity, which reduces human beings to something less than that which a full description of their essence suggests they are. The second section takes the picture of alienation and alienated activity developed in the first section and uses it to hunt out instances of alienation in the realm of food. This "hunt" reveals the processes of standardization in food production, commoditization of food products and hastening of food consumption as alienated activities.

### **Alienation: What is it?**

The concept of alienation can be both extremely easy and extremely difficult to understand, depending upon the context in which it is used and the depth of meaning which is intended by its use in a given situation. Alienation can best, and on a surface level, most easily be described as a split or schism between things or beings. To say that

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is not a step by step guide for eradicating alienation, it does consider identification of the difference between alienated and unalienated activities to be the first step towards eradicating alienation. As such, it does, at times, mention the eradication of alienation.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the comments considered in disambiguating the term are from the Manuscript on Alienated Labor which is the first manuscript in the *Economic and philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. However, Marx and other secondary works were considered as well.



something or someone is alienated with respect to another is to imply that they are disconnected from it or cannot access the full meaning inherent within their interaction. Consider a few examples that are common in daily life. A mother might say that she feels alienated from her teenage son. She is understood to mean that she cannot connect with him; her interactions with her son lack meaning and depth. She may even go so far as to say that she feels as though he is not really her son. Similarly, an exchange student might feel alienated from the new culture in which she is now immersed. This usage is viewed as an expression of her difficulty feeling 'at home' and connected with a culture that doesn't naturally belong to her. Although alienation is understood rather readily in such daily usages, alienation as it is discussed and addressed in philosophy, particularly by Marx, can be a bit more cryptic. Part of the reason for this is that alienation as Marx discussed it is both broad in scope, pervading all aspects of human life, and nuanced in its plenitude of manifestations. Several of these manifestations, including political economy, philosophy, and religion, are discussed extensively in Marx's works. In addition to such, perhaps unavoidable, difficulties, Marx doesn't spend very much time discussing the meaning of alienation itself. Instead, he focuses on its various expressions, leaving the concept itself rather cloaked and mysterious.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of this section is to carefully pick apart the few statements offered by Marx regarding alienation and rebuild the fragments into a coherent analysis and interpretation of the term. A consideration of the word itself, apart from its use in

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, Marx really only devotes a few paragraphs to the concept of alienation itself. The rest of what he says about it concerns alienated labor.

philosophy, will inform our understanding of the various senses in which the word has been used both contemporarily and historically. The root of the word 'alienated' is 'alien,' which is derived from the Latin 'alienus' meaning "of or belonging to another." This historic derivative has been transformed into the modern word, which means "unfamiliar; different or separated; foreign" (Abate, 1997). As Marx's description and the supporting interpretations offered by Marx scholars are examined, both these definitions will become useful in demystifying the concept.

In his various works, Marx introduces two interrelated forms of alienation. The first is the split that occurs between a human being and her essence or being. In this type of alienation, a person cannot completely fulfill her natural needs and potential. As a result, she loses part of her essence and, subsequently, part of her identity; she is forced to be something less than she might have been had other circumstances not deprived her and kept her from achieving her full range of expression. The second form of alienation refers to the split that occurs between theory or pure thought and actuality or practice.<sup>7</sup> In this type of alienation, artificial ideals, (ideals which have no basis in reality) are imposed by humans upon themselves and their practices. Consequently, people are prevented from realizing the truth of their alienated existence, meeting their natural needs and living up to their own potential. As each form of alienation is explicated, it will become clear that this second type of alienation is related to the first type in that it is really a particular mode of bringing about the first

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<sup>7</sup> Whenever the split between theory and practice is mentioned, theory is intended to refer to pure thoughts which are completely cut off from the physical world and activity or practice is intended to refer to the actual goings on in the world.

type; a person who is alienated in the second sense will necessarily be alienated in the first sense as well. Since understanding the second form is dependent upon an understanding of the first, the alienation that separates a person from her essence will be undertaken first.

Before one can understand how humans become cut off from their essence, one must understand what exactly constitutes the essence of a human being. The term 'essence' has been understood in multiple differing ways by different people at different times. As such, it is important to specify that in this paper essence is understood simply as that thing that makes something what it is rather than something else. As vague as this description might seem, it is the one that fits precisely with what Marx intended. Marx intended to identify what it was that made humans different from all other species. Note, this identifying characteristic is not necessarily static; it may change or be understood differently over time as a species evolves<sup>8</sup>. The thing that Marx believed separated humans from all other beings was their ability or potential to make their own history. To put it differently; the identifying feature of a human being is her potential to create her own being.<sup>9</sup> According to Marx, humans have natural needs that are physical, spiritual and social. As people strive to meet these needs, they are driven to become producers. As producers, humans have the potential to meet their own needs by means of their own endeavors; this allows people the ability to create their own history (Marx, 1844).

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<sup>8</sup> Marx believed that we were evolving throughout history as a species specifically; our consciousness is evolving as we progress through history.

<sup>9</sup> In both *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* and *Marx's Concept of Man*, Fromm reiterates this point which Marx briefly and rather ambiguously refers to in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

In addition to determining that it is a person's needs, physical, spiritual and social, which ultimately drive her to become a producer and subsequently by being a producer give her the potential to completely determine her own existence, Marx identifies four moments in human evolution which can be thought of as preconditions that allow humans to become the type of producer that can completely determine their own destinies. It is important to understand, that these aspects of development "are not...different stages... [they have] existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and first [humans], and still assert themselves in history today" (Marx, 1845). These 'preconditions' are similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which more basic needs are met first, followed by more complex needs, but all the needs exist at once. In the first moment, humans produce their physical life in that they learn to make things in order to maintain their physical being. For example, people learn to make shelters to protect themselves from the elements. Once people have mastered basic survival, the second moment begins, which brings about the formation of new needs and new means for meeting those needs. These new needs are spiritual. By spiritual needs, it should be understood needs related to one's spirit, rather than needs concerning anything religious. These needs include the various manifestations of spiritual wellbeing such as happiness, and feelings of safety and fulfillment. In the third moment, humans figure out how to reproduce themselves by procreating. Through procreation, people developed social needs which were initially related to living in a family and raising children (Marx, 1845). Later, these needs grew to be specified more toward broader societal situations. Consider a group of teenagers who want to be accepted by their

peers. These peers are not members of their family and likely have no bearing upon the teenagers' futures. Yet, they still feel the need to be accepted. The seeds of such needs as those felt by the teenagers first developed in the third moment. In order to understand the distinction between the third moment and the fourth moment, one must understand that this third moment consists of the emergence of the need to be social and behave socially. Out of this third moment the fourth moment evolves (John, 1976).

Out of the third moment and the need to be social, consciousness began to evolve. As consciousness emerged it emerged as a double relation. Specifically, it is this double relation that Marx refers to as the fourth moment. An early stage in the development of consciousness which is referred to as practical consciousness evolved naturally out of our need to be social in the following way. Prior to the third moment, the consciousness that humans possessed was purely a sense consciousness (awareness that physical bodies which were sensed existed). As social needs evolved and people began to interact with others and engage in social practices, the consciousness naturally evolved to first facilitate and then 'track' these interactions. This "tracking" stage of consciousness, referred to as the practical consciousness, arises precisely because it aids in social interaction; initially it is simply what allows us to communicate with others: language. As consciousness evolves, language evolves and so do our thoughts (Marx believed that thoughts did not exist outside of language) (Thought and Consciousness, 1976). This practical consciousness simply reflects and repeats in thought what is actually happening in a human's world and her relations with it. Practical consciousness

is distinguished from the theoretical consciousness, which evolves after the practical consciousness and is concerned with formulating theories and abstracting from the particulars of the world. More will be said on the theoretical consciousness and its role in alienation later during the discussion of alienation as a split between theory and actuality. For now, it is just important to understand that humans are beings that have physical, spiritual and social needs which they have learned to meet by producing shelters, tools, other beings, language etc. It is their learning to meet these needs along with their development of the tools they need to meet them which gives humans the potential to create their own history.

Now that the Marxian picture of human essence has been formed, the question of how people become alienated from their essence can be taken up again. Recall that humans are essentially producers; producers of things, language, beings and, ultimately, their own identities. If humans become alienated from their essence, it is because they have produced/created in an alienated way. In order to understand what it means to produce in an alienated way, it is helpful to consider once again the origins and usage of the word alienation (of or belonging to another; unfamiliar, different or separated) which Marx chose to employ in describing this type of activity along with his picture of human essence. Putting ourselves in this Marxian framework delivers a description of alienated labor (production) as labor which is not one's own, is external and fails to meet all of the human needs that human beings have developed through history. Note: alienated labor may meet some of the more primary human needs; what is important in identifying it as alienated is that it does not meet all of our human needs; it denies a

part of our essence as human beings. As such, it does not allow people to fulfill their potential to create their own destiny. They are somehow less human by performing this activity. He describes alienated labor as “external labor...a labor of self-sacrifice... [and] work for someone else.” He goes on to say that alienated labor is “not the satisfaction of a need, but the means for satisfying other needs” (Marx, 1844). Essentially, there is a difference between the need that is being met through one’s labor and the need that is being met with the end results of labor. The need which Marx is referring to here that is not being satisfied is the potential for humans to create their own history and determine their own destiny; it is the need to fulfill their essence as human beings; the need to be fully human. According to Marx, “free conscious activity is the species character of human beings” meaning that creating in accordance with his own standards is what separates humans from other species; it is this characteristic which is made possible by all of the precursors which developed to meet needs, that makes a human fully human. The point is made clearer when Marx describes a human who is alienated as one who “in his human function has been reduced to an animal” and goes on to say that animals “produce only under the compulsion of a direct physical need while man produces when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom of such a need” (Marx, 1844). To put it simply, Marx is saying something akin to what Kant said in one of his formulations of the categorical imperative in which he instructs us to treat human beings not merely as a means to an end, but as an end in themselves (Levine, 1978). It is okay for person’s work to be a means for meeting some basic needs, but it can’t be only that; it must allow her to fill her potential. Consider, a man who is building

himself a house. His labor is only unalienated so long as he doesn't feel compelled by nature and the fact that the pending storm may kill him to create it. He must be able to build the house according to his own standards and time frame without feeling as though nature has forced him to make it a certain way. As the example illustrates, the key to producing in an unalienated way is for humans to feel as though they are in control as opposed to feeling as though they are at the mercy of natural forces.

This description of alienated humans and alienated labor is drawn from what Marx calls contemporary economic facts relating to the existence of humans. Marx also claims that people have been alienated throughout all of history (Marx, 1844). If this is true, then one might wonder both how Marx decides what the "true essence" of humans is and why he thinks, as Fromm emphasizes in two of his books, that humans will eventually overcome nature and become the master of their own destiny (Marx's Concept of, 1961). Clues to these questions come from Marx's description of nature and what unalienated people and nature would look like. For this reason, the way of nature as Marx saw it will be examined next.

Nature provides the means for existence, physical spiritual and, by means of the first two, social. The more of something from nature that a person uses to exist the less that is available for her to use in the future (Marx, 1844). Thus, the more a person produces, the less she can produce. Similarly, the more someone exists, the less it would seem she can exist. In this way, humans are enslaved to nature. Because humans need the objects of their labor so desperately, the objects they produce become a power above and against them. People need them to survive and cannot escape that fact. This



is summed up well in *Alienation, Praxis and Techne* as object reification; the objects become the supremely important thing above all else (Being, Making and, 1976). The problem with object reification is that it leads to objectification. Objectification is the reduction of someone into simply an object. For example, when someone goes to buy a boat, all they see or think about is the boat itself. There is no thought of the boat making process or the boat maker or anything else that was involved in producing the boat. As such, the boat-maker has been reduced to the object: the boat; the tree that provided that wood has been reduced to the object: the boat etc. Perhaps the most common example of objectification is the reduction of human beings into money. Employers see their employees simply as money gained and money lost. Likewise, employees judge their personal worth by how much money they can bring in. Basically, when humans engage in object reification and its close brother objectification, they turn their essence into something very different than it normally would be; they reduce themselves to the objects which they produce in this state, people are alienated because they are cut off from their true essence and their essential relationships with nature, themselves and other individuals. In order to understand how it is that humans, in this particular type of existence, are cut off from nature, themselves and others, it is helpful to examine Marx's picture of humans overcoming nature.

According to Marx's picture, there is a way for people to be unalienated and still fit into the nature of their existence. When people have attained an unalienated state of being, they are still using nature to reproduce themselves. They reproduce themselves physically by maintaining their bodies with food, shelter etc. They reproduce themselves

spiritually and socially by using their wills and consciousnesses to direct their activity towards creating in accordance with any standard they wish and not just in accordance with their own physical existence. As people work upon the world and manipulate nature, they begin to see nature as their reality, their work and their being (Marx, 1844). Essentially, people reproduce themselves in all that they see. Humans become unalienated when they learn to recognize the products of human labor as human objects created by real human beings (i.e.: when they learn to see the whole person not just a reduction of them) The objects in a person's world become hers not by possession, but through something like appreciation for the human essence manifest in their creation. Once people learn to recognize the products of human labor as the creative expressions of individuals, they are no longer cut off from nature, themselves and others. People are directly connected with nature in several ways. In recognizing that nature provides the means for existence, people can appreciate the practicality and beauty inherent in this relationship. Furthermore, people learn to reproduce in accordance with the laws of nature and beauty and thereby can connect with the delicate balance of life (Marx, 1844). Through these interactions and their new understanding, people recognize themselves as a part of nature and are intimately connected with themselves in a new and unparalleled fashion. In addition to feeling connected with themselves as a part of nature, people connect with themselves every time they see the world around them and recognize their own work. When a person sees her own work in her world, she realizes that she is in control of her own destiny, reinforcing her essence as a physical, spiritual and social being. Once humans connect

with themselves as social beings, they are free to connect with others as well. The way that humans relate to others is the same as the way that they relate to themselves (Marx, 1844). Just as people look at the world and see it as their own world because it is full of their work and their expressions, they recognize that it is also full of others' work and expressions. This recognition allows people to connect with other individuals on a deeper level than they otherwise could. Humans are thoroughly connected with their world as they live up to their full potential, recognize, and foster, others' ability to do so too; in recognizing all each of the ways in which they related to their world, they are connected with their whole being and are united with their essence.

At this point, it has been established that humans are alienated from their essence because they produce in an alienated way focusing solely on the object of their production which they need to produce for their own survival. When people focus solely on the end of their production, they do not have the opportunity to fulfill their potential of creating in accordance to their own standards. People remain enslaved to nature; to put it more precisely enslaved to the objects of their production. In this state people are only concerned with the objects: the objects they can produce, the objects they can possess and the objects they want to possess; they never see the person behind the objects who created them with the utmost care and concern for the other person who would use and get joy out of their product. Humans can overcome this tendency to reify objects of production by learning to appreciate the human expression inherent within the objects and relations in the world. Essentially, if people raise the importance of the act of producing with respect to the object produced, then they are on their way to

overcoming alienation. Once people raise the importance of producing they come to understand that they should produce in accordance with their own standards based upon what they enjoy and what meets their spiritual and social needs rather than what simply maintains their physical being. Furthermore, they can recognize others as similar to them in that they want to produce in a way that is an expression of themselves as well. As such, humans collectively learn to set up a society in which everyone can fulfill her needs and is no longer reduced to something less than what they fully are. People have overcome nature and are now in a position where they are in control of their own destinies or at least that is Marx's thought.

Having discussed the way in which people are alienated from their essence and how they may overcome this split, the second form of alienation, the schism that occurs between theory and actuality, can now be examined. In analyzing this form of alienation, it is important to keep in mind that Marx was a practical man. Despite accusations that his vision of an unalienated society was unrealistic and naive, Marx's criticism of the gap between theoretical consciousness and true consciousness has an air of practicality. Marx's comments on this matter are deeply rooted in a pragmatic understanding of human nature and the human essence as described previously. Hence, understanding a person's alienation from her essence is essential to understanding Marx's position regarding the alienation that occurs due to the disconnect that exists between theory and practice.

Recall that it is part of human essence to create one's own history and that being a free, conscious individual who can produce in accordance with her own standards is

what makes this possible. Furthermore, it is one's social needs, one's need to have intercourse with other people that led to the development of practical consciousness in the first place. Theoretical consciousness only emerges later when, due to the demands placed on it by increased productivity and population, practical consciousness extends itself. As practical consciousness extends itself a division in labor emerges<sup>10</sup>. Out of this division of labor comes the division between thought and practice/activity and the theoretical consciousness emerges. Practical consciousness is different from theoretical consciousness in that practical consciousness simply tracks what is happening in the world; it reflects man in his physical existence and activities (Thought and Consciousness, 1976); it is necessarily linked with the world of practice and actual life. On the other hand, theoretical consciousness abstracts from and makes generalizations about the world. The source of such abstractions or theories is of course the world, including everyday existence and activities. However, the way in which the abstraction is carried out renders the final theories completely cut off from the real world (Marx, 1845). At this point, theoretical "consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real" (Marx, 1845).

It seems strange that the theories produced by the theoretical consciousness could be formulated based upon the goings on in the real world and still fail to represent something real, but this fact is easily explained when one remembers the

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<sup>10</sup> As the Practical Consciousness continues to track human activities, we pick up on the fact that some are better at certain things and others better at other things. Thus from the noticing of these natural predispositions, tasks are divided up—this is how practical consciousness leads to the division of labor.

nature of the world that the consciousness is abstracting from. First, in the world that we are living in, the world that our consciousness is tracking and using as data for formulating its theories, alienation is prevalent; people and their activities exist in an alienated state. However, the theoretical consciousness makes theories based upon this picture of existence without “realizing the truth in what these theories express.” As a result, “the alienation of activity corresponds [with] an ideological alienation” (Thought and Consciousness, 1976). Because people extrapolate from their own alienated existence, the laws, ethical systems etc. produced from this abstraction reflect that alienated existence. This representation is not a true and complete representation of the world; the alienation of human beings is not represented or recognized because the theoretical consciousness only picks up on what it deems to be the important aspect of human beings: the products of their conscious thoughts.<sup>11</sup> As such, the failure to completely meet human needs and of people to live up to their potential, which pervades all of society, is ignored and attributed to a failure on the individual’s part to be disciplined enough to live up to societies standards rather than a failure of the standards themselves<sup>12</sup>. As people strive to live by the ethical standards, laws, political and economic systems which the theoretical consciousness has laid out in the world, the alienation that already exists is reinforced and proliferated.

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<sup>11</sup> The division of labor divides the labor of thought from other labors. Once this division occurs the labor of thought and hence products of thinking are viewed as superior to other activities. For this reason the reality of man in his activity is ignored when alongside the activities of thought.

<sup>12</sup> Discipline is an act of thought in that being disciplined is adhering to certain theories or ideals regarding how one ought to be. Thus attributing the failure to meet human needs to lack of discipline rather than to a failure of the standards themselves is a failure to notice other activities of importance besides thought.

Marx emphasizes the problematic nature of theoretical consciousness most directly through his criticisms of philosophy and religion. As 'purely theoretical disciplines,' Marx believed that philosophy and religion were inherently filled with contradiction. According to him, they were inadequate because they failed to consider the actual man in his actual history. He criticizes them for measuring actuality by theory. Philosophies as such could never be realized in the world because they failed to capture the full truth of existence. In fact, Marx advocated removing what he considered to be "the obstacles of abstract principles, reflections and determinative concepts since these prevented the comprehension of truth" (Thought and Consciousness, 1976) In other words, Marx believed that the musings of theoretical consciousness should be removed in so far as they were musings that prevent the comprehension of the truth of existence. The reason being, that alienation occurs whenever theoretical consciousness (abstract ideals which only consider a partial skewed reality) imposes itself upon us and prevents us and our social, natural relationships from developing and flourishing. The contradiction inherent in philosophy and religion exists because people have natural needs and ways of being that are opposed to the ideals and reality that theologians and philosophers promote. Theologians and philosophers, by acting upon these purely theoretical ideas treat human beings as being equivalent to their theoretical consciousness, but -consciousness of any kind is not the whole of a human being, it is merely part of a human being (Marx, 1845). What is occurring in these fields is similar to the object reification discussed in the section on alienation of humans from their essence, only this is a consciousness reification. This consciousness reification is

problematic in two ways. First, it reduces a human to simply her theoretical consciousness and second, it allows people to continue thinking that the products of their theoretical consciousnesses are wonderful, which subsequently allows them to ignore the failure of their theories to capture the reality of the world. Theories which ignore the entire essence of human beings as essential are not wonderful plans to follow.

Sartre makes this very same mistake reifying consciousness when he interprets alienation as being merely the suppression of the natural freedom of consciousness (Busch, 1977). Just as consciousness is only a part of human beings, the suppression of freedom of consciousness only plays a small role in alienation. According to Sartre, consciousness creates the self. We first have consciousness which allows us to experience various states; from these states of consciousness a Self is formed and along with it a self-consciousness (consciousness about oneself). According to Sartre, alienation occurs when the consciousness refuses to recognize its own power to create the Self (Busch, 1977). Marx would view Sartre's interpretation of alienation as a rather confused one. Recall that according to Marx, consciousness arises as a tracking of the activity actually occurring in the world. This tracking then develops into an abstraction of the world. When this abstraction fails to fully represent the truth of the goings on in the world, alienation occurs.

Although Sartre over emphasizes the role of consciousness, he was not completely off. Alienation does have something to do with the ability of the consciousness to help people create their own being and in turn create itself. It is



consciousness that allows people to track their own existence and realize the nature of their alienation. Once people realize their alienated condition, they can change what they are doing and the way they are conducting their activities. Once people change the way they are behaving in practice then their consciousnesses, as trackers of their existence, will change too. The problem leading to alienation is not that the consciousness fails to realize its own ability to create; it is that it fails to realize that in its theoretical state it fails to capture an accurate picture of the alienated existence of human beings. As such, people cannot realize they are alienated and in turn cannot make changes in their world to become unalienated. Humans have the ability to create themselves and hold themselves to whatever standards they wish; when they fail to realize that their theoretical consciousnesses are not capturing the whole of their reality and that as a result they are holding themselves to ultimately unfulfilling standards, they render themselves alienated. If people can overcome the alienation occurring that splits their theoretical consciousness from the reality of their alienation, then they can overcome their alienation.

Having analyzed the two forms of alienation discussed by Marx, the concept of alienation can now be summarized and used to develop a tool for detecting its various manifestations. We have found that alienation is the result of alienated labor or to use a word with less negative connotations, production, which imposes upon the individual in one of two senses. Either it imposes upon her in that it cuts her off from her essence directly as a self-creative physical, spiritual and social being or it imposes upon her by creating a theoretical consciousness whose activities are necessarily separate from and

opposed to the activities of her existence, which would allow her to fulfill her potential and meet all her needs. Recall, theoretical consciousness fails to represent the truth of human existence as an alienated one. As such its abstractions and theories encourage people to meet standards which reinforce their alienation rather than overcome it.

Above all, alienation is a way of being in which people, in all that they do, deny themselves and their true being by reducing themselves to something lesser. This sweeping definition of alienation along with its historical and contemporary usages all imply that living in an unalienated state is better than living in an alienated one. One would be hard pressed to find a person who did not judge the idea of being reduced to something less than human horrid. As such, despite the fact that humans have been alienated for the entirety of their existence thus far, they still firmly hold on to the belief that the, so far unattained, unalienated life is an ideal that is attainable and worth striving for. Marx believed that this ideal was possible for the sole reason that people create their own history. Because people create their own history, once they realize the reality of their alienated existence, it is within their power to change it. However, as Fromm points out, the reality of an alienated existence can only be fully realized when it reaches its peak (The Sick Individual, 1962). Alienation will reach its peak when objectified, alienated labor stretches across every economic, social and geographic line. Once alienation is proliferated in this way, people can realize their folly and begin changing the way they interact with their world. Following such a wide spread change, people will find themselves connected with their world in a meaningful fulfilling way. Considering that alienation is a pervasive human condition that lurks in every sphere of

society and that it will take the overcoming of alienated labor in each of these realms to truly liberate humans from their historic enslavement to nature, each manifestation of alienation that can be discovered and overcome will serve as a step in the right direction. As mentioned earlier, before an instance of alienated labor can be overcome and transformed into an expressive, meaningful human activity, it must be identified as an alienated endeavor. By identifying some of the highlighting attributes of alienated labor, such instances can be quickly and confidently picked out and transformed. The above analysis revealed several characteristics as indicators of alienated labor.

A summary of the indicators of alienated labor are as follows. Labor which is alienated is one which denies the reality of human needs, allows a theoretical ideal to reign supreme and impose upon the actual activities and nature of humans. It is also not a free conscious activity in the sense that it is only performed in response to a physical need; it is merely a means to an end rather than an end in itself and it encourages the reduction of human beings to the products of their endeavors.

### **Food and our Interactions with it**

With a guide for diagnosing alienation in hand, we are prepared to venture out into society and identify the various manifestations of its vast illness. The only question that remains is where to begin this quest. As briefly discussed in the introduction, the realm of food production and consumption is an ideal candidate for beginning the identification and eventual eradication of alienation. This realm is particularly appealing for two reasons. First, our interaction with food will prove especially revealing due to its

natural and historic role as a linking force rather than an alienating one. Examining how something that seems as though it should be bringing us closer to our world becomes an alienating force cutting us off from that same world should help us better understand what changes need to be made in order to render alienation a condition of the past. Second, food and the traditions surrounding our consumption of it make up a central aspect of our identities. If such a central identifying feature of our lives can be experienced in an unalienated way, then it seems as though a completely unalienated existence is not only possible, but close at hand.

Before jumping into an analysis of the ways in which eating and producing food have become alienated activities, consideration ought to be given to the ways in which such activities have served as a uniting force linking us to nature, others and ourselves. The production and consumption of food links us with our world in both a literal sense and a more abstract sense. In the literal sense, our production and consumption of food links us with nature, others and ourselves via an actual physical connection. In the beginning of *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan comments that "all food chains [through which humans produce their food] are systems for doing more or less the same thing: linking us through what we eat to the fertility of the earth and the energy of the sun" (Pollan, 2006). Here Pollan is pointing out that it doesn't matter what process we choose to employ in order to obtain the meals we eat; through all of them one fact remains the same: we are dependent for our energy upon the various other creatures of the planet, which we eat and who have the ability to harness the energy of the sun. Thus, every time we eat, we are physically linked with nature via the energy that it

provides and stores in our food. Slow Foods International points to the recognition and acknowledgment of this vital connection as one of its main driving forces. According to their website, the slow foods “movement is founded upon [the] concept of eco-gastronomy- a recognition of the strong connections between plate and planet” (Slow Foods International, 2009) Another way in which food literally links us to our world is the way that it links us to one another. Lapp   describes this connection when she says that, “food is our most primal need and our common bond to earth and one another” (Lapp  , 2002). We are linked to one another in that we all have the same need regardless of race, ethnicity, social status, geographic location etc. and we are linked to one another in that we all share the same bond with the earth and the energy from the sun. In addition to these rather obvious literal means by which food and our activities surrounding food link us to nature and to others, they also literally link us to ourselves. Producing and consuming food is driven by our need to maintain ourselves physically. When we meet this need we connect with ourselves in that we, through our own actions, have nourished and given life anew to ourselves.

Turning to the more abstract sense in which production and consumption of food links us to nature, ourselves and others, we find that the linking character of food is much deeper than we at first might have realized. In a more abstract sense, our production of food links us with nature by requiring us, at some time during the process, to venture out of our manufactured world into a world that is, at least to some extent, more akin to nature. Originally, human beings were hunter/gatherers who had to completely leave the comfort of their tribe and venture out into the plains or into the

forest to begin the process of preparing a meal. Even once agriculture and ranching began, the fields and pastures were still a separate space that resembled nature when compared with the more modern town centers. The point here is that someone has to interact with the natural cycles of life in order to harvest the raw products that food is made from. This link is more abstract than the literal physical link above in that it simply involves interacting in a space that is not completely created by humans. In *Walden*, Thoreau acknowledges this same sentiment that being immersed in nature is not only different from being in the village, but it connects us with nature in a unique way. He says that “[he went to the woods because [he] wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if [he] could not learn the lessons it had to teach” (Thoreau, 1854). Another more abstract way in which food production and consumption serve as a link is through the traditions surrounding food which link us to one another. Traditions surrounding food bring people together in several ways. First, nations are linked together by the unique diets that they traditionally observe. For example, Jewish people traditionally observe a kosher diet and Indians refrain from eating cows. Second, individuals are linked when they come together to ‘break bread’ according to tradition. Consider the family dinner. Even though most of us no longer eat every dinner together, we still come together to eat for holidays and celebrations such as birthdays, Thanksgiving, Passover, Christmas, Eid ul-Fitr<sup>13</sup> etc. Third, individuals are linked to the past as they observe the traditions of the past. Since food is the most often preserved part of a tradition, or at least an important part of most traditions, we can say that food

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<sup>13</sup> This is the feast that occurs at the end of Ramadan.

is providing a link here as well. Whether people know it or not, they are also linked to one another through the chain of preparation. Somewhere along the line someone else was involved in preparing the food that we eat, be it through a recipe, a process for growing or a process for preparing that someone created. When all the ways that producing and consuming food connect us with our world are considered, it seems much more shocking that alienation could exist in this sphere of society. Yet, it will prove possible and actual as this section demonstrates.

Before we examine the alienation that is surprisingly prevalent in the modern realm of food production and consumption, a few things should be said about the role of food in creating our identities as well. The individual and societal relationships maintained and experienced with food profoundly shape and influence who we become and what values we hold. “We are not only what we eat, but how we eat” (Pollan, 2006). The choices we make about what to eat and what preparations we support via our choices can be a reflection of our most sacred values and our adherence to them shapes our character. The profound effect that our food choices have on our personal development and growth is probably why Lappé chose to include, in the introduction to her book *Hope’s Edge*, a comment made by her son that her book “gave people a clear way to see the larger impact of their choices—even those as personal as what [they] choose to eat” (Lappé, 2002). This comment not only mentions the powerful impact that all our choices have, but also refers to the choice of what to eat as a personal one. Here ‘personal’ has a double meaning; it refers both to the fact that it is something each individual decides for himself and to the fact that it is a choice that is very central and

close to the heart. This reference reflects the centrality of the choice to one's identity. Playing such a crucial role in the formation of our values and building of our characters, interactions with food can also serve as an aid to finding meaning and direction for life in general. Again Lappé expresses such sentiments in the introduction to *Hope's Edge* when she says that the "emergence [in the new way people are interacting with food] ...holds key to finding personal meaning and direction in our lives"(Lappé, 2002). She goes on to say that "[food] can ground us as we stretch ourselves to draw in all the interlaced threads- so we can weave a whole meaningful picture of ourselves" (Lappé, 2002). She is reflecting the sentiment that something which plays such a central role in our lives can guide us in all that we do. As such, the alienation present in our interactions with food and the hope of removing it can guide us in removing alienation from the whole of our lives. A final way in which our interactions with food serve as a central aspect of identity is through the expression they allow us. Preparing food can be an art, an act of creativity. We have the chance of manifesting ourselves and our personalities through our preparations and with whom we chose to share them. For example, everyone has their own unique method for preparing something as simple as a sandwich; the way someone prepares their sandwich is just as much an expression of their individuality as the clothes they choose to wear or way they speak.

All of the above suggests that "Food is a powerful metaphor for a great many of the values" (Schlosser, 2001) of life we possess. The process of food production we support and what we choose to eat reflects our ethical priorities and our fundamental beliefs. Furthermore, when alienation manifests itself in our production and



consumption of food, a “fundamental aspect of national identity: how, where and what people choose to eat” (Schlosser, 2001) is threatened. This threat seems particularly daunting in America where there has never been “a single strong culinary tradition to guide us” in our food choices (Pollan, 2006). Some have argued that the deterioration of our relationships that are facilitated by our interactions with food “never would have happened in a culture in possession of deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating, (Pollan, 2006) but globalization has spread the threat to all corners of the globe; to places possessing strong culinary traditions, to places where it seems it would not initially have existed.

With the alienated means of interacting with food proliferated and expanded to the entire globe, it is, as Fromm pointed out, a prime time for eradicating those very processes which are, to be properly called, alienated activities. Eradicating alienated activities requires first identifying such activities. For this purpose we should first consider the comments that Marx made specifically regarding man’s relationship to eating and then rely upon our general picture of alienated labor. According to Marx, “Eating, drinking and procreating are of course genuine human functions. But abstractly considered, apart from the environment of other human activities...they are animal functions” (Marx, 1844). Recall that Marx also said, people are alienated when “in [their] human functions [they are] reduced to animal” (Marx, 1844). Initially, it is a bit unclear what we are supposed to make of this statement and ‘the environment of other human activities,’ but we can abstract the meaning from what Marx has said elsewhere. From the picture of human beings given in the previous section, human activities

include producing, creating according to one's own standards, interacting socially and fulfilling needs through process not just the end result of those processes. Abstracting from these needs, a picture of an alienated interaction with food from Marx can be built. Alienated interactions with food may include processes of producing food which are done according to an arbitrary standard, are solitary and non-interactive and are simply the means for meeting the end of food rather than an end in itself. To round out this picture, we must add some of the other symptoms of an alienated process included in the section on alienation that are not alluded to directly in Marx's statement regarding food. Such symptoms include object reification and thought imposing upon practice. With these two symptoms, we can add to the picture of alienated food production/consumption a sense that food commodities and profit generated from them is the supreme end of concern; nothing else involved in the process is valued. Additionally, this concern only for the monetary exchange involved in food production and consumption allows arbitrary economic theories, which have been developed from an incomplete picture of human activity, are imposed upon interactions with food by governing any judgments and decisions made concerning how interactions with food ought to be carried out. On the contrary, an unalienated picture of interaction with food is as follows. The process of making food is an expression of human creativity which is fulfilling in itself. The interaction with food is an inherently social one that cannot help but bring people together, people are connected via food to nature, themselves and others and finally, we are wholly ourselves as we interact with food.

Upon examining the existing interactions with food in our society, the industrialized production of food reveals itself as a sphere and means of production which is dominated by alienated labor. Fast food, in particular, is seen as a major culprit of alienation as it meets many, if not all of the infractions listed above. Simply put, Fast food is the picture of an alienated interaction with food, reducing people to the commodity food they can produce and consume. However, alienated interaction with food includes more than just fast food restaurants. There are other aspects of eating and growing which participate in the widespread alienated interaction. Nevertheless, Fast food does play a unique role in that it encourages the spread of alienated activity to other sectors in the realm of foods. To demonstrate how this mode of interacting with food is alienated, each of the symptoms of alienated activity will be examined separately.

The first characteristic indication of alienated activity is that it in some way denies human needs. As Schlosser informs us, “George Ritzer, [a distinguished sociology professor at the University of Maryland who studies consumption] has attacked the fast food industry for celebrating a narrow margin of efficiency over every other human value” (Schlosser, 2001). Many human values that have become an integral part of human culture have done so because they aid in meeting our physical spiritual and social needs; they help us fill our potential and to live fully and completely as ourselves. With the rise of industrialized food, physical needs were clearly pushed aside as “ad campaigns made processed foods seem better than fresh ones” (Schlosser, 2001). There was no concern given to whether the processed foods were nutritionally sound and

would meet the physical needs of the people consuming them. The only concern was selling the food; people are reduced to profit in the form of convenience. According to articles in *Health News*, “a healthy balanced diet should be primarily whole foods with restricted consumption of processed foods.” Processed foods may be convenient, but “disappointingly, they don’t offer much in nutritional value” (Bolen, 2007)<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, the modern industrial age finds “some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn” (Pollan, 2006). So much corn hardly seems like a balanced diet and it ignores the wisdom of having a varied diet developed by our ancestors. This is also a reduction; the broad diet that was carefully developed over the course of human existence for our optimal functioning to a diet which cannot support such optimal function—forcing us to become less than optimal due to physical nutritional constraints. Finally, the zenith of ignoring physical needs is realized in the example of a farmer in Iowa that Pollan describes and his commodity crops which “are basically inedible;” they, like all the other commodity crops are bought and paid for before they are ever grown and, as such, must follow a long and intricate path before they ever reach the table (Pollan, 2006). If inedible food is not the epitome of ignoring the physical need to eat, then one does not exist. Food has been reduced to a tradable good and, along with it, the producers of the food (farmers, growers, bakers, chefs etc) to something even less.

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<sup>14</sup> These processed foods are overloaded with hydrogenated oil, high fructose corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, and Trans fats. While lacking in necessary nutrition, processed foods' main ingredients are nutrient empty sugar, water, fat, flour, starch, artificial colorings and flavors (Bolen, 2008).

Similarly, the industrialization of food supports a neglect of spiritual needs as well. According to Schlosser, “the whole experience [of ordering and eating at a fast food restaurant] is transitory and soon forgotten” (Schlosser, 2001). It hardly seems that anything which is a transitory experience could be fulfilling a spiritual need. The corn which is processed into such transitory fast food meals “is not something to feel reverent or even sentimental about” either (Pollan, 2006). When compared to the excitement and jubilation experienced upon the harvest of crops in the past, the harvest of such modern crops seems disappointing and unfulfilling; there is no joy to be had in the miraculous result of one’s labor having been mixed with the miracles of nature. Finally, as an example of the toll this type of production takes on the farmers who grow such crops, one farmer states that “the only thing [he] can control...is what time [he] gets out of bed in the morning (Schlosser, 2001). How is someone who can’t control anything that he does supposed to fulfill his spiritual needs. Furthermore, how is he supposed to create in accordance with his own standards? The answer, he can’t.

Not surprisingly, the same process which neglects or ignores physical and spiritual needs also fails to nurture social needs. Pollan’s grand end, the destination of his journey along the modern industrial food chain from farms, to feed lots, to slaughter houses and finally to plate, the consumption of the industrial food chain’s meal was “finished...in under ten minutes;” (Pollan, 2006) a meal which took months, maybe even years to produce from the first raw material of it took ten minutes to eat. Although this meal and other similar fast food meals are often shared with others, the brevity of them results in a stunted version of the social interaction which takes place during a typical

'sit-down' dinner. Eating together is not simply the action of eating in close proximity with others; sharing an experience such as 'having a meal,' involves more than simply doing the same thing. It involves social interaction and recognition of others as real, unique people.

A further assault on the interaction at the dinner table is exemplified by the Chicken McNugget. "The Chicken McNugget turned a bird that once had to be carved at a table into something that could easily be eaten behind the wheel of a car" (Schlosser, 2001). Many similar 'innovations' encouraged the 'on-the-go' meal and made the social gathering at dinner a memory of the past; many no longer even eat in close proximity, they eat alone on their way out the door. Such people don't even seem to have the time to recognize their own needs; they have reduced themselves to beings who don't need to enjoy physical nourishment.

However, the industrialized system that fast food chains encouraged did not stop there. Taking away traditional family dinners was not enough. Schlosser describes an even more egregious assault on human culture and tradition while visiting a McDonalds abroad. He notes that "this McDonald's was in Dachau, but it could have been anywhere-anywhere in the United States-anywhere in the world" (Schlosser, 2001). The gut-wrenching feeling that this particular McDonald's produces is not a coincidence. This feeling is the very denial of the social connection that such a place forces one to consider. When one visits the site of such a human atrocity, one cannot help but feel even more connected to the past and one's fellow human beings; it's as if their spirits still linger there reminding visitors of the pain they endured, of the pain no living thing

should ever have to endure at the hands of their fellow creatures. The McDonald's presence there suggests and encourages one to ignore the humanity manifest in such a location; it allows the spirits to be shrugged off as though they were the characters in a play rather than real people. Furthermore, all the McDonald's restaurants around the world encourage people to ignore the unique culture that they are in and to miss out on the unique cultural interactions available in a particular location; traveling is reduced to "saying you went somewhere" rather than an experience of another culture which helps one realize to a fuller extent her own identity.

Finally, the all important need to create according to one's own standards, which allows for us to create our own existence, is violated by the industrial food system. The industrial food system is inherently externally driven because it prides itself on consistency and efficiency. Such values leave little room for creativity or expression. Fast food restaurants demonstrate the ideals of consistency and efficiency perfectly. The fast food industry prides itself on consistency to such an extent that it has "turned commercial kitchens into small factories" (Schlosser, 2001). Workers are treated as though they were machines in a factory. They are made to operate according to strict schedules akin to the cleaning, maintenance and operating schedules regulating machinery. "The strict regimentation of fast food restaurants [workers included] creates standardized products" (Schlosser, 2001). Such products are not, and have little hope of being, the manifestations of human creativity. These products are not created because the workers felt the need to create them; they are produced because the workers have been reduced to their physical needs and the means for meeting those needs, money.

In fact, despite management being able to “impose its own rules about place, output, quality and technique” (Schlosser, 2001) on the production of fast food products, they too can not say that the products produced in the fast food restaurants which they run are manifestations of their own creativity. Managers do not impose rules of consistency because it is “expressive,” they do it out of the belief that such consistency and efficiency will bring in the greatest profit. As such, these managers are just as externally driven as the employees whom they manage; they are driven by the theories of profit making and their objectification of food and the profit this commodity can bring in<sup>15</sup>; these managers allow their decisions and their decision making processes to be reduced to economic theories; there is little active judgment involved<sup>16</sup>. Managers are not only alienated by their own objectification and external theories about profit gain, they are also rendered alienated by the equipment present in their restaurants. Because “the equipment only allows one process,” (Schlosser, 2001) the managers are not just psychologically prevented from altering process to fit their own standards, they are, like their subordinates, physically prevented. One might argue that the managers have the authority to remove the machines or trade them in for new ones, but this is rarely done considering the enormous cost that doing so would result in. Again, their decisions have been reduced to theories of money making. Furthermore, with this type of immutable equipment, “there is very little to train” (Schlosser, 2001). In fact, “all of the executives agree that ‘zero training’ [is] the fast food industry’s ideal”

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<sup>15</sup> This point will be picked up again in a moment when discussing the ways that theory imposes upon practice in the realm of food production and consumption.

<sup>16</sup> Decision making is an important aspect of human essence because being able to decide courses of action etc. allows us to act according to our own wishes and create our own histories.



(Schlosser, 2001). Eliminating the role of managers as trainers, these machines (fryers, shake machines, bread toasters etc.) in effect provide an external barrier to the initial social interactions and mentorship which typically occur between coworkers and often result in friendship.

In addition to the external impositions found in the fast food restaurant, similar impositions to human creativity and fulfillment are found in the processes of growing crops and raising animals. Here corporations exert their power and influence in the fields and pastures, or rather, the 'factories' that farms and ranches have become. Large companies, such as Tyson, "determine feeding schedules, demand equipment upgrades and employ 'flock supervisors' to make sure that corporate directives are being followed" (Schlosser, 2001). Struggling to compete, farmers and ranchers are often forced to "Sell-out" to such corporations and surrender their operations. Farmers may remain on the farm, but in reality, they are little more than factory workers manufacturing crops and animals; they reduce themselves to mere pawns of corporate bidding. Meat packing plants are now designed to meet just one goal: "to provide massive amounts of uniform ground beef so that all of McDonald's hamburgers [will] taste the same" (Schlosser, 2001). The local butcher who makes his cuts so skillfully that they are met without tension is obsolete in the world of industrialized food production; the quality of butchering an animal is reduced to a measure of speed and profit<sup>17</sup>

In discussing the external motives driving managers' decisions to standardize, their theories about profit making were mentioned. Such theories are one of the most

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<sup>17</sup> Quality in a meat cut also includes preserving the tenderness of the meat, the size of the portion, the cleanliness of the cut, etc.

prominent examples of how abstract theories can impose upon and prevent the satisfaction of human needs, which leads to the reduction of human beings to less than what the full fulfillment of their needs would make them. In order to understand how theories came to push managers in the sector of industrialized food production towards standardization, we need only to understand one overarching theory prevailing in our modern world and its ramifications. To sum this theory up in the simplest terms, it is the view that money is the be all and end all of life; the thing that all of us seek and the key to the good life<sup>18</sup>. It is not too much of a stretch to see how this ideal was abstracted from a partial picture of our alienated existence. Recall that it is a partial picture because it does not recognize the reality of our alienation as one that is not meeting our needs. In our alienated existence, the fruits of our labor are all we have at our disposal for the purpose of meeting our needs. The fruits of our labor are nothing more than what we can produce. We then use these products directly to meet a need or we trade them for the products we need to meet our other needs (this trading can be more abstract as the trades in our modern world usually are and involve money instead of actual goods). However, this picture ignores all of the non-materialistic needs and parts of us that we certainly do have. For example, money cannot buy us genuine relationships with others and it is questionable as to whether money can meet our other spiritual and social needs.<sup>19</sup> The problem with this partial picture is that it objectifies all of human production/activity and reduces people to money. Money is

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that this is simply an observation of the attitudes held with regard to money, which are widely supported in the United States.

<sup>19</sup> Today, it seems as though money can buy anything. As such, having money may allow someone to engage in social activities because they can throw elaborate parties, buy tickets to shows, and so on.

made out to be more important than anything else. With such an emphasis on money, everything, people, food, talent etc. is seen as a means for generating money and everything is given its price. This world view quickly leads people to wonder how they can make the most money from something as essential to human existence as food. From this question, psychological studies of human desire, consumption and purchasing soon follow.<sup>20</sup>

Through the manner described above, food corporations and franchises come to be run by “MBAs from Harvard who don’t know if a potato grows on a tree or underground” (Schlosser, 2001). These MBAs may not be familiar with the inner workings of potato life or of alienation, but they are well versed in the psychological underpinnings of consumerism which determine how best to draw in a profit. As nonsensical as it is to have people who know nothing about growing or preparing food running a food operation, the powerful theories regarding money and profit somehow turn it into a good idea; these processes are reduced to processes for profit making. When the time comes to decide on processes, they favor the processes that are most efficient and lead to the greatest profit, “but the canning freezing and dehydrating techniques used to process food [and turn it into a good commodity] destroy most of its flavor” (Schlosser, 2001). Rather than abandoning these processes for more traditional ones, they solve this problem by adding chemicals and artificial flavors to the foods they produce. Ironically, “the current methods for preparing fast foods are less likely to be

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<sup>20</sup> The introduction of the “supersizing” option was the result of a study conducted by a clever marketer who noticed that “deep cultural taboos against gluttony...had been holding us back” from consuming larger portions and more food (Pollan, 2006).

found in cookbooks than in journals such as *food technologist* and *food engineering*” (Schlosser, 2001). The MBAs from Harvard know that their customers would find something disturbing about this fact. As such they “would like people to believe that the flavors of their food somehow originate in their restaurant kitchens” (Schlosser, 2001) and they “work hard to obscure the histories of the foods [they] produce” (Schlosser, 2001). Once again instead of opting for the simple solution of traditional, more fulfilling food production, the money making theories drive them to “organize on industrial lines...prize consistency, mechanization, predictability, interchangeability and economies of scale” (Pollan, 2006). In other words they opt for the system which purposely prevents people from realizing the origins of their food in nature, expressing themselves through the way they grow and prepare food and is simply not practical everywhere; they opt for the reduction of humans into puppets. They envision everyone, everywhere “ordering the same food, from the same menu, fast food that taste[s] the same everywhere (Schlosser, 2001). They want to install industrialized food systems in areas where there is no clean water and sell hamburgers where people hold the cow as sacred. In a phrase, they don’t care about what is practical or important for human fulfillment and realization, only what is profitable. They fight nature instead of harnessing its abilities.

The entire ideology and resulting practices of the executives described above rests upon their ability to both see food as a commodity and to reify the profit that can be made from their food commodity. The ‘kitchen factories’ alluded to earlier are what “changed familiar foods into commodities that are manufactured” (Schlosser, 2001).

Seeing the sad frozen dinners that come out of such kitchens, it is much easier to view food products as commodities than as powerful expressions of human essence which link us to our world. Under this industrialized system, the food that is grown is itself of little value, the grower is of little value, and the consumer is of little value; they are no longer human. In fact, much of it “must be processed or fed to livestock before [it] can feed people” (Pollan, 2006). What is of value is the money that can be brought in from its sale. The industrial system of food production reinforces itself and the views which render it possible. The forced standardization of processes involved in growing and preparing food produce standardized, sad products which are not impressive save for the dollar amount that they bring in. As such, the reification of profit increases. This further encourages holding standardization and efficiency as supremely important. Concerns such as quality, health, and societal good are of little to no consideration.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the proliferation of the industrialized food system and the alienation inherent within it (the reduction of humans to money makers and food to commodities) to the entire globe, there are still many pockets of hope to be found. Hope of overcoming the alienation manifest in our interactions with food comes from farmers, communities and individuals who are choosing another way and betting on the future generations to do the same. We can only hope that the lessons they have picked up on will spread to the rest of us and provide a first step toward completely eradicating alienation in our lives. Slow Foods is a grassroots movement of this kind which

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<sup>21</sup> The advent of High Fructose Corn Syrup which could be added unknown to us to most of our foods rather than decreasing our consumption of regular sugars actually increased our consumption of sugar by about 30 pounds per person (Pollan 2006).

encourages people to enjoy the links that foods can provide to communities, individuals and the environment. Although it is a grassroots movement, don't be fooled it is not just a small group of hippies in Colorado and California. The movement has over 100,000 members in 132 countries (Slow Foods International, 2009). In addition to the fact that some people are already starting to see the problems of the industrial food system and opt out, there are some general facts about our interaction with food that make it an area of promise. For example, "toddlers can learn to enjoy hot and spicy food, bland health food, or fast foods, depending upon what people around them eat (Schlosser, 2001). This implies that kids can learn to like foods that are healthy for them and that connect them with their world instead of ones that separate them and try to make them into nothing but a consumer of as much food as possible. Furthermore, they can learn to view food and people for what they are the whole of what they are. If kids like such foods, then they will want to eat such foods and, in turn, they will have a desire to interact with foods differently than we do today.

Those attempting to show our kids a different way of interacting with food can be found in pockets all across the world. In *Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Hope's Edge* Pollan and Lappé offer a few examples of such pockets that can be found amidst the primarily industrialized land of the United States. The easiest and most prevalent of these pockets is the organic grocers such as Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and Vitamin Cottage, which are popping up in cities across the nation. Such grocers not only serve up organically grown,

whole foods which are more nutritious<sup>22</sup>, but they offer stories of origin along with their foods. Such stories inform customers about where the foods that they are about to purchase came from and often include descriptions of the farmers and ranchers who provide them (Pollan, 2006). Stories of origin not only allow customers to understand more about what they are putting into their bodies, but they encourage connections. They encourage customers to think about their dependence upon nature and their link to others via the preparation and production of food. Thinking about such connections is the first step towards realizing the whole person involved in the process of bringing food from the earth to the plate.

The contributions that Organic Grocers make towards an unalienated interaction with food do not end with origin stories. They also provide cooking classes which allow students to learn how food preparation can be an expression and an art rather than a chore. In fact many of the movements which advocate for involvement with food which is unalienated started with chefs. This is likely because chefs already see food as more than just nourishment or profit; it is their canvass, their expression and their art (Lapp  , 2002). Cooking classes also link people to each other as they practice their new skills and share their meals with one another. Whole Foods also provides links with nature and the community by encouraging customers to reuse bags, compost left over food and donate to local schools and charities. Finally, such grocers take a huge step away from alienation through the consideration and humane

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<sup>22</sup> Whole foods “are full of the micronutrient vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, phytochemicals, and fiber” (Bolen, 2008). For more information on balanced diets and the nutrients available in Whole Foods see Bolen, 2007 cited at the end of the work.

treatment they show their employees. Employees are offered benefits for riding their bikes to work, store discounts and share in excess profits. All of these offerings and practices teach recognition of not just whole foods, but whole people<sup>23</sup>.

Many of us recognize what these organic grocers are doing as a step in the right direction towards a more meaningful and fulfilling interaction with food, but some believe that what they are doing is not enough and criticize such stores for pretending to be something they are not. One group of such critics is the Beyond Organic Farmers. These farmers do not simply grow their food organically and feed their animals organic food, they “strive to recreate the harmonious relationships in nature, sustaining the health of creatures and the natural world” (Pollan, 2006). This type of farming requires a deeper understanding of nature. Achieving such an understanding requires a deeper connection and appreciation of the natural world and the way that it beautifully maintains so many interdependent species. Again, thinking and realizing this connection is the first step towards whole recognition of processes and how people are involved in those processes. Another group of individuals with a similar attitude is those that choose to hunt and gather. Pollan describes one such hunter/gatherer as “one who regards finding, preparing and preserving food as one of the great pleasures of life rather than a choice” (Pollan, 2006). This suggests that those of us who do not experience participating in the complete process of preparing a meal are missing out on one of the great pleasures of life. After having such a hunter/gatherer experience, Pollan offers readers an idea of what we might be missing out on. He reminds us that

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<sup>23</sup> These are simply observations that anyone who regularly shops at whole foods can pick up on.



“putting a great dish on the table is our way of celebrating the wonders of form we humans create from this matter” (Pollan, 2006). Those of us who have not participated in abstracting the raw material of a meal from our environment can only imagine how much greater an expression and awe such activities make the final meal which we share with family and friends. This experience creates such a strong link with nature, the past and those we share it with that our appreciation makes the meal “feel a little like ceremony” (Pollan, 2006). Perhaps all meals should be treated as ceremonies, celebrating the power of food to help connect us with our world and express ourselves freely. If they were, we might find that we are free to be more fully ourselves and to recognize others as unique individuals as well; we would be and would treat others as fully human.

Not all of us, especially those of us that live in the middle of concrete buildings and hardly ever see a tree, can imagine or even picture ourselves hunting and gathering our food in a forest, but other groups of people who are choosing to interact with their food differently suggest that we can still have a profound transforming relationship with food. Lappé describes such an escape in the middle of a busy city with the edible schoolyard, a typical school playground that has been turned into a garden in which the students can grow fruits and vegetables for themselves. In the garden students not only connect with and learn about the earth, they learn about themselves. The teacher in one such schoolyard informs us that “[he doesn’t] instruct a lot... [he] lets the kids play, experiment [and] learn by watching” (Lappé, 2002). In other words, he lets the kids do things their way; he does not impose standards upon them. They get to figure out what

works best for them and how to emulate the beauty in nature. Another example of meaningful food interactions changing lives can be found in prison gardening programs. In these programs low risk prisoners spend their time growing food for the community. This gives the prisoners a way of connecting with the community and themselves that sitting in a cell never could. Finally, advocates of the Slow Foods Movement “[emphasize] hands-on experiences, community interaction, and the pleasures of the table” (Slow Foods International, 2009).

Each of these groups is clearly opting to interact with food differently, but the question remains as to what difference it has made and how this difference expresses an unalienated interaction with food. The biggest difference between the industrialized interaction with food and the interaction that these groups express is one of connection. By creating interactions with food that include nature, others and, as odd as it may sound, ourselves, these groups foster relationships rather than damage them. Recall that one of the signs of alienated activity is that it cuts one off from nature, others and the self. Thus, its opposite must connect us with these aspects of our world.

There are two major ways that these new styles of interaction with food reconnect us with nature. First, techniques of farming and gardening which encourage us to “redesign the farm [or garden] as an imitation of nature,” also require us to “go back to nature and copy the methods to be seen in the forest and the prairies” (Pollan, 2006). This approach to growing food not only fosters a greater knowledge and appreciation of the beauty in nature, but it takes us out into nature, into the forests as a participant rather than a conqueror. Second, people who learn to observe and work

harmoniously with the natural world are more likely to feel connected to it than those who have never seen a plant that wasn't in a pot. Loving our mother earth as a mother and copying her beauty, these are the lessons of the beyond organic farmers and the modern-day hunter/gatherers; such experiences force us to recognize the part of our identity that is rooted in our natural connections with the world and as part of nature.

The lessons of these groups do not stop with those on the subject of nature, they extend and perhaps begin far beyond that in the realm of human relationships. In fact one of the beyond organic farmers that Pollan talks to says that "the reformation begins with people going to the trouble of buying directly from farmers they know-relationship building" (Pollan, 2006). Somehow participating in these new interactions, (farming, hunting, gathering, gardening etc) brings people together. For example, parents of a child participating in the edible schoolyard program commented that their son "used to come home and play video games [and that] now he comes home [and] tells [them] stories about the garden" (Lappé, 2002). When the edible schoolyard program was first put in, the teachers "were hoping the kids [would] use the time to talk about things that wouldn't normally come out in the busyness of the day" (Lappé, 2002). In other words they believed that the program would encourage the students to slow down and talk to one another in a meaningful way. The Slow food movement counts on food having this kind of effect on students. Their Slow Food in Schools [movement] helps to strengthen the food communities of tomorrow by engaging youth today" (Slow Foods international, 2009). Even if we can't explain it, it seems as though there is something about working to produce a meal that brings people closer. Pollan reiterates this point when he

comments upon “what a sturdy bridge caring about food can sometimes provide” (Pollan, 2006). In some sense we all care about food; after all, we need it to survive. Sharing this concern with one another can serve as a powerful bond of friendship.

Finally, participating in these meaningful interactions with food has an immeasurable impact upon the way one relates to himself. One of the strongest examples of this comes from those who had written themselves off in society as no good: the prison inmates. However, their experiences in the garden seem to have transformed them; “inmates involved in gardening were less than half as likely to return to prison” (Lappé, 2002). The explanation of this involves an inward change. “People need to feel useful; they need to feel their lives have meaning...seeing beautiful nutritious food spring from seeds we ourselves plant can certainly make us mortals feel like miracle workers” (Lappé, 2002). Perhaps this is precisely why the interactions make us feel better, but another explanation is that they allow us to express ourselves creatively and to share that expression with those around us. Somehow the homemade, not quite round pizza is always enjoyed more than the store bought “perfect” pizza.

Perhaps the biggest difference that these interactions with food make is that they force us to question our old theories about how things ought to be. The organic grocers take food “from the realm of ordinary protein and carbohydrates into a much headier experience, one with complex aesthetic, emotional and even political dimensions” simply by showing us where our food comes from (Pollan, 2006). In this way food begins to be viewed as what it truly is, a thread interconnecting all aspects of life. As a result people begin to question whether such an important aspect of life

should be regarded so lightly by our policies. The gardener inmates suggest to us that usefulness is not just seen in economic terms. Usefulness is something that we have been denying people for far too long simply because they are not greedy, money-making machines. Along the same lines, the beyond organic farmers teach us that “farms produce a lot more than food; they also produce a kind of landscape and a community” (Pollan, 2006). Finally, the modern day hunter/gatherers remind us to “eat [animals and all food for that matter] with the consciousness, ceremony and respect that [it] deserves” (Pollan, 2006). Basically, they all remind us that food isn’t just fuel; it is a link to our past, to nature, to our community and to ourselves.

The above picture paints the industrialized production of food as one which is inherently bad and riddled with alienation; contrarily, it pictures organic farming and other “nature knows best” type practices as inherently good, fulfilling practices. Despite the tendencies here, I want to point out a few anomalies so that the point about why a particular activity is alienated/not alienated is not lost. Recall from the earlier discussion that the dehydrating, canning and freezing process remove most of the flavor from foods. I mentioned that this problem was not solved by abandoning these processes, but I did not mention how it was solved: flavorists. Flavorists create the familiar flavors “by blending scores of different chemicals in tiny amounts, a process governed by scientific principles but demanding a fair amount of art” (Schlosser, 2001). The role that these flavorists play in the production of industrialized food is not an alienated one. In fact it is a fairly creative one that “one flavorist compared ...to composing music” (Schlosser, 2001). Furthermore, “in the absence of public credit or acclaim, the small

and secret fraternity of flavor chemists praises one another's work" (Schlosser, 2001). They are not only brought together through their unique interaction in the food production, but they interact much differently with the final product. One Flavorist says that "he enjoys walking down the supermarket aisles, looking at the many products that contain his flavors, even if no one else knows" (Schlosser, 2001). What is unique about these flavorists is that they enjoy the expression they find in their work whether or not anyone else acknowledges it. They are far less focused on the end product of profit and recognition than many of their industrial counterparts are.

Just as the industrialized food interaction has pockets of unalienated production, the organic and natural/historic way of interacting with food has alienated activities. As Pollan participated in many of the groups above (the beyond organic farmers, the modern hunter/gatherers etc) he described moments of alienation. During his foray into vegetarianism he noted how eating meat was "more sociable" and that "what troubled him most was the way [being a vegetarian] subtly alienated [him] from cultural traditions" (Pollan, 2006). It is true that choosing a strange and new diet can cut one off from the culture and friends that he has known. Those who do so are often given funny looks, hounded with thousands of questions and forced to skip out on certain cultural aspects (dining out, Thanksgiving dinner etc). Another point along similar lines Pollan makes upon making his hunter/gatherer meal. He notes that the "meal was more ritual than realistic" (Pollan, 2006). This comment brings up an important factor that needs to be considered in any reformation; the meals not only have to be fulfilling and unalienating, but they have to be practical as well.

One of the reasons that these examples were not brought up in their appropriate sections is that they are anomalies. For the most part, they are not true examples of alienated activity and unalienated activity. The flavorists are still in an alienated state even though from their perspective they do not experience their activities in this way. They are still alienated because they are part of the alienated food system. Furthermore, they are helping the alienated food system run and what is worse, expand.<sup>24</sup> No one except the CEOs and a select few others know that they exist and thus cannot recognize their activities as the human expressions they have the potential to be. Likewise, the alienation that Pollan felt from changing diets does not reflect a true transformation. The transformation in the food sector must occur as a community choice not an individual choice if it is going to lead to the complete eradication of alienation. If the choice is made on an individual level, it may still be a step in the right direction, but it will be hard to not be alienated from cultural traditions which reflect different values; it is difficult to not feel less human when one cannot participate in cultural traditions, but one may actually be more human by doing so.

Food naturally and historically has served as a link between us, nature, each other and ourselves. Furthermore, food plays a central role in the forming of our identities both national and individual. The above examples, although far from exhaustive, illustrate some of the ways that the industrialized production and consumption of food has changed food from the powerful linking force of the past into an alienating commodity separating us from nature, others and ourselves. Farmers and

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to understand that alienation is a societal problem. Marx did not intend for individuals to render themselves unalienated; the transformation must occur on a societal level.

others who are choosing to interact with food differently offer us hope that our interactions with food will not and do not have to be alienated ones. What they are doing differently is a matter of creating connection with nature, others and ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

In disambiguating Marx's comments on and identification of the various manifestations of alienation in the world, this project sought to clarify a valuable concept and thereby rescue it for current use from vanishing into the depths of obscurity. Particularly, alienation was to be recovered as a possible explanation of the numerous and varying problems plaguing our current relations with food. More broadly, alienation, once clarified, can be entertained as a viable underlying explanation of many, if not all, of the problems manifest in our current world.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, that this project has not, and did not intend to suggest that alienation is definitively the underlying cause of all of society's problems or even simply its food related problems; it merely suggests that this possibility has its strengths and ought to be seriously entertained.

If only one thing has been made clear in this project, it is that alienation is the result of a certain form of reductionism. Alienation results from activities and mindsets which allow human beings to be reduced to something less than what their essence suggests they ought to be. According to Marx, the essence of human beings is that they

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<sup>25</sup> Until the concept of alienation and its ramifications are clarified, alienation cannot be viewed as a viable explanation of societal problems because such an explanation would be just as unclear as no explanation at all.



have the potential to create their own existence. This potential arises as humans learn to produce in accordance with their physical, spiritual and social needs. As they produce in order to meet their needs, people learn not only to produce what they need, but how to create their world and themselves according to their own, freely determined standards. In this picture of human essence, alienation occurs whenever someone is reduced to a producer of just one type of good, a creature with only one type of need etc. One common type of reduction discussed was the reduction of human beings to their thought/theories which are produced by conscious activities.

Once the picture of alienation as a reduction of human essence into something lesser was obtained, the application of the term to the world of food was simple. Activities surrounding the production and consumption of industrial foods tended to exhibit and encourage the reduction of human beings into producers of money-making food commodities. On the other hand, less mainstream practices of food production and consumption tended to embrace the essence of human beings in their entirety.

Not only has the demystifying of Marx's concept of alienation proved useful in hunting for its various manifestations present in our interactions with food, but it will certainly prove useful for identifying the manifestations of alienation in other realms of human existence such as our modern interactions with the law and the environment. Furthermore, disputes regarding the truth of Marx's statements concerning philosophy, political economy, religion and the like can be, at least, more accurately and confidently debated with a better understanding of Marx's underlying assumptions in hand. Finally,

philosophy can maintain alienation as a coherent concept while allowing for the details of it to be altered and argued for.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> By this I mean that the concept of alienation being a state where a being has been reduced to something less than what their essence suggests they ought to be can be perfectly maintained while the definition of something's essence is disputed.

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