Although the term “alienation” is used frequently in popular and scientific circles, its precise meaning remains so unclear that many have questioned its value. Because the term has been imprecisely used and because present-day usage seems equally imprecise, it has also been recommended that the term “alienation” be either abandoned or conceptually clarified and more rigorously defined.

This study attempts to show that Marx used the terms “alienation” and “estrangement” both precisely and systematically, and that calls for the abandonment or clarification of the terms are unjustified with regard to the works of Marx. We are not convinced, however, that the lack of precision inherent in today’s use of the term “alienation” is reversible and that the term is at all useful as it has been employed in modern studies.

It is therefore important to distinguish strictly between Marx’s precision and today’s ambiguity and thus to abandon the widely held notion that many modern studies involving the term are somehow related to the Marxian tradition, when in fact they are not.

There are several reasons for today’s lack of consensus and systematic use of the term “alienation.” In this short space, we can only briefly
touch upon some of them. As used in popular language today, the term designates individual or group remoteness from and/or disaffection with something or someone. It may therefore be said that "alienation" stands for a discrepancy of some sort. Contemporary social scientists—not immune from the influence of popular language—design studies intending to locate and measure the individual's "alienation." Thus, for example, the individual's alienation (that is, remoteness or disaffection) from government or the political process is studied, and phrases such as "urban alienations" (Fischer, 1973) are coined.

In view of the multitude of cases in which it is possible to speak of remoteness or disaffection, "alienation" loses all specificity. It is at best a sophisticated term denoting a variety of conditions that could, without loss of clarity, be just as well apprehended with numerous other words. In fact, the use of vocabulary other than "alienation" to describe situations in which individuals or groups are remote from someone or something and/or are disaffected about something would most likely lead to increased specificity in the way language is used to describe social phenomena, by both laymen and social scientists. Instead of an all-encompassing term such as "alienation," terms more descriptive of various types of remoteness and disaffection could be employed. Certainly, this would not be a violation of the spirit of the "social science enterprise." On the contrary, social science as well as philosophy depends on a disciplined use of vocabulary in its attempt to apprehend reality.

Given the all-encompassing way in which "alienation" is often used, it is indeed understandable why some advocate dropping the term altogether from the social science vocabulary. Indeed, it does not seem to be necessary for a clear understanding of the various types of remoteness or disaffection. In actuality, the particularity of these various types, which are of special interest to social scientists because of their particularity, tends to be glossed over when "alienation" is used.

Of course, "alienation" is not always employed in an all-encompassing and indiscriminate way. Thus, attempts have been made to arrive at particular dimensions that could be subsumed under the term—that is, to apprehend particular situations of individuals' remoteness or disaffection. Seeman's six varieties of alienation (1976:268) serve as an example. These varieties (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation) represent an effort to avoid
using a term that is too all-encompassing. It remains unclear, however, why the term “alienation,” when used in this way, should be retained at all. There is no apparent advantage, for example, in calling “social isolation” a variety of alienation. “Social isolation,” however defined, remains social isolation.

It also remains unclear why only some situations and not others are categorized as “varieties of alienation.” The criteria for categorization have been quite arbitrary ones and are likely to remain so. For example, Seeman’s “varieties of alienation” only reflect one person’s judgment and attempt to abstract from the numerous ways in which the term “alienation” is used. It represents an attempt to create a consensus concerning the use of the term where there is no consensus. The basis on which this consensus could rest is in itself relative, making it both unlikely that a discipline-wide consensus could be sustained and that “alienation” as a term would be given a clearly defined meaning in the social science community.

Seeman’s endeavor, then, does represent an attempt to clearly define and consistently apply the term “alienation.” But the attempt has not been successful and the ambiguity often associated with today’s use of the term has hardly been overcome. Recent social analysis has often linked the use of the term to Marx and has justified it on the basis of his writings. In many cases, however, this linking has explicitly or implicitly distorted Marx’s thought and the way he used the terms “alienation” and “estrangement.”

The present study addresses the main distortions that have arisen from linking Marx to modern research and commentary on “alienation.” It also attempts to break some new ground in interpreting Marx and points out the implications for scholars who wish to utilize Marx’s concepts of estrangement and alienation⁴ in their own work. The aim here is both to contribute to the understanding of Marx’s work and to promote greater clarity and rigor in the way certain concepts, especially “estrangement” and “alienation,” are used in the social sciences.

In addition to making certain that the correct vocabulary and translations are used when discussing Marx’s theory of estrangement, it is equally important that Marx’s analytic framework as a whole be understood correctly. Only then is it possible to apprehend the function and value of his theory of estrangement for today’s social sciences. Marx
based his theory of estrangement on an "inventory" of each human being's capabilities. In his investigation of the nature of social organization, he found that throughout most of history individuals have not been able to live according to their capabilities. For example, by nature human beings are capable of subjecting production and the product of their labor to their conscious control. Yet, in actual life they are prevented from doing so. In other words, a discrepancy was found to exist between individuals' capabilities and how, in fact, they must live. Individuals were seen to be estranged in the broadest sense of the word. More concretely, taking capitalism as an example, Marx showed why a discrepancy existed between individuals' capabilities and how in fact they must live. He specified precisely the social processes that force individuals into such a discrepancy. He also specified the basis upon which it can be said that individuals are estranged and from what they are estranged.

For Marx, the desired form of social organization was communism, which, contrary to capitalism, would assure that individuals would be able to live according to their capabilities. Thus, the need for a communist society as perceived by Marx was based on the value judgment that individuals should be able to live according to their capabilities. Marx's call for a communist society did not, of course, only express the wish that individuals be able to live according to their capabilities. Marx maintained that once human beings have the opportunity to live according to their abilities, many other conditions would change for the better. Therefore, man would no longer be dominated by the product of his own labor, and his physical existence would no longer be subject to arbitrary exchange relations. Hence, the call for a society without estrangement is not based only on the abstract postulate that man ought to be able to live according to his capabilities. Marx also realized that if estrangement were not eliminated, the undesirable conditions of life brought about by capitalist social organization could not be abolished.

According to Marx, a form of social organization such as that which is prevalent under capitalism develops its own forces which in various ways will set the stage for the successful construction of a communist society. Marx did not advocate a society without estrangement only because of an abstract notion that it is desirable that individuals be able to live according to their nature. Rather, he asserted that if and only if individuals are able to live according to their abilities, which they possess by nature, will
it be possible to free humanity of the numerous burdens brought about by a form of social organization (for example, capitalism) which does not allow man to live according to his nature. For Marx, the ability to live according to one's abilities was not completely subject to the will of individuals. Sufficient historical development was seen as a necessary prerequisite to the successful formation of a society in which individuals would be able to live according to their nature.

This study shows that Marx considers estrangement to be a dichotomous phenomenon. If, as is the case under capitalism, individuals are prevented from living according to their capabilities, they are estranged. Evidence is presented here showing that individuals cannot be said to be more or less estranged if Marx is not to be misinterpreted. For Marx individuals are either estranged or not estranged.

Marx's theory of estrangement becomes a tool for the critical analysis of the capitalist as well as socialist societies known to us today. It is a tool for the critical analysis of all forms of social organization in which individuals are prevented from living according to their abilities.

NOTES

1. As the title of this study indicates, I do not speak of Marx's theory of alienation but of his theory of estrangement. Marx made a clear distinction between the terms "estrangement" (Entfremdung) and "alienation" (Entäusserung), and the two terms should not both be translated as "alienation," as customarily has been the case. Based on inadequate translations, social scientists in the English-speaking world have seldom made this distinction, which is so crucial to an understanding of Marx.

2. In this context, it will also become apparent that many studies involving Marx's theory of estrangement have overlooked this important fact.