

Marxism and the Search for Life's Purpose in the Age of Capitalism

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Abstract

The question of life's purpose has long preoccupied philosophy, yet in the twenty-first century it takes on renewed urgency amid alienation, precarity, and a global crisis of meaning. This article develops a Marxist account of purpose, beginning with Marx's theory of species-being and alienation and extending through the work of Althusser, Gramsci, and Lukács. Their analyses of ideology, hegemony, and reification reveal how capitalism distorts or obscures meaning, while also pointing toward collective praxis as a way to reclaim it. The article contrasts this framework with existentialist, idealist, and religious approaches, showing how Marxism uniquely grounds purpose in material conditions and solidarity. It concludes by connecting Marxist insights to contemporary struggles—from consumerism and digital commodification to climate and justice movements—arguing that Marxism remains a vital framework for rethinking meaning and purpose in a global, crisis-ridden age.

Keywords

Marxism, Alienation, Purpose of Life, Ideology, Existentialism, Meaning Crisis, Capitalism

1. Introduction: (The Crisis of Purpose in Contemporary Life)

I focus on Althusser, Gramsci, and Lukács because together they provide a dialectical account of structure, subjectivity, and social mediation—resources essential for diagnosing how capitalism generates a “purpose deficit.” Althusser's theory of ideology and interpellation explains how subjects are constituted; Gramsci's notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony chart how counter-purposes might be organized; Lukács's concept of reification and totality illustrates how individuals lose purposive agency in capitalist societies. Other strands—such as more econo-

mistic structural Marxism or poststructuralist neo-Marxisms—fall outside the scope here because they either underplay purposiveness or dissolve class dynamics central to this analysis.

Methodological note: This article proceeds by conceptual analysis rather than empirical investigation, focusing on clarifying underlying concepts and arguments rather than reporting field data.

In this paper, I use “life’s purpose” to mean a person’s overarching, constitutive aim or telos that (ideally) organizes decisions, gives coherence to projects, and anchors identity—distinct from “meaning,” which is the retrospective sense or narrative coherence attributed to one’s experiences. Whereas meaning is often backward-looking or interpretive, purpose is forward-directed and normative.

The search for life’s purpose remains one of philosophy’s most enduring questions. From religious doctrines that anchor meaning in divine will to existentialist affirmations of individual freedom, diverse traditions have sought to provide coherence to human life. Yet the twenty-first century presents a distinctive “meaning crisis,” characterized by rising alienation, social fragmentation, and discontent under advanced capitalism (Han, 2017; Rosa, 2019). Surveys reveal declining satisfaction with work, increased mental health struggles, and a widespread sense that contemporary societies fail to provide deeper purpose (Taylor, 2020). Social media and consumer culture, while promising connection and fulfillment, often exacerbate this crisis by commodifying identity and promoting competitive self-display (Fisher, 2009; Illouz, 2020).

This article proposes that Marxism offers a compelling philosophical response to this crisis. While Marx is often reduced to an economic theorist, his philosophy contains a profound account of human nature, history, and meaning. Marx’s concepts of species-being and alienation, together with his vision of communism as the restoration of purposive life, address the existential needs of human beings as creative, social beings. Later Marxist theorists such as Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Georg Lukács further illuminate how ideology, hegemony, and reification distort or obscure purpose under capitalism.

At the same time, Marxism’s dialogue with existentialism, idealism, and religion highlights its distinctive contribution. Where existentialists emphasize individual freedom in the face of absurdity, Marxists stress the material and collective dimensions of purpose. Where idealism locates purpose in Spirit or Reason, Marx insists on praxis and historical struggle. Where religion offers transcendence, Marxism grounds purpose in earthly human emancipation.

The aim of this article is therefore twofold: to reconstruct a Marxist theory of life’s purpose across its classical and contemporary articulations, and to demonstrate its relevance for navigating the meaning crisis of late capitalism. The central thesis is that Marxism provides not only a critique of alienation but also a constructive framework for living meaningfully in solidarity, praxis, and collective emancipation.

2. Marx on Purpose, Labor, and Alienation

2.1. Historical Materialism and the Grounds of Purpose

At the core of Marx's philosophy lies historical materialism, the principle that social being determines consciousness (Marx, 1977). Ideas of purpose, morality, and identity do not exist in abstraction but emerge from the concrete relations of production and social life. In this sense, the question of life's purpose must be situated in the material activities through which humans reproduce and transform their conditions.

This orientation challenges both religious and idealist accounts of meaning. Hegel, for instance, saw history as the unfolding of Spirit, with individuals finding their purpose in contributing to its rational progression (Hegel, 1975). Marx, by contrast, insisted that history is driven by material struggles, particularly class conflict, and that purpose must be understood through praxis—the conscious, transformative activity of human beings.

2.2. Species-Being and Human Creativity

In his early writings, Marx introduced the concept of “species-being” to describe humanity's distinct capacity for universal, conscious life-activity (Marx, 1975). Unlike animals, which act only to satisfy immediate needs, humans can project themselves into the future, create freely beyond necessity, and recognize themselves in their products. This capacity for creative, purposive labor is what makes human life meaningful.

For Marx, history itself is the record of humanity's self-creation through labor. The capacity to shape the world and realize human potentials through collective effort grounds purpose in a way that is neither transcendental nor merely biological. Purpose is not given from outside but emerges immanently through praxis.

2.3. Alienation and the Loss of Purpose under Capitalism

Capitalism, however, distorts this capacity through alienation. In the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, Marx outlined four forms of alienation: from the product of labor, from the process of labor, from fellow human beings, and from species-being itself (Marx, 1975). Labor becomes coerced, external, and estranged, reducing life-activity to a mere means of survival rather than an expression of human essence.

This analysis resonates powerfully today. Contemporary discussions of “bullshit jobs” (Graeber, 2018) and widespread employee disengagement illustrate how work often lacks intrinsic meaning. Marx's insight is that this condition is not an individual failure but a structural feature of capitalist production, which prioritizes profit over human fulfillment.

2.4. Communism and the Restoration of Purpose

Marx envisioned communism not only as the abolition of private property but

as the restoration of purposive life. In a society free from exploitation and rigid division of labor, individuals could cultivate multiple capacities: “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, and criticize after dinner” (Marx & Engels, 1970: p. 47). Such a life would overcome alienation by reuniting individuals with their labor, their community, and their species-being.

Purpose, then, is not found in wealth accumulation or transcendence but in self-directed, socially meaningful activity. The Marxist vision of purpose is inherently collective: it is realized in solidarity, cooperation, and the conscious transformation of society. As Marx famously declared, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, 1970: p. 65).

3. Extensions by Marxist Thinkers

3.1. Althusser: Ideology and the Construction of Purpose

Louis Althusser reinterpreted Marx for the twentieth century, emphasizing how ideology shapes individuals’ sense of meaning and purpose (Althusser, 2014). For Althusser, ideology is not merely a set of ideas but a material practice embedded in institutions such as the family, schools, media, and religion, which he termed Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). These structures reproduce the conditions of production by interpellating individuals into subject positions that appear natural.

Through interpellation, individuals are “hailed” into roles—worker, student, parent, citizen—that confer an apparent purpose. For instance, the ideology of meritocracy presents academic success or professional achievement as the natural telos of life, while consumer culture frames self-realization in terms of lifestyle choices. These purposes, however, serve the reproduction of capitalist relations rather than genuine human flourishing.

Althusser’s analysis demonstrates that much of what individuals experience as self-chosen purpose is ideologically conditioned. In this sense, alienation is not only economic but ideological: it operates through the very frameworks by which people interpret their lives. This insight complements Marx’s notion of species-being by showing how ideology obscures it.

Recent scholarship has extended Althusser’s insights to the digital era. Dean (2019) argues that social media platforms operate as ISAs, interpellating users into roles defined by visibility, consumption, and performativity. The “purpose” offered by online life—measured in likes, followers, and metrics—is thus deeply ideological, masking structural inequalities while channeling human energies into commodified self-presentation. A Marxist critique informed by Althusser reveals these forms of purpose as false, demanding the recovery of alternative, emancipatory aims.

3.2. Gramsci: Hegemony, Common Sense, and Counter-Hegemony

Gramsci shifted attention to culture and politics, analyzing how ruling classes

secure consent through hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). For Gramsci, hegemony is the process by which dominant groups project their worldview as “common sense,” embedding particular class interests in the very fabric of everyday life. Life’s purpose, under such conditions, is framed in ways that support the existing order: securing employment, purchasing property, raising a family. These appear natural and universal, yet they are historically contingent and socially constructed.

Gramsci also highlighted the possibility of counter-hegemony. Subaltern groups can challenge dominant meanings by forging an alternative common sense through education, cultural production, and political struggle. Life’s purpose, in this perspective, becomes a contested terrain: it is not simply imposed but continually negotiated within cultural and political struggles.

Recent interpreters of Gramsci (Mayo, 2015; Thomas, 2020) emphasize that his notion of hegemony remains vital for understanding how neoliberal capitalism secures legitimacy. The narrative of individual responsibility and entrepreneurial selfhood, for instance, shapes purpose around self-optimization and personal branding. Counter-hegemonic movements—such as climate activism, feminist struggles, and labor organizing—propose alternative purposes rooted in solidarity, justice, and sustainability.

Gramsci’s philosophy suggests that recovering life’s purpose requires engaging in cultural struggle, creating new forms of common sense that enable collective emancipation. Purpose, in this sense, is not only individual but historical: it emerges in the project of constructing a counter-hegemonic order.

3.3. Lukács: Reification and the Recovery of Meaning

Lukács advanced Marxist philosophy by analyzing how capitalism produces reification, the process by which social relations take on the appearance of objective, independent things (Lukács, 1971). In a reified world, labor, commodities, and even human relations are reduced to quantifiable, impersonal objects. Time becomes standardized, labor is fragmented, and individuals experience themselves as mere cogs in an impersonal system.

Reification undermines purpose by fragmenting human experience and concealing the social totality. Life appears as a series of isolated tasks or measurable performances, rather than as part of a coherent whole. This diagnosis anticipates contemporary critiques of bureaucratization and quantification, where metrics, audits, and algorithms dominate both work and personal life (Beer, 2016).

For Lukács, the antidote to reification is class consciousness. By recognizing the social totality and one’s place within it, individuals can transcend fragmentation and recover purposive agency. Purpose is restored not by retreating into individual projects but by situating oneself within the collective struggle of the proletariat.

Recent scholars (Fraser, 2019; Jaeggi, 2018) have built on Lukács to argue that

reification is central to contemporary experiences of meaninglessness. From the quantification of academic performance to the commodification of intimacy on digital platforms, reification permeates daily life. Yet, as Lukács suggested, collective struggle remains a way to reassert agency and reconstruct purpose beyond capitalist fragmentation.

4. Dialogues and Contrasts

4.1. Existentialism: Freedom, Absurdity, and Collective Praxis

Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus argued that life has no inherent meaning. For Sartre, human beings are “condemned to be free”: without predetermined essence, individuals must create their own purposes through choices (Sartre, 1993). Camus, meanwhile, described existence as absurd, a confrontation between the human longing for meaning and the world’s indifference (Camus, 1991). In his view, life’s purpose arises not from discovery but from rebellion—living fully despite absurdity.

There are clear affinities between existentialism and Marxism. Both reject divine teleology and emphasize human responsibility for meaning. Yet their divergences are equally significant. Existentialism often focuses on the individual subject’s confrontation with freedom, whereas Marxism situates purpose within material conditions and collective praxis. Sartre himself acknowledged this tension, later calling Marxism “the unsurpassable philosophy of our time” (Sartre, 1976), because it accounted for the socio-economic structures within which freedom is exercised.

Recent commentators (Critchley, 2019; Chamsy, 2022) note that existentialism’s emphasis on subjective freedom can be complemented by Marxism’s attention to structural constraints. From this synthesis, one can see that purpose is both individually chosen and collectively conditioned. Alienation and absurdity are not only existential conditions but socially produced, and rebellion must therefore take collective as well as personal forms.

4.2. Idealism: Spirit versus Praxis

Hegel’s philosophy of history located purpose in the unfolding of Spirit. For Hegel, human history expresses the progressive realization of rational freedom, with individuals serving as instruments of Spirit’s development (Hegel, 1975). Life’s purpose, accordingly, lies in aligning oneself with the march of Reason.

Marx inverted this account (Marx, 1970). He argued that ideas do not drive history; rather, material forces and class struggles do. To locate purpose in Spirit is to obscure the concrete realities of labor, exploitation, and praxis. Purpose, for Marx, is grounded not in metaphysical teleology but in the transformative activities of human beings.

This shift democratizes the question of meaning. In Hegel’s system, “world-historical individuals” such as Napoleon embody Spirit’s purpose; in Marx’s sys-

tem, ordinary workers individuals” such as Napoleon embody Spirit’s purpose; in Marx’s system, ordinary workers become agents of history. Life’s purpose is thus not participation in a transcendent rational plan but the collective struggle for emancipation through praxis.

Recent philosophers (Žižek, 2012; Loick, 2019) have argued that revisiting the Marx–Hegel dialogue remains fruitful for understanding purpose today. While Hegel highlights the importance of historical totality, Marx grounds this totality in material relations. The result is a view of purpose that is historical without being metaphysical, collective without being abstract.

4.3. Religion: Transcendence and the Opium of the People

Religious traditions have long provided a dominant answer to the question of purpose. Christianity, for instance, teaches that life’s telos is to serve God and attain salvation. Such accounts provide existential comfort but, for Marx, also function ideologically. In his critique of religion, Marx famously described it as “the opium of the people”: a consolation for suffering that discourages efforts to change the conditions producing that suffering (Marx, 1975).

From a Marxist perspective, religion offers a false resolution to alienation. By deferring purpose to a transcendent realm, it distracts from the task of transforming earthly conditions. As Eagleton observes, Marx’s critique was not simply dismissive; he acknowledged religion’s role in expressing real human suffering and longing for justice (Eagleton, 2014). Yet for Marx, authentic purpose requires confronting those conditions directly, not escaping them through transcendence.

Contemporary debates (Boer, 2021; West, 2017) suggest that Marxism and religion need not be seen as entirely opposed. Both articulate concerns with justice, love, and solidarity, though they diverge on whether these are grounded in divine command or human praxis. For Marxists, the highest purpose is not obedience to God but participation in collective emancipation.

4.4. Contemporary Relevance: The Struggle for Meaning in Late Capitalism

For instance, recent research shows that higher scores on Purpose in Life measures strongly predict lower levels of depression and anxiety across large adult samples (Boreham et al., 2023). Surveys also indicate that over half of young adults in the United States reported lacking “meaning or purpose” in the past month, a trend associated with declining mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 2023).

A standard critique of Marxism is that its prescriptions can lead to authoritarian outcomes or that it is overly deterministic in economic terms. This account resists authoritarianism by grounding purpose in individuals’ abilities to critically appropriate and transform social conditions, not by obeying top-down commands. It also avoids crude economic determinism by treating economic pressures and ide-

ology as mutually mediating forces, thereby preserving purposive agency alongside structural constraint.

4.5. Alienation at Work and the Crisis of Labor

The workplace remains a primary site of purposelessness under late capitalism. The intensification of precarious employment, the rise of platform labor, and the spread of what Graeber (2018) terms “bullshit jobs” highlight how many forms of work lack intrinsic meaning. Employees often report disengagement, burnout, and a sense that their labor contributes little to personal or collective fulfillment (Bailey et al., 2019).

From a Marxist perspective, these conditions exemplify alienation: workers are estranged from their products, their labor process, and their own human capacities. The modern discourse of “quiet quitting”—workers withholding emotional engagement and doing only what is contractually required—can be interpreted as a symptom of alienation (Fleming, 2023). Such behaviors express a refusal to invest meaning in labor that has become emptied of purpose by capitalist organization.

A Marxist framework suggests that meaningful work must reconnect labor with species-being. Cooperative enterprises, worker-owned firms, and forms of labor that directly serve social needs offer glimpses of such a reorientation. Restoring purpose requires restructuring work so that it becomes an expression of collective creativity rather than an instrument of profit.

4.6. Consumerism and the Commodification of the Self

Late capitalism also fosters meaninglessness through consumerism and commodification. Individuals are encouraged to locate purpose in acquiring commodities or curating identities through consumption. Social media intensifies this dynamic, transforming selfhood into a brand managed through likes, shares, and metrics (Illouz, 2020).

Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism remains strikingly relevant here. The pursuit of meaning through commodities is inherently unsatisfying because it reduces being to having (Fromm, 2013). Instead of expressing species-being, individuals are alienated into endless cycles of consumption. The commodified self becomes a hollow performance, producing anxiety rather than purpose (Han, 2017).

A Marxist alternative points toward purpose in use-value rather than exchange-value: in activities and relationships that meet genuine needs and foster flourishing rather than merely signaling status. Such a reorientation resists commodification and reclaims human life from market logics.

4.7. Ideological Success Narratives

Capitalism sustains itself ideologically by linking purpose to success narratives such as the “American Dream” or neoliberal self-optimization. These narratives frame

life's telos as career advancement, property ownership, and personal achievement. Yet structural inequalities mean that many cannot attain these goals, leading to despair when failure is internalized as individual inadequacy rather than systemic contradiction (Fraser, 2019).

Althusser's notion of interpellation helps explain how individuals adopt these narratives as their own purposes, even when they produce suffering. The ideological script of hustle culture, for instance, valorizes overwork as meaningful, obscuring its alienating effects (Fleming, 2019). Marxism unmasks these narratives as false purposes and insists that meaning must be sought beyond capitalist definitions of success.

4.8. Activism, Solidarity, and the Recovery of Purpose

Amid these crises, many individuals find renewed purpose in activism and solidarity. Climate movements, feminist struggles, racial justice campaigns, and labor organizing provide frameworks of meaning that transcend individualism. Participants frequently describe activism as transformative, aligning personal fulfillment with collective emancipation (Klein, 2019).

These movements embody Marx's call for praxis: they unite reflection with action, critique with transformation. Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony helps explain how they construct alternative purposes rooted in justice and sustainability. Lukács's emphasis on totality highlights how these struggles resist fragmentation, linking personal agency to historical change.

In this way, Marxism does not merely diagnose purposelessness but points toward its remedy: purpose arises when individuals participate in collective struggles that challenge alienation, resist commodification, and build emancipatory futures.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Collective Philosophy of Purpose

Recent scholarship continues to engage Marxism in relation to purpose and meaning. Roberts (2023) elaborates how alienation under capitalism structures subjective orientations and contributes to deficits of meaning. Similarly, Siddiqui (2023) revisits Marxian categories of crisis and accumulation, offering resources for a normative critique of capitalism that remains attentive to purposive needs.

The meaning crisis of contemporary life reveals the inadequacy of traditional answers to the question of life's purpose. Religious transcendence, biological reductionism, and individualist existentialism each address aspects of the problem but fail to account for its social and historical dimensions. Marxism, by contrast, situates purpose within material life, species-being, and collective praxis.

Marx's analysis of alienation shows how capitalism estranges individuals from their own creative capacities. Althusser reveals how ideology constructs false pur-

poses that serve the system. Gramsci emphasizes the cultural struggles that shape common sense and meaning. Lukács diagnoses the fragmentation of reification and points to class consciousness as a way to recover purposive agency. Together, these insights form a comprehensive account of how purpose is lost and how it may be reclaimed.

Engaging in dialogue with existentialism, idealism, and religion highlights Marxism's distinctive contribution: it is historical without being metaphysical, collective without erasing individuality, and immanent without recourse to transcendence. By grounding purpose in praxis and solidarity, Marxism provides a framework for living meaningfully amid the crises of late capitalism.

The highest purpose, in this view, is not the pursuit of wealth, status, or private fulfillment alone but participation in the emancipation of humanity. To live meaningfully is to contribute to the collective project of overcoming alienation and creating conditions in which all can flourish. As Marx insisted, philosophy's task is not merely to interpret the world but to change it (Marx, 1970). In reclaiming this imperative, we rediscover purpose not as an abstract ideal but as a lived, collective practice.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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