

## Play and alienation

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### Abstract

At the dawn of industrial modernity, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a shadow lay over Europe. Sensitive artists and intellectuals like Rousseau, Schiller, and Herder described the atmosphere as an encounter with something *fremd* – foreign, strange, alien. Karl Marx later introduced the term of *Entfremdung* (estrangement, alienation), a metaphor for the wrong life and pathology, or a romantic *Stimmung* (mood, atmosphere), to social philosophy. After being applied to the sphere of industrial economy and class struggle, and later revitalized by philosophers of the Frankfurt School and the cultural revolt of 1968, however, the concept was dropped, even among critical philosophers. Was “alienation” maybe too far from practical life? Isn’t alienation contradicted by happy capitalism and consumerism?

Maybe, the phenomenon of play can make us revisit the philosophy of alienation and make the concept concrete for phenomenological analysis. In the case of play, players do not feel alienated. In terms of the temporal aspect of societal acceleration, play seems to constitute time-out in a world of stress. And in terms of the spatial aspect, human beings – especially children – can temporarily transform the most alienated environment into a place of play. This has even been reported from concentration camps. In this respect, play seems to be the “other” of alienation.

However, play is not just innocent and an expression of the “good life” as such. Play has changed pattern during the historical process. Sportification has created forms of play, which could be compared to industrial production: competition for centimeter, gram, seconds – *citius, altius, fortius* (‘faster, higher, stronger’) – stress. And the fortified places of sport games, the stadia, have sometimes been transformed into prisons and concentration camps.

This may lead to questions of contradiction: What does it mean that play is both mirror of society and critique of society? That play is both alternative to societal stress and itself underlying societal patterns, also alienating patterns? And how does play relate to identity, which constitutes another “other” of alienation: Who are we ourselves? Anyway, the study of alienation is not at all outdated, and it is precisely the study of play that can make it living.