

Reading 2.2

Decoding Modern Society: *The Matrix* Trilogy and the Realm of Alienation

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The Matrix (1999) was one of the most financially successful movies of the late twentieth century. More importantly, almost instantly, the movie began to exert an unusually high degree of influence on popular culture, and the term, *matrix*, despite its established usage in various areas of inquiry and research, quickly came to be associated with the film. Indeed, *The Matrix* represents such an effective formula linking action sequences, stunning visuals, and an intellectually compelling storyline that subsequent films belonging to the “tech noir” genre (a combination of film noir and science-fiction; esp. Meehan 2008) have been measured in terms of their ability to achieve a comparable combination. Arguably, despite numerous attempts, to date, none has succeeded at outdoing (or equaling) the cult-status and formula of success of *The Matrix*.

Though *The Matrix* trilogy is far from flawless, and has its share of detractors, in order to appreciate the movies as both an expression of and a contribution to contemporary culture, the film must be understood as being centered on a message about the present age as well as the condition of modern societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In fact, there is a high degree of affinity between the thrust and underlying message of *The Matrix* trilogy, on the one hand, and sociology and modern social theory, on the other. Yet, judging from the continuously growing list of books and articles that have been published about the trilogy during the last decade, the affinity of one of the films’ key theme with prominent traditions of classical and contemporary social theory appears to have been lost on most of the films’ critics and interpreters. As this literature has focused overwhelmingly on philosophy, religion, and post-modernism, the trilogy’s social-theoretical message and its relevance to us today, has remained neglected (see Irwin (2002; 2005), Lawrence (2004), Grau (2005), Constable (2009), Yeffeth (2003), Kapell and Doty (2004), Couch (2003), Seay and Garrett (2003), Worthing (2004), Horsley (2003); for a partial exception, see Diocaretz and Herbrechter (2006), especially the first three chapters).

The widespread neglect of the affinity between *The Matrix* trilogy and contemporary social theory is symptomatic of a growing lack of awareness (“reflexivity”) with regard to the defining features of modern societies and their impact on how we live our lives. . These features and related contradictions have been the theme and subject matter of social theory for almost two centuries, although particular theorists have been concerned with them in different ways, and to differing degrees. In this reading, I distinguish between two types of social theories, reflexive and reflective. *Reflexive theories* were conceived in order to illuminate modern society as a social system fraught with a variety of contradictions and conflicts . Some of the conflicts are between surface appearances, ideologies, social and political groups, interpretive frames, and underlying economic, and political and social forces that shape empirical reality in many different ways. By contrast, *reflective theories* were less (if at all) concerned with how the contradictions and conflicts inherent to modern societies may influence, taint, or thwart the project of analyzing those societies. *The Matrix* trilogy provides an excellent illustration of these two types of social theories.

The Matrix Trilogy and the Social Theory of Jean Baudrillard

A few minutes into *The Matrix*, the hollowed out version of a well-known book by postmodernist social philosopher Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* ([1981 [1994)], functions as a place to hide diskettes with illegal computer programs. Baudrillard was one of the most well-known postmodern philosophers, and the most prominent sociologist among the postmodernists. Since the 1980s, he has come to be regarded as one of the most important social theorists of the second half of the twentieth century. As Douglas Kellner put it,

Baudrillard, a “strong simulacrist,” claims that in the media and consumer society, people are caught in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra, which have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external “reality,” to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even “reality,” no longer seem to have any meaning. And the narcotized and mesmerized (...) media-saturated consciousness is in such a state of fascination with the image and spectacle that the concept of meaning itself (which depends on stable boundaries, fixed

structures, shared consensus) dissolves. In this alarming and novel postmodernist situation, the referent, the behind, and the outside, along with depth, essence, and reality, all disappear, and with their disappearance, the possibility of all potential opposition vanishes as well. As simulations proliferate, they come to refer only to themselves: a carnival of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the omnipresent television screen and the screen of consciousness, which in turn refers the image to its previous storehouse of images, also produced by simulatory mirrors. Caught up in the universe of simulations, the “masses” are bathed in a media massage without messages or meaning, a mass age where classes disappear, and politics is dead, as are the grand dreams of disalienation, liberation, and revolution (Kellner 2011: 321-22; see also Hazelrigg 1995:25-6).

As will become apparent, this apt characterization of Baudrillard’s perspective describes the condition of those who are hooked into the matrix, and their experience of “reality.” Indeed, Baudrillard’s perspective applies to the experiences of those who only know the matrix (without knowing that there is a matrix, or anything outside of it). His theory does not apply to the totality of *The Matrix* universe¹, however, and those who inhabit Zion. It is interesting that aside from the training programs, we do not see any forms of entertainment, such as televisions, radios, magazines, or videogames in the Zion reality—the most ubiquitous entertainment venues that many of us today use to distract ourselves, and each other, from facing the “desert of the real”—e.g., unpleasant feelings caused by the fact that there are many forms of social injustice, that life is not necessarily great even if we own a lot of commodities, and so forth. As the reflexive critical theorist Kellner put it in the above quote: to those who exist outside of the matrix, there is a “referent, [a] behind, and [an] outside, along with depth, essence, and reality . . . and . . . the possibility of . . . potential opposition.” Consequently, with regard to the logic of *The Matrix* trilogy, efforts to interpret the films as a kind of “postmodernist manifesto” are misleading inasmuch as the actions and concerns of the people living in the “real world” of Zion are characteristically modern, as they are oriented toward and inspired by such ideas and ideals as *freedom, peace, and solidarity*.

Marx, Weber, and Modern Society as the Realm of Alienation

Although there are several scenes in *The Matrix* in which its social-theoretical thrust is readily apparent, the “pill-scene” being the most obvious. Neo must choose between discovering the real world, symbolized by a *red pill*, and returning to the false reality of the matrix, represented by a *blue pill*. When Neo meets Morpheus for the first time, the latter asks Neo whether he is willing to find out “how far the rabbit-hole goes” (an obvious allusion to *Alice in Wonderland*). Neo indicates that he is ready to find out.

Morpheus: Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Neo: The Matrix?

Morpheus: Do you want to know what it is? The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Neo: What truth?

Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.... Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes... Remember, all I'm offering is the truth, nothing more...

In this exchange, Morpheus communicates rather eloquently the gist of the theories of Marx and Weber, two significant founders of sociology, with Marx as the critic of alienation, and Weber as the critic of the “iron cage.”² In both regards, the language appears to be carefully chosen, and message underlying *The Matrix* cuts to the heart of what *alienation* and *iron cage*, respectively, were meant to convey: that something rather insidious is at work in modern societies, that social

theory is the means with which it can be illuminated—and what this means both for our lives, and for the research orientation and self-understanding of sociology as a social science.

Marx and Alienation

Marx's critique of alienation was directed at the linkages that sustain modern society—between the capitalist mode of production, the bourgeois social structure, the role of labor in individuals' lives, and the character of social relations—all of which translate into a rather peculiar relationship between the individual and reality generally. Marx identified alienation as occurring on four levels: “man's alienation from the product of his labor, from his life-activity, from his species being” – the consequence being “the alienation of man from man”– in short: the alienation of man from nature and from himself.”³ In *The Matrix*, there are four modes of alienation as well: (1) the simulation of the Matrix as “reality”; (2) human beings thinking that they live “normal lives,” while in fact they vegetate in transparent pods and provide the machines with energy—the human “labor power”; (3) the “real world” of Morpheus and his comrades inhabiting a hovercraft, with is presented as a world of war and work—of industrial labor; and (4) the specific reality of the matrix—the world “as it was at the end of the twentieth century”—our world.

Viewed from the vantage point of the critique of alienation, modern society appears as a self-sustaining feedback loop (or force-field) between several dimensions of societal reality that become more and more aggravated with every generation. Over time, in order to maintain the stability and functioning of the system, mechanisms were established to buffer or alleviate *both* the destructive consequences resulting from the spread and inescapability of alienation that might threaten the survival of the system—and the social and technological advances that accompany the spread of capitalism, and which could engender qualitative social transformations. In fact, every new generation experiences and internalizes as normal the preceding generation's experience of alienation, as well as the corresponding technological advances, so that the specifically modern condition of alienation that accompanied industrialization has been compounded over and over again, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, as Morpheus puts it, “no one can be told what the matrix is” (i.e., how modern

society is the realm of alienation), since that would require a way of looking at reality that is not itself a function of specific societal conditions.

Thus, we generally perceive reality in ways that are directly an extension of how modern society functions, how modern society is a self-reinforcing feedback loop propelled ahead by the continuous deepening and proliferation of alienation. We not only perceive reality through alienation; whatever it is we perceive, also *objectively* is the product of layers of alienation, and could not be imagined independently of it. Therefore, to “tell” another person that the world is governed by alienation is an utterly meaningless statement, unless the person is able (and willing, since willful ignorance—as it appears to be on the rise today—is an insurmountable obstacle to attaining the necessary understanding) to undergo the labor of seeing for himself or for herself. As a result, “you can feel” how modern society is the realm of alienation, *especially* “when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes,” as Morpheus intones, as these are areas of social existence in which the paradoxes of modern existence are particularly pronounced, but *knowing* about it is a different story entirely, as it requires an effort to change *one’s own self*, to the degree that our specific identities replicate and extend concrete social conditions.

Weber and the “Iron Cage”

With regard to Weber’s “iron cage”, it is important to note beforehand that until recently, the related discussion in English-speaking sociology refers back to an incorrect translation, since Weber did not use the German version of that phrase. In his 1930-translation of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons, the later “pope” of post-World War II theory in sociology, had turned Weber’s term, *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, into “iron cage” (Weber [1904/5] 1958: 181). Yet the expression Weber had used should have been translated as a *steel-hard casing* (Weber [1904/5] 2002a: 123) or a *shell as hard as steel* (Weber [1904/5] 2002b: 121). A *shell* or *casing as hard as steel* is an image rather distinct from a cage made of iron, in several regards. An iron cage is pre-industrial, before the invention and proliferation of the Bessemer method that facilitated the conversion of iron into steel. While iron is vulnerable to the elements, steel does not rust and lasts much longer. Furthermore, *cage* and *casing* denote

different surroundings: a person that is held in a cage usually is aware of that fact, while a person contained in a casing—encased, as it were—is much less likely to know of his or her condition. This, to be sure, is exactly what Weber tried to relay—that modern society, as a function of the Protestant ethic, is a prison that not only is difficult (or, indeed, impossible) to discern, but a prison that is part of ourselves, of our constructed identities: *the prison is part of us, and we are part of the prison*. Here, too, “no one can be told what the matrix is” (i.e., what the implications are of the casing as hard as steel, for how we exist: picture Neo and all the others in their pods, hooked both into the power-plant and the matrix), since appreciating this insight and its far-reaching implications is dependent entirely on the willingness of the individual to make the effort to understand, and to recognize that his or her world operates according to forces and imperatives that are quite different from what s/he had thought.

“There is No Spoon”

Due to the sway of alienation and the steel-hard casing in modern society, the ability of individuals to contemplate the difference between the presumed as well as the imagined forces shaping social and individual life requires no less than the effort to “bend oneself”, or, to be more precise, to “bend one’s self.” In a sense, it is necessary to undo the bending that results from alienation and our existence inside the casing as hard as steel; as it were, we need to “straighten out.” The seemingly cryptic exchange between Neo and the “spoon boy” in the Oracle’s (Gloria Foster) living room pertains to the necessary precondition for Neo’s ability to “change the matrix”:

Spoon Boy: Do not try to bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth.

Neo: What truth?

Spoon Boy: There is no spoon.

Neo: There is no spoon?

Spoon Boy: Then you’ll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.

The challenge for the rebels, when they are inside the matrix, is to realize and act upon the fact that the matrix is a system of power that works mostly because the ability of individuals objected

to it, to recognize it as a system of power, is impaired. As a result, those who are aware of the existence of the matrix, within the matrix, still are not able to “think” that fact while acting in the matrix, as a consequence de facto submitting to the power of the simulation. Put differently, the challenge is to recognize that we are alienated, and that we have to be aware of this fact in order to be able to act in ways that are not an extension and function of the system of power we inhabit—even though this awareness alone neither is “dis-alienating,” nor empowering. *Yet related reflexivity is a necessary precondition for efforts at dis-alienation and self-empowerment.* Even though initially, Neo does not know of his ability to “fight” the matrix, what distinguishes him from the other rebels is that in the course of events, with their help, he acquires the capacity to realize that even though the matrix appears to be real, it is not—and to act on this realization. Thus, while inside the matrix, there may appear to be a spoon or any other material object or force, the latter cannot be bent by will alone, but by appreciating fully that they merely are the simulations of spoon, objects, or forces, and dependent on the rebels’ willingness to submit to the logic they represent.

As becomes evident very quickly, the many choices Neo is compelled to make, and which he genuinely and “honestly” must make himself, as well as the training he is being put through, are designed to enable him to become aware of the simulated nature of the matrix, while inside the matrix, to act on this knowledge, and thus to attain a certain degree of control. Put simply, in *The Matrix*, we follow Neo’s training as a transformative learning process induced by the rebels, especially Morpheus, under the sage guidance of the Oracle, *to hold two thoughts at once*: that the matrix is real and unreal at the same time. To translate this insight into the language of social theory: due to our positions in society, we inevitably suffer from alienation, but our existence as alienated beings is not an essential feature of our nature, but the result of clearly identifiable, interlinked, and historically grounded social, political, cultural and economic processes. Presumably, it is not accidental that an African-American male—Morpheus—and an African-American woman—the Oracle—know more about Neo and his abilities than he does about himself—the white middle-class guy who would not consider the possibility that he is alienated, on the one side, and two characters who are amply familiar with a multiplicity of forms of alienation (including especially the history of slavery), on the other. This is the

meaning of *Temet nosce*—“Know thyself”—above the Oracle’s kitchen door: without the help of others who have different social backgrounds and experiences that are the result of different locations according to race, class and gender (as social manifestations of alienation), it is not possible to know our (alienated) selves fully, or even sufficiently, and the limitations (as well as capabilities) our positions in society impose on our ability to read, relate to, act within the world.

The Matrix as a Critique of Everyday Life

The matrix is alienation not primarily as a subjective experience, but as *a simultaneous social process and structural condition that manifests itself at the level of subjective experience*. It is not simply a general process resulting from industrialization and the spread of the capitalist mode of production, but sociologically, much more specific, as it pertains to a particular kind of relationship to nature—individually, socially, and environmentally/globally—that emerged alongside the formation of modern society.

In the above exchange between Morpheus and Neo, references to everyday life abound, hinting at the fact that what those hooked into the matrix experience as the normalcy of everyday life is everything but normal and everyday, since in reality they are energy suppliers in a vast power plant, each placed in an adult-sized pod filled with a gelatinous liquid. Morpheus elaborates in one of the later training programs, as he and Neo walk down a city street:

Morpheus: The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around. What do you see? Business people, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it.

The problem of overcoming the matrix is also the problem of how to get across to those who are hooked into it that their experience of seemingly straightforward everyday life is a more or less total state of exception. (Shutting down the matrix, even if the rebels could do that, would not be

an option, given that millions of people would wake up in the power-plant, in a state of utter shock and horror from which most would not be likely recover.) Thus, the central theme of *The Matrix* is the all-pervasive yet increasingly invisible prevalence of *alienation* in the world today, as it is sustained and mediated by the media, including especially in everyday life as the stage upon which the program of alienation is being played out, with corresponding difficulties to overcome it.⁴ When Morpheus first explains the matrix to Neo, he describes it as a computer-generated, “neural-interactive simulation ... a dream world built to keep us under control.” The matrix was engineered to conceal the omnipresence of alienation from human beings, in order to extract the human life-force. Yet, how exactly does alienation continue to be an issue, in this purportedly modern, if not postmodern day and age, after two centuries of purported enlightenment in what feels like every conceivable direction?

Social Theory through *The Matrix* - *The Matrix* Trilogy as Social Theory. From Classical to Contemporary Social Theory

Classical social theory, as it developed in Europe, started out from the experience of alienation, and its development accompanied successive transpositions of alienation to higher levels of mediation shaping cultural, social, political, economic, legal and educational processes and institutions.⁵ Everyday life is the arena where these transpositions occur and play out.

Concordantly, at the heart of *The Matrix* is the notion that everyday life in modern societies is highly problematic.⁶ The basic premise is that we do not “naturally” grasp the true character of social life: the matrix is a literal illustration of the fact that we tend to “live our lives, oblivious,” as Agent Smith puts it, that modern society entices us to *think* that we understand the world in which we live, while also relying on and perpetuating many strategies designed to provide disincentives for individuals to attain that understanding. Thus, we remain embedded in many layers of ideology, and even if social coexistence would be possible on the basis of members of society relating to reality in undistorted ways (which it is not likely to be)—*modern society in general, and its current transnational incarnation in particular, add specific layers of illusion and ideation that on their own would make it virtually and practically*

impossible to see political, social, cultural and economic realities realistically.

Indeed, it would never occur to most of us that modern society could function according to patterns and principles that have less to do with our notions about life, liberty, and the pursuit and happiness, than with systemic imperatives and dynamics that contradict commonly held assumptions basic to the construction of meaningful life-histories. Partly, these imperatives and dynamics are tied to the tension between human beings as biological life-forms that are more or less “out of control” (i.e., not fully in control of themselves, their own lives, and their relations with others, and especially, with Other), and the world we have created: the world of industrialization and post-industrialization, of high technology and digitalization. Yet we inhabit a social world that requires that we, humans, are “in control,” both with regard to our collective affairs, and our own selves. Still, for the most part, *we are not in control*. Thus, the issue is less that we do not know what is real, but that we are not in a good position to discern that the real as it appears on the surface of social life itself may be problematic, and to confront accurately the reality of modern society as the primary challenge.

The problem is that inevitably we rely on the cultural, political, and social representations of how modern society maintains order and functions, as the basis from which to try to explain the totality of modern society, and our place within it. Yet these representations themselves are products of that which we try to understand and explain. In this sense, the effort to conceive of what drives modern society is similar to trying to understand the plots of many science-fiction stories, novels, and movies in which early assumptions about reality turn out to have been wrong (Gunn 2003)—and whose appeal may be related to the sense that prevailing perceptions of modern society may be problematic.

Beyond the Mirrors: Reflective and Reflexive Social Theories

Several authors have noted that In *The Matrix*, there is an abundance of mirrors (e.g., Clover 2005; also Brannigan 2002; Motter 2003). The abundance of mirrors provides a visual representation of the reflection-reflexivity divide. Interestingly, the history of social theory can be divided into two primary types: those that *reflect* how modern society is a realm of alienation,

and those that adopt a *reflexive* stance with regard to the link between modern society and alienation, and critically reflect upon this fact.

Social theories that *reflect* how modern society is the realm of alienation treat alienation as a given that is inevitable in industrialized societies, and thus, not in need of special attention. Social theories of this type result from efforts to interpret conditions in actually existing modern societies in terms of widely accepted norms and cherished values. (somehow break this up – this needs to be fairly straightforward for students) Yet, to a certain degree, those norms and values are bound to be manifestations of alienated conditions, rather than the basis for illuminating the latter. Such social theory recreate (rather than illuminate) the feedback loop running on alienation, which in turn influences norms and values, which in turn reinforce and amplify alienation. Theories that either reject or downplay the notion that alienation did and continues to play a key role in modern societies reduce their ability to consider and explicate the theoretical and practical issues and concerns that should be at the heart of social theory: how both the pursuit of prosperity *and* alienation have been shaping the evolution of modern societies to the present time. To the extent that particular social-theoretical agendas deny or neglect that alienation is a process that constitutes a key dimension of modern societies, those agendas are in danger of concealing rather than revealing the matrix quality of present social, political, cultural, and economic conditions. This problem is especially virulent given that there are no theories that enable us to better confront the kinds of theoretical and practical challenges that Marx's theory was designed to address. If we reject Marx's critique of alienation as a legitimate and necessary endeavor, we run the risk of theorizing today's societies in ways that undercut novel ideas, visions, and perspectives relating to the future and the possibility of transformative social action. In *The Matrix*, reflective theories would correspond to the blue pill: "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe," as Morpheus states. In social-theoretical terminology, taking the blue pill would be synonymous with the choice to interpret social reality according to principles that are themselves manifestations of the alienated social world. Paradoxically, we are socialized to read modern society in ways that are compatible with and reflect the realm of alienation, without reflecting upon the processes and structures that sustain modern society as both the cause and consequence of the proliferation and

compounding of alienation, in all areas of social life, and all types of social identity. The culture—and cult—of consumerist individualism would be a prime example.

By contrast, *reflexive theories* endeavor to jolt our minds out of the peculiar combination of complacency and spectacle that sustains modern societies. Theories of this type encourage us to confront cognitive dissonance and its social-structural causes. We are encouraged to struggle against alienation (if only against the *effects* of alienation, to notice its sway), to recognize the causes of alienation, and to recognize how our own identities are shaped at least in part by existing alienated conditions. The impetus of reflexive theories—especially critical social theories—is revolutionary, in terms of how we *see and conceive of the world*, though not necessarily in terms of how we act in and upon the “real world.” Reflexive theories, thus, correspond with the red pill—a visualization of the willingness to find out what reality really looks like

On the one hand, modern societies are not simply what they seem to be. On the other hand, our selves at least partly are the product of modern social reality and social structure. As a consequence, understanding modern society requires that we recognize that our selves are constituted by it, to whatever degree. . While as inhabitants (both pillars and cogs) of the machinery of modern society, we are supposed to assume that we have the capacity to understand the machinery, inasmuch as we think we know the social world we live in, without making the necessary effort, we may be similarly deluded as those who are hooked into the matrix. It should be the purpose of all social theories to contribute to our ability to recognize this fact.

The Matrix trilogy represents three stages, in relation to alienation. *The Matrix* is about the (thrilling and/or disturbing) discovery that modern society is the realm of alienation (theory). *The Matrix Reloaded* is about the question of what to do with that discovery (how to mediate theory and praxis: “I wish I knew what I’m supposed to do” is Neo’s first statement of substance in *Reloaded*). *The Matrix Revolutions*, finally, is the effort to overcome alienation (praxis). The initial, largely negative audience reactions to the second and third movies may be explained through the fact that discovering alienation is far more exciting than the rather tedious question of what to do with this discovery. Inevitably, the feel of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* is different

from *The Matrix*, since they do not culminate in unqualified liberation, but—more realistically and consistently—in a truce between the humans and the machines.

The Matrix Trilogy: A Critique of Work Society?

In concrete terms, The Matrix trilogy is about how work continues to burden the majority of human beings, even though technological developments were supposed to bring liberation from toil. How, then, might social theory help illuminate the thrust of these movies? Paradoxically, alongside vast increases in productivity and technological advances, especially in the industrialized world, humans do not work less, and do not have greater control over their lives. In fact, work continues to become more important for individuals' sense of self-worth, especially in the United States (and to a slightly lesser extent in Western Europe). How to explain this phenomenon? Rather than being ancillary to modern societies, a specific mode of labor constitutes their core. Labor is not something that happens and is organized in society, but society exists by being organized around the labor process: there is direct link between how the majority of people “make a living” and how society is organized—this was the message Marx had worked to formulate and tried to communicate (see Postone 1993).

Despite all the changes that appear to be taking place in actually existing, modern capitalist societies, many of which are perceived to be far-reaching indeed, the paradox is that the “fundamental structural features of capitalism” (Postone 1993: 386) are stable by continuously being reconstituted. The social, political, and cultural structures remain stable, while under the impression of “globalization,” the economic circumstances that surround their lives are changing rapidly. As the structural features of modern capitalist societies (especially race, class, and gender) have become ever more refined, a social structure has taken hold that seems to be so firmly ingrained that the possibility of a “beyond the matrix” has become inconceivable to most human beings alive today.

There is no point in fighting the matrix, or fighting to overcome the matrix (i.e., alienation), if related efforts do not involve the qualitative transformation of relations between

men and women, and between whites and members of other races and ethnicities (by implication, considering the state of the Earth in *The Matrix* trilogy, also between humans and nature). In reverse, efforts to move beyond alienation can take the form of changing the nature of social relations in such a manner that at the very least *obvious, visible, conspicuous* forms of alienation, such as racism and sexism, lose their foundation in society, or put differently, to ask what kind of social change would be needed to undercut the regeneration of forms of alienation so obvious as racism and sexism.

From the beginning, the Wachowskis conceived of *The Matrix* as an “intellectual action movie.” It is not likely that the movie will lose the status as the most successful such effort, for some time to come, the reason being the degree to which *The Matrix* is hooked into, reflects, and is critically reflexive of, the increasingly problematic state of modern societies since the late twentieth century. In the absence of profound changes in politics, culture, economics, and society with far-reaching implications for individuals’ lives and identities—beyond modern society as *work society*—a similarly (or more) effective approach to designing a Hollywood movie to communicate a story of liberation and emancipation related to the specific kinds of repression, power, and built-in limitations characteristic of the present time and age, is difficult to imagine.

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¹ Although I will refer mostly to the first part of the trilogy, *The Matrix* (1999), I will also presuppose familiarity with *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* (both released in 2003), as well as *The Animatrix* (2003)—the set of animated background stories—especially the two segments entitled “The Second Renaissance,” which could hardly be more sociological, with such references as to the “vanity and corruption ... of humanity’s so-called ‘civil societies’”, the Holocaust-like treatment of formerly submissive intelligent working machines as the threatening Other, narrow-minded politics, and environmental destruction—and how humans “were” responsible for all of it.

² Marx did not have a high opinion of sociology as it was emerging during his life-time, nor did he regard himself as a sociologist. In fact, it was not until the late 1960s that Marx’s works came to be viewed as founding texts for sociology.

³ Marx ([1844] 1983), pp. 140, 138. Note that the German word Marx used is “Mensch”—meaning “human being.”

⁴ The writings of the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre may be the best reference point for illuminating this dilemma. See also Sheringham (2006: 135-37) and Goonewardana (2011). Since alienation is the experience that precipitated the rise of sociology (see, e.g., Ollman 1976, Geyer and Heinz 1992, Dahms 2011: 157-248), the related literature is vast.

⁵ These transpositions have amplified and transformed alienation. In the related literature they have been theorized in terms of commodity fetishism, reification, instrumental reason, and functionalist reason. See Dahms (2011: 93-157).

⁶ The literature on everyday life in social theory and philosophy has continued to expand. See especially Certeau (1984), Smith (1987), Robert (2006), Sheringham (2006), Lefebvre ([1947] 2002; [1961] 2002; [1981] 2005).