I’m an Alien in New York

How Capitalism Creates Alienation in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*
Abstract

This essay investigates how capitalism affects the characters in John Dos Passos’ novel *Manhattan Transfer*. It argues how capitalism in many instances leads to alienation in various ways. In order to understand the historical context of the novel and to perform this character study, the concepts of modernism, modernity, Marxism, capitalism and alienation are put forward in the theoretical framework as the foundation of the essay. The main theories used are Georg Lukács’ definition of *heaviness*, Ferdinand Tönnies’ discussion on community and society and Melvin Seeman’s presentation of the ways in which the term alienation has been used and explained over the years.

Keywords

*Manhattan Transfer*, John Dos Passos, Alienation, Capitalism, Marxism, Modernism, Modernity, Georg Lukács, Heaviness, Ferdinand Tönnies, Community, Society, Melvin Seeman.
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Introduction

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (Berman 15)

This quote is from the introduction of Marshall Berman’s important book about Marxism and modernity, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982), and it clearly demonstrates both the positive and the negative sides people believe the period of modernity brought with it. Some people thrived during these years, while others had a much more difficult time and instead felt left out. This led to *alienation* which is a key term when discussing Marxism and modernism, and it will be examined further on in this essay.

The author of the novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), John Dos Passos, was a modernist writer who strived to depict contemporary life in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Born in Chicago in 1896, Dos Passos had a first-hand experience of life in a large, modern city and he wrote about characters from various social groups, ranging from the manual labourers to the elite classes. Many of his literary works were concentrating on social issues and he often took a left wing approach (Dos Passos 343).

*Manhattan Transfer* is a novel which contains various characters: Jimmy Herf, Ellen Thatcher, Joe Harland and Bud Korpenning to name a few, and they all live on Manhattan in New York City. A number of the characters do not originate from the city, one of them has his roots in the countryside, and some arrive to New York from overseas, while others have lived in the city their entire lives. We follow certain characters over many years of their lives, while others we only encounter for a few hours or days. They belong to different social classes, nevertheless their lives sometimes intertwine with each other which makes it
worthwhile to follow them and understand their connections when analysing this novel. What almost all of them have in common is that they are all on a quest for a better life, since almost anything is better than the lives they live at present. Nonetheless, different obstacles stand in the way, and instead many of the characters’ lives, with some exceptions, go downhill from where they started out. Bud Korpenning, for example, is a young man who moves to New York from the countryside in order to escape an abusing father and in pursuance of a better life for himself. However, he has no luck in finding work and he has difficulties with managing to survive in a harsh and rapidly changing city. This is only one example of a character in *Manhattan Transfer* who strives to create something better for himself. The characters’ attempts to improve their lives are something which is fascinating on its own, but what is also of interest is how life does not always turn out exactly how they wanted it to, and the question is: what is the reason for that?

In this essay I will investigate *Manhattan Transfer* in connection with capitalism and alienation. I will examine how capitalism has become an obstacle in many of the characters’ pursuits for a better life. In order to perform this investigation I will use the concepts of modernism, modernity, Marxism, capitalism and alienation, because together these notions create the foundation of my analysis of *Manhattan Transfer*. I will draw on Georg Lukács’ text *The Theory of The Novel* with the intention of understanding the underlying reasons for many of the characters’ choices in their lives. I choose to study Lukács’ text, not only since he was a very influential figure to Western Marxists that belonged to the Frankfurt School, but also because *The Theory of The Novel* is, in particular, very useful for an analysis of *Manhattan Transfer* since he argues from a literary perspective. In his work, Lukács brings up the term *heaviness* which is closely connected to the feeling of alienation.

The characters in the novel should be viewed as representing ideals and different philosophies, rather than be regarded as real people. They are there to symbolise various ideas
and opinions and this is important to keep in mind when performing the character study which is what I will use as a method. To understand *Manhattan Transfer* it is of importance to comprehend the time it is set in: early twentieth century. The theory section thus, as stated above, includes a discussion on modernism and modernity, followed by capitalism. Subsequently, there will be a brief discussion on Marxist theory in general with a focus on Lukács’ text, and then I will narrow it down to its relation with alienation in order to put *Manhattan Transfer* in its context. In my analysis I will focus more specifically on how to apply this theory to my primary text, and the several modern, urban characters in *Manhattan Transfer*. The last part of the essay will be a conclusion in which I will present my findings and show how the characters are affected by capitalism and its accompanying representation of alienation.

Previous research on *Manhattan Transfer* has had New York itself as its subject, and has discussed the city’s place and importance in the novel. This can be seen in Michael Madsen’s article “‘No More’n a Needle in a Haystack’: The City as Style and Destructive Underworld in John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*”, which discusses how the city is the main character of the novel (38). Madsen also argues that in “[…] *Manhattan Transfer* we see great fragmentation and the majority of the characters and inhabitants in the city are alienated from each other – either because they choose to, or because there is no other way in the city” (40). Although Madsen discusses how the characters in the novel are fragmented, he draws this notion back to the city. My essay differentiates from Madsen’s in the sense of it focusing on capitalism and the alienation the characters might experience as an effect of that, the city is not my main focus. In “John Dos Passos’ Use of Film Technique in *Manhattan Transfer & The 42nd Parallel*”, Gretchen Foster discusses how Dos Passos uses methods in his writings which derived from the newly developed film industry, for example by means of montages (186-87). Moreover, an article which can also be connected to my essay to a certain extent is
“Modernity and Mechanization: ‘Pylon’ and the Novels of John Dos Passos” written by Axel Knönagel. The aim for my essay is, as stated previously, to focus on capitalism and alienation, and this is something Knönagel brings up to some degree as well. In his article, he tries to put William Faulkner’s *Pylon* in context by using Dos Passos’ novels *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* Knönagel discusses how the city is “the legendary place of opportunity, but also […] a place which, at the same time, demands an extremely high toll for the successes it makes possible” (593). This is a notion similar to what I will bring forward in my essay as well, together with how capitalism in the new, modern times, is demolishing the characters and their chances of a decent life, but again, as with Madsen’s article, Knönagel’s text has the city of New York and its urban life as its primary focus. My essay on the other hand emphasises how it is capitalism and its accompanying alienation which bring destruction to the characters’ lives, not the city in itself.

**Theoretical Framework**

In the theoretical framework of this essay I will discuss modernism, modernity, capitalism, Marxism together with Lukács’ ideas, and alienation. These sections will then work together in order to create an understanding of the early twentieth century that *Manhattan Transfer* is set in, to make an informed analysis of this novel. These four sections are important, since to comprehend *Manhattan Transfer* and my analysis, it is crucial to understand the context and the setting of the novel. We will start with the era as such: modernism and modernity.

**Modernism and Modernity**
Modernity transformed the lives of many people around the world and it is largely connected to industrialisation, which is generally considered to have started as early as the 1780s, and continued far into the twentieth century. Modernity is defined by Robin Walz as: “[t]he experience of living in a contemporary world that is being continually transformed by the processes of modernisation. An attitude, philosophy or worldview that aligns with the conditions of the modern world” (3). It brought with it many new ideas and innovations, such as the radio, the car, the telephone and the airplane, which drastically changed the lives of the people living during these years. What was developed during this time has clearly affected the lives of us living today.

Walz differentiates modernity from modernism, which he explains as “[a] cultural movement across the arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that departed from classical or inherited ideas about art and strove to replace them with new aesthetics that expressed the contemporary moment” (4). Modernism thus refers to the new way of cultural workings, whilst modernity is the period of time as such. This era changed the way in which people perceived their relationships to each other and how they interacted.

One who examined these relationships was Ferdinand Tönnies who wrote his work Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft in 1887, translated into English as Community and Civil Society. In it he differentiates between the community and the society. The community, or Gemeinschaft, is in his sense a place, or a feeling, of being utterly integrated with other people where everyone’s will is the same (22). Tönnies brings forward three varieties of communities: “In the first type of community we share our common physical humanity, in the second we share land held in common, in the last we usually share sacred places or worship the same deities” (28). However, more interesting in connection to this essay is his notion of Society, Gesellschaft, which he classifies as “a group of people who as in Gemeinschaft, live peacefully alongside one another, but in this case without being essentially united […], on the
contrary, they are here essentially detached” (52). Tönnies argues that as an individual you want to do things your own way, and do not necessarily want to listen to others’ desires. Furthermore, one does not do anything if one cannot gain something better or at least something equally good from it, since one is selfish in that sense (52). He continues to argue that each person’s only rule is to do things which merely benefits oneself, and that one only recognises others when it would help oneself in some way or another (65).

It is quite clear that in these new, modern times of the twentieth century, people, if they constantly want to improve their living conditions, cannot live their lives in the same ways as they have always done: “[everyone] is forced to innovate, simply in order to keep his business and himself afloat; anyone who does not actively change on his own will become a passive victim of changes draconically imposed by those who dominate the market” (Berman 94). If one did not adapt to the new world, one would be left on the outside looking in, and would not be able to take part of the new opportunities modernity brought with it.

These notions put forward above, can be connected to capitalism in the sense of a capitalist mainly being motivated to improve his or her own conditions, without being completely united with other people in society. A business man, for example, might not be in close contact with the workers in his company since they belong to different classes. To understand capitalism however, and to comprehend why it became increasingly important during this period of time, it is of interest to know more about its mechanisms and this is what will be discussed next in order to put my analysis of Manhattan Transfer in context.

Capitalism

Capitalism has, according to the American economist Robert Heilbroner, “three historically unique features: an all-important dependency on the successful accumulation of
capital; a wide-ranging use of market mechanism; and a unique bifurcation of power into two sectors, one public, one private” (1321). He continues to argue that the technological changes, which occurred during the period of the eighteenth, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, all happened due to the drastic increase in capital and this was because it became much more profitable to develop new inventions than ever before. However, to constantly generate technological advances does not always bring prosperity with it. Various occupations became old-fashioned since they were no longer the most efficient way of doing things, thus leading to multiple people losing their employments (1323).

These new technological improvements led to different parts of the world becoming more and more connected with each other. The radio and the telephone, as stated previously, were developed in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and these factors led to world trade having the possibility of expanding even further. This new world market, which stretched across the globe, had the possibility of mass production which created difficulties for local production methods for ordinary people. Smaller companies did not have the option of competing with huge corporations since the larger ones had completely different opportunities to succeed, than small, local businesses had (Berman 91). Due to this decrease in productivity in the local areas for inhabitants in the industrialised countries, several people and their families, many of whom were still living in rural regions, chose to, or where indirectly forced to, move to the big cities. This led to an urbanization on a completely new scale. In the cities of New York and London populations increased tremendously.

Money and its worth have developed over the years of human history and this is discussed by Georg Simmel in his famous book *The Philosophy of Money* (1900). Individuals are almost always trying to increase the amount of money they already have, and it is this which keeps the economy spinning. According to Simmel, it is “of the greatest socioeconomic significance” that people continue to make every effort to acquire a larger income than before
(165). He states that “money arouses contradictory emotions in the human subject, the deepest sorrow and the highest bliss [...]” (279). Money can make the difference between life and death. Simmel argues that the exchange of commodities creates the notion of how one product or service is taken from one person, on their own accord or not, and transferred to someone else (289). Workers, for example, therefore do not own their product, and they are not given the opportunity to decide when that commodity is going to be sold, since it is most often not theirs to give away.

Tönnies, very clearly, brings forward how competition is imperative in “the field of commerce” (65), where one constantly has to win in order to survive. Capitalism has grown due to the change in our society from having a primarily agricultural economy to instead having an industrialised one. Businessmen and capitalists merge together and they both strive for the same goal, a constant exchange of products and services, and this is what creates capitalism. This can be connected back to the previous part on modernity and Tönnies’ definitions of community and society. Tönnies brings up that a farmer, for example, more commonly “looks inwards to the core or the centre of the place, the community, to which he belongs. The business class, on the other hand, turns outwards; they are interested only in the line of communication, main roads and means of transit” – the society (66). A person from the lower classes, such as a worker, therefore tends to care more about what is in the vicinity, what happens further away is not of any particular interest. Moreover, a person of the business class would have a wider worldview to understand how the globe’s resources and its people can be used in the most efficient way in order to make as much money as possible.

**Marxism, Heaviness and Seeking Characters**

In the eyes of a Marxist, capitalism does not lead to independence for the workers under any circumstances. The workers do not have the possibility to decide for themselves
how to live their lives. They are, as Paul Bowles states, “destined only to fill roles as wage earners; workers, having only their capacity to labour to sell, have no choice but to sell it” (44-45). They do not have any other option than to work if they are going to survive. Capitalism is an inevitable and integrated part in Marxism since the subject was discussed by Karl Marx frequently during his life time.

Friedrich Engels discussed, in his *Principles of Communism* (1847), what the foundations of communism essentially were and the reasons for this political ideology’s existence. One of the greatest impacts on communism was the industrial revolution which by the time of the 1840s was growing larger and would continue to develop even further, and this can be seen in an extract from the manifest:

> This industrial revolution was caused by the invention of the steam engine, the different spinning machines, the mechanical loom and a host of other mechanical contrivances. These machines, which because of their expensiveness could be installed only by the big capitalists, changed the hitherto prevailing mode of production. They replaced the workers, because the machines could produce products at a lower cost and with greater efficiency than the workers could produce them with their imperfect spinning wheels and weaving looms. The machines delivered the control of industry into the hands of the big capitalists and turned the little possessions of the workers, their tools, looms etc., into just that much worthless junk. Thus the capitalists soon got possession of everything, while nothing was left for the worker. (Engels 7)

The Frankfurt School emerged as a response and a further development to what Marx and Engels had brought up in their lifetimes. Since, as time goes by and the way of living changed for people all over the world, so had Marxist critical theory in order to stay relevant.
According to Harry F. Dahms, the theorists belonging to this school “were determined to establish the foundations for the most theoretically sophisticated and complex critique of the advanced capitalist society that emerged during the early twentieth century” (4). These academics then further developed Marx’s ideas and criticisms to better suit the relatively new social sciences which became more and more emphasised in the twentieth century (4). The school became a rare institution because of its particular focus on Marxist theory and its accompanying workers’ organisation. However, the participants had different alignments from each other since they did not agree on all subjects. Some members stood by the ideology of the party, while others did not agree with its decisions (Wiggershaus 34).

Georg Lukács, an extremely influential figure to the Frankfurt School, discussed the term *heaviness* in connection to literature in his work *The Theory of The Novel*. The book, he stated in a preface published in the 1960s, “was written in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world” in 1914-15 (12). The world was not the same as it had been in the past, the First World War changed and ended lives of millions of people and new developments altered their lives even further, and in connection to this, heaviness is claimed to be,

> the absence of present meaning, a hopeless entanglement in senseless casual connections, a withered sterile existence too close to earth and too far from heaven, a plodding on, an inability to liberate oneself from the bonds of sheer brutal materiality, everything that, for the finest immanent forces of life, represents a challenge which must be constantly overcome […] (57-58)

This can be seen as a reflection on modernity in the sense of not being in control over one’s own life, and the complexity of releasing oneself from the capitalism which rules countries and people’s lives in the modern age. Lukács brings forward how a novel is completely hypothetical in the manner of containing characters longing for a “[…] Utopian perfection, a
nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality […]” (70), a nostalgia for past times where everything was much more simple and concrete and not as abstract as in his contemporary time. Lukács describes the novel and its characters as “seekers” (60). These seeking characters can be seen as the extensions of the heaviness which they might experience. They are trying to find the meaning of life which they have lost. The sense of the characters being in search for meaning suggests that what the characters are striving for, and the process of accomplishing it, cannot be communicated right away; the seeking is part of the core of the novel (60-61).

These various notions of modernism, modernity and capitalism, together with Marxism and what Lukács brings up regarding literature, clearly reflect a world view which both modernists and Marxists experienced: the feeling of not being in connection with either oneself or with the world on a whole. This brings us to the last section of the theoretical framework to finish this contextualisation of *Manhattan Transfer*: alienation.

**Alienation**

Melvin Seeman lists five different ways of how the term alienation has been used and described over the years, with notions such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement (784-89). The concept of alienation therefore refer to the sensation of feeling left out. During the period of modernity, several people had the feeling of standing on the outside of society, looking in. They had no part in the world anymore since the world was rapidly transforming. People did not have enough time, or the possibility, to adapt to this new world and way of living. In his article, “The Development of Marx’s Alienation: An Introduction”, Lanny Ace Thompson brings up Marx’s notion of alienation with his theory of *estranged labour*, otherwise known as *alienated labour*. People, mainly workers, were seen as being merely parts of a machinery. They were perceived to be parts of
the work force, rather than individuals, since they were not allowed to use their own minds and ideas; they were simply cogs in a wheel (25-26). Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times shows a famous example of how Chaplin, acting as a worker, is trapped in a machinery. Although it is portrayed in a humorous way, it can be seen as a critique of modernity’s new ways in which technology and machines had begun to play huge and important parts of life. In the film, Chaplin becomes a literal cog in a wheel.

Throughout Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, the term alienation is discussed. From his point of view workers are performing tasks which they perceive as compulsory since they do not have any other option to realise themselves and grow as people. The workers are not individuals with their own ideas anymore, instead they have become products which the capitalists can use or dispose of at any time. They are, to reference back to the comparison to Chaplin, caught in a machine. Marx states:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor’s product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. (29)

The process of working itself has been transformed into an object of labour. The workers are therefore not in control of their own bodies any more, since they spend their time creating things, objects or services, which in reality do not belong to themselves, but to someone else.

Thompson also brings up Marx’s thoughts on alienation. He states that “[…] Marx understands alienation as the domination of a subject by an estranged object of its own
creation” (25). The subject stands in for the worker and the object is the commodity or the income which this product or service generates, that the worker essentially has created. However, the object does not belong to the worker, even though he or she is the one who has produced it. Instead it belongs to someone else, a corporation for instance. Thus, this leads to the worker not having much power to influence his or her working or living conditions since labour in itself is becoming an article of trade. This creates an evaluation of how much a product is worth in terms of money. The assessment does not only depend on how well a commodity or service is produced or performed, but also on how the market looks, and this can change from day to day. To quote Thompson again: “The product is not controlled by the workers, but by the capitalists” (26). As a result, this creates the estrangement or alienation from what the worker has made, he or she is no longer in charge of what they themselves generate and this is a reason for feeling outside and not having control (26).

Thompson discusses the term *species-being* which Marx used in his writings and which essentially means how we humans differ from other animals because we have our consciousness. We as humans show what it is to be human through labour, labour that we believe is meaningful. The workers who make their living in factories and so forth, working with things that are not particularly accomplishing for the human consciousness, are therefore not living the way humans should live their lives in this world according to Marx. The concept of estranged-labour is therefore not natural for us humans (27). The consciousness needs interactions between people to thrive, but estranged-labour impedes this, and creates alienation even further (28).

Daniel Burston discusses the term alienation, which in psychiatry in the nineteenth century was associated with “hallucinations and delusions, which loosened the patient’s grip on consensually validated versions of reality, engendering a loss or distortion of a patient’s sense of personal identity, which estranged them from themselves and others” (283).
However, later on, in the twentieth century the meaning of the term had changed to a certain degree when academics in other fields than the psychological started to use it as well. These philosophers, particularly in the social sciences, began to use alienation as a description indicating “a conscious experience or a state of feeling at variance with or mistrustful of the status quo […]” (284). This is different to how psychoanalysts regarded the issue since they saw it as an unconscious process, but now it was referred to as something conscious (284). Furthermore, the phrase began to be used in a wider sense to the extent of not only referring to individuals but instead to larger groups of the inhabitants in a country, such as the workers (283-84). Burston brings up how Marx argued that because labour had become an article of trade and was not rewarding for the workers anymore, they felt separated from themselves and their spirituality. They had come to be regarded as commodities and work force only. Marx argued that the case of alienation came from “… a class-divided society…” (285) and it was this which capitalism had left in its wake (285).

To conclude this theory section, it is clear that modernism, modernity, capitalism, Marxism and alienation all interrelate, without one the others would not be the same. A new world was created due to modernity and Modernism since new developments established during this period of time altered the lives of millions of people. As argued by Tönnies, people are mostly searching for ways in order to improve their lives, and a person will not do anything if they cannot benefit from it themselves (52). Capitalism thrived in these new environments and conditions, but it had its backlashes as well with certain occupations becoming redundant. One of the foundations of Marxism was that people felt they lost their place in the world. Marx himself discusses the term alienation in the sense of labour losing its value since, as Thompson puts it: “[t]he product is not controlled by the workers, but by the capitalists” (26). Moreover, Marxist theory, in relation to literature, was further developed by Lukács who is an influential figure to the Frankfurt School which strove to create a Marxism
that would suit the modern times of the twentieth century. Lukács discusses, in his work *The Theory of The Novel*, how characters in novels are “seekers” (60) and that they are nostalgic for a time that has passed (70). Seeman brings up five notions of how alienation has been used over the years, and they are powerlessness, meaningfulness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement (784-89). Burston discusses how alienation was mostly regarded as something which was individual originally, but later on it became something that could refer to larger groups in society (283-84).

Together these parts of my theoretical section, since they all affect each other, make an informed analysis of *Manhattan Transfer* possible since they demonstrate the context around the characters of the novel, and because they show how life could manifest itself in the era of modernity. I will order my analysis on the foundation of the character’s social classes and proceed from that. This thus means that I will start from the bottom of the social ladder and move upwards in order to reach the higher social strata.

**Analysis of Manhattan Transfer**

*Manhattan Transfer* is a novel in which the readers follow various characters who live in New York and their struggles in life. A few of them reside in the bottom of the social class hierarchy, for example Bud Korpenning and Joe Harland. In spite of them being in essentially the same situation in life, they differ from each other since Bud has always been regarded as a person of the lower class. He is a young man who arrives to the city from the rural area outside New York, looking to escape his abusive father and to acquire a working position. However, few opportunities present themselves to him and he finds it extremely difficult to survive in the city. Joe Harland, on the other hand, comes from a well-off family and was in the past a hugely successful businessman who used to be called the “Wizard of Wall Street”
(124) and made a great deal of money. Nevertheless, times have changed and he is now an alcoholic with money troubles, having to beg family members for money for rent and drinks. Even though these two characters’ backgrounds differ from each other, and they used to belong to different groups in society, Bud being a member of the working class and Harland a capitalist, they are now in the same situation which makes them feel connected. They have difficulties feeling united with the people around them and they both feel powerless and isolated. Both powerlessness and isolation are terms which Melvin Seeman argues are parts of the five ways alienation has been used and described over the years. They feel powerless and isolated in the sense of never truly being in a position of control in order to advance successfully in their lives, and of being completely on their own with no one to turn to for help since everyone is only striving to make their own life better (784-88).

Harland, who lost his place in the hierarchy due to his alcoholism, has difficulties regaining his position since his family is no longer willing to help him, and his cousin’s husband Jeff Merivale bursts out: “He is not my cousin…. He ought to be locked up. And next time you see him you can tell him this from me, Emily: if he ever comes here in that disgusting condition again I’ll throw him out”’ (Dos Passos 89). Harland has the choice of either leaving behind his family or being abandoned by them. This choice leads him to having nowhere to turn anymore. He has become isolated from the people which used to be important to him. He might also feel self-estrangement, which Seeman discusses, by not recognising himself anymore (789). He used to be on the inside, but has now been left on the outside, looking in on his family which he used to be a part of but is not any longer. He goes through “a conscious experience or a state of feeling at variance with or mistrustful of the status quo…” (284) as Burston states in his article. Harland is not in a position which he recognises and this makes him feel alienated from others. At one point in the novel, Harland himself explains the reason for having lost his position as a well-off man with a tie that, whenever he
wore it, he would earn money. However, he met a girl and in order to prove that he would do anything for her he gave the tie to her, but she simply regarded it as an old tie and “threw it in the fire…. (125). The girl did not care about an old tie, she wanted new things instead. The old tie becomes a metaphorical tie back to an era that is now gone because it, during this period of modernisation, lost its value. Everything was projected towards the new, and the old was not good enough anymore since developments and forward thinking were what became increasingly important. The girl is, on the other hand, the epitome of a new generation who wanted brand new, modern things. Tönnies argues that if an individual desires to do what pleases him- or herself, he or she might not want to listen to what other people are saying (52). Harland went against this and listened to the girl and that became, in his own mind, his downfall.

Bud is a typical working man who grew up on a farm. He believes that if he can acquire an occupation in the city, his life will improve. He has had a difficult upbringing, living with his abusive father whom he finally kills in order to escape. He spends his days searching for an employment and at the same time worrying that he will be discovered by the police and arrested for murder. Life in the city is not unproblematic and he searches for something which seems to become more challenging each day. He spends his days feeling that “[i]f I could git more into the center of things…. (Dos Passos 21) everything will be resolved. Bud is a clear example of a person who is feeling alienated, he considers himself on the outside of the centre, and he believes that if he could only get to this utopian place, which Lukács put forward, his life will improve (Lukács 70). This thought of his can be connected to what Tönnies discusses in regard to the community and society. He argues that a manual labourer usually “looks inwards to the core or the centre of the place, the community to which he belongs […]” (66). Bud is therefore a representation of a person yearning for a place in which he believes he will be in unity with people around him, but this place seems impossible
to attain. In order to avoid the police, and in large his whole life, he ends it by jumping from the Brooklyn Bridge since he does not seem to be able to “git more into the center of things....” (21), he remains on the outside, and is never allowed entry into the inner circle.

If one would move up a step on the social ladder from the working class one would find the businessmen and their families and this is where the Thatchers come in. A large part of the novel is dedicated to Ellen Thatcher who we encounter in the beginning of the novel as a new-born baby. The novel then follows her over the course of her upbringing and into her twenties. Ellen’s father, Ed Thatcher, is a businessman who is not fond of any risk taking regarding his work. The fear of losing his job makes Ed feel quite content with his position in the social sphere. The Thatchers are a relatively affluent family with enough money to sustain a good living standard, nevertheless, they are constantly reminded of what they could acquire if Ed would be a little more courageous. In the chapter called “Tracks” a man called Viler, who owes Ed money, is trying to convince Ed to take a risk and buy bonds, saying “[h]ell man you dont want to be in this damned office all your life do you? Think of your little girl” (Dos Passos 92). Everyone’s goal in life seems to be to become richer and richer, to climb the ladder of success, but there are different ways of doing it. Ed is a righteous man who wants to acquire his money in an honest way, he sees how others have obtained their money through scams and other dishonest methods and that is not a road he is willing to take.

The techniques of global capitalism can be seen in “Tracks” since this chapter takes place in Ed’s office and he imagines hearing “private wires click click click clicked dollars from Singapore, Valparaiso, Mukden, Hongkong, Chicago” (93). Money is being transferred across the continents all over our globe back and forth. In this quote we can also see an allusion to the new technologies which were developed in the early twentieth century and “the clicking” is the sound of money being relocated with the help of telegraphs in ways that would not have been possible just a few years earlier.
Ellen Thatcher herself, as stated previously, is a young woman in the end of the novel who, in the first chapter “Ferryslip”, is a new-born baby, daughter of Ed and Susie Thatcher. Over the course of the novel she is married to three men: John Oglethorpe, Jimmy Herf and lastly, George Baldwin. Ellen’s name changes throughout the novel depending on who she is talking to. At some points she is still Ellen, mostly around people she has a close relationship with, for example her father, at other times, generally in situations where she is in her position of an influential and hugely successful actress, she is referred to as Ellie, Elaine or Helena. I believe that these various name changes can be seen as an example of what Melvin Seeman puts forward as self-estrangement (789). She is not simply Ellen anymore, but rather an individual with multiple personalities since she does not act in the same way when she is by herself or with someone she trusts completely. This can be compared to when she plays her public role. What everyone expects of her is for her to be a perfect woman, and they therefore refer to her as Elaine or Helena. These names can be considered to have a more grown up sound to them, in comparison to Ellen which sounds more as a child’s name. To feel disconnected with herself because people surrounding her are referring to her as different persons is a clear example of alienation. Her first husband, John Oglethorpe, states on their honeymoon: “‘Elaine Thatcher Oglethorpe, that’s a very fine name, isn’t it, darling?’” (98). Not even with her husband, with whom she should feel completely comfortable and at ease with, is she allowed to go by her real name Ellen. She still has to play the role of someone else.

Ellen, or Elaine (her stage name), is a prominent actress on New York’s finest theatre stages. Harry Goldweiser, a man who has helped Ellen with her career says,

“if you can give the public what it wants at that time and at that place you have a hit. Now that’s what Elaine gave us in this last show…. She established contact with the audience. It might have been the greatest play in the world
acted by the greatest actors in the world and fallen a flat failure…. And I dont know how you do it, nobody dont know how you do it.” (Dos Passos 206)

She is loved by everyone, however, in the end of the novel, she wants to resign from acting and says “‘I hate it; it’s all false. Sometimes I want to run down to the foots and tell the audience, go home you damn fools. This is a rotten show and a lot of fake acting and you ought to know it’” (Dos Passos 180). This feeling of falseness the character of Ellen expresses can be seen as an example of Georg Lukács’ discussion of the term heaviness as “the absence of present meaning, a hopeless entanglement in senseless casual connections […]” (57). Ellen is continuously surrounded by men who want her love and other people who admire her acting and want a share of her success. She says, “‘George I dont want to be had by anybody…. Cant you understand that a woman wants some freedom?’” (190). However, even though she says this she does not seem to be able to change her love life around. She becomes in this sense alienated from her own life and the choices she has to make, except her professional life which she seems to still have some control over because she does quit acting. Nevertheless, she is constantly affected by what others tell her to do or feel.

Ellen marries Jimmy Herf, who I will discuss further on in this analysis, and they travel to Europe for a time and returns to New York after World War I. When they arrive back both of them feel that they should have stayed in Europe. Even though Ellen’s work as an actress does not produce any concrete commodities which are possible to touch, she is still a character who comes from the middle class and that mentality of having to work and that your work should mean something is important for her. This mind-set is part of what Thompson brings up in Marx’s own writings, “[…] Marx understands alienation as the domination of a subject by an estranged object of its own creation’” (25). Ellen becomes dominated by her work as an actress since that seems to be a large and important part of why people surrounding her love her. Ruth Prynne, Ellen’s friend talks about her and says: “‘She’s not so
darn lovely either…. She’s just a kid and she’s upstage as the deuce already. All because she made a kind of a hit in Peach Blossoms. You know one of these tiny exquisite bits everybody makes such a fuss over. She can act all right”” (Dos Passos 113). Her description can clearly be seen as an example of how other people perceive Ellen and why, even though she is not a perfect and wonderful person all the time, they still want to associate themselves with her. She is too important in the theatrical business to discard both for the important theatre stage managers and her friends who are aspiring actors as well. Everyone feels that to be acquainted with her might help themselves somehow. To do something in order to improve one’s own living conditions is what Tönnies deliberates in Community and Civil Society. A person is generally quite selfish and does not do anything for somebody else if it cannot improve one’s own life (52).

In the end of the novel Ellen marries George Baldwin, a lawyer who has had feelings for her for a very long time, but in the past she has always tried to avoid his suggestions of marriage. When we first meet Baldwin he is a young man who finds it difficult to make his business successful since he is not hired often enough for his law firm to progress. Conveniently enough he reads in the newspaper about a milk man, Gus McNeil, who has been hit by a train car. Baldwin sees his opportunity, sues the railroad company on behalf of McNeil, and wins the case, which is the start of his successful career. Baldwin’s decision to undertake the case is essentially a matter of selfishness. He sees an opportunity to improve his own life and therefore he decides to help McNeil. This can again be drawn back to Tönnies arguments about a person’s egotism. Tönnies also discusses how competition is the foundation of capitalism and that to win is hugely important if one wants to survive in a capitalist society, otherwise you will succumb. However, the work as a lawyer becomes tedious and as time passes he does not have any passion left for it, and says that “’[t]he terrible thing about having New York go stale on you is that there’s nowhere else. It’s the top
of the world. All we can do is go round and round in a squirrel cage.’” (187). This quote can be connected back to Modern Times and Chaplin being caught in a machine. Baldwin is also trapped in a machine, however, on a psychological level, not physically as in Chaplin’s movie. Nevertheless, Baldwin becomes a representative of a person not feeling connected with himself and his surroundings. He perceives himself as being stuck in a life he does not appreciate.

Two important capitalists for the novel, who really appreciated their lives as businessmen in the beginning of it, are Phineas Blackhead and Densch, two partners in an import and export company. However, as time passes by they are not as successful anymore. Blackhead is a distinct capitalist trying to stem a strike that threatens to break out and Densch tries to convince George Baldwin to take office, saying,

“…as I look at it … the country is going through a dangerous period of reconstruction … the confusion attendant on the winding up of a great conflict … the bankruptcy of a continent … bolshevism and subversive doctrines rife … America […] is in the position of taking over the receivership of the world. The great principles of democracy, of that commercial freedom upon which our whole civilization depends are more than ever at stake.” (Dos Passos 245)

America is clearly going through a period of great changes and everyone has to adopt to it, since the old world is rapidly disappearing. Densch and Blackhead are representations of people capitalising on World War I, but now when that is over, their company is starting to lose value, and Densch is thinking of himself as “[a] ruined man…” (315). A fortune does not last for ever and this is something both of them experience. Their lives collapse, Densch travels to Europe in shame, while Blackhead passes away. These two are distinct examples of how Dos Passos demonstrates how capitalism and a constant yearning for money, easily turn
into ruin. This is connected to Lukács discussing how characters in a novel are longing for a past in which life was easier (70). They both become alienated in the sense of feeling powerless (Seeman 784). They do not have any control over their lives and the only thing they can do is to leave, either escape to another country far away, or as in Blackhead’s case, die. In this sense it might be possible to say that if a worker never is completely powerful, neither is a capitalist, who cannot control the market him- or herself either.

Another capitalist, differing from Densch and Blackhead, is Congo Jake. He is an ambivalent character who, in the first part of the story, resides on the bottom half of the social ladder after he arrives to the United States as a French immigrant. However, as the years pass by, he initiates a career as a bootlegger in the prohibition era and earns a large amount of money. He changes his name to Armand Duval which has a more prestigious ring to it than Congo Jake. His rise to prosperity can be seen as an example of what Mr Wilkinson, a character in the novel, says: “That’s true, a live man, nowadays, wants more money, needs more money than he can make honestly in public life…. Naturally the best men turn to other channels” (Dos Passos 86). Even though this quote does not appear in connection to Congo Jake, it still seems fitting to his character since he does not earn his fortune in an honest way. In his mind, the exchange of commodities has to continue even though the article of trade in particular, alcohol, is outlawed at this point in time. Tönnies discusses in Community and Civil Society how capitalists constantly do their utmost for the exchanges of commodities to continue. Nothing, not even the law of a country can stand in the way of increasing one’s fortune. However, this way of living is not a safe one, and a police raid or another group of bootleggers who want to destroy what he has are never far away, and if that would happen everything that he has built would fall apart. Congo Jake is not experiencing any alienation as such, he on the other hand is undoubtedly a capitalist who makes the best of what he has and sees an opportunity to make money of the prohibition. He therefore represents the idea of a
ruthless capitalist succeeding on dishonest grounds and this can be seen as Dos Passos criticising capitalism and its workings.

Congo Jake also states, when discussing the imminent World War I,

“[y]ou know why they have this here war…. So that workingmen all over wont make big revolution…. Too busy fighting. So Guillaume and Vivani and l’Empereur d’Autriche and Krupp and Rothschild and Morgan they say let’s have a war…. You know the first thing they do? They shoot Jaures, because he socialiste. The socialists are traitors to the International but all de samee…..”

(Dos Passos 193)

I would say that this is an example of Dos Passos’ own opinions on the First World War and his Marxist sentiments channelled through the character. The socialists are the enemy of the capitalists and it is important for the capitalists to keep them where they belong, in the factories, not on the streets fighting for their freedom.

A different character who, similar to George Baldwin, seems to feel as if he is stuck in New York is Jimmy Herf. We first encounter Jimmy when he is a little boy. He and Ellen are the only characters who we follow from their childhood, and their lives intertwine when they grow up. Jimmy has always felt left on the outside. His mother died when he was very young and he was raised by his aunt Emily and her husband Jeff Merivale. Jeff is planning Jimmy’s future, saying: “‘I have not noticed that you felt sufficient responsibility about moneymatters … er … sufficient enthusiasm about earning your living, making good in a man’s world. Look around you…. Thrift and enthusiasm has made these men what they are’” (Dos Passos 100). Jeff is a clearly a prominent capitalist who believes that to constantly increase one’s fortune is of the utmost importance. Jimmy on the other hand does not have this passion for
“moneymatters” at all and he thinks to himself that “Uncle Jeff and his office can go plumb to hell” (101).

He pursues a career in journalism but seems to have issues with connecting socially to other people around him and he has difficulties finding meaning in his life all the same, thinking that as a journalist this is “[a]lways the way … a parasite on the drama of life, reporter looks at everything through a peephole. Never mixes in” (272). He discusses the matter with his friend Stan Emery and Stan says:

“Why the hell does everybody want to succeed? I’d like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That’s the only sublime thing.”

“It’s alright if you have a comfortable income.”

“That’s all bunk…. Golly this is some cocktail. Herfy I think you’re the only sensible person in this town. You have no ambitions.”

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“But what can you do with success when you get it? You can’t eat it or drink it. Of course I understand that people who haven’t enough money to feed their faces and all that should scurry round and get it. But success…”

“The trouble with me is I can’t decide what I want most, so my motion is circular, helpless and confoundedly discouraging.” (Dos Passos 148)

The notion of Jimmy feeling that his motions in life are circular stand in sharp contrast with how life should, optimally, be during this era of rapid transformation, of always trying to move upwards in a straight line rather than be trapped in a “squirrel cage” as George Baldwin stated (Dos Passos 187). These notions can also be related to Chaplin’s film character who is stuck in a machinery going round and round, and that can be regarded as a parallel to Jimmy
whom I believe cannot make out any meaning in his life. Lukács argues that a novel is structured around characters who are searching for something, the characters are “seekers”, and Jimmy is a perfect example of this (Lukács 60). Jimmy thinks: “Pursuit of happiness, unalienable pursuit … right to life liberty and…..” (Dos Passos 310). He is searching for happiness, but it seems impossible for him to find it. The character of Jimmy is also, together with Ellen, connected to what Lukács terms heaviness. He argues that in this state of mind, a person would feel that he or she lives their life without it having any clear significance because of the feeling of constantly having to improve one’s life and strive for improvements (Lukács 57-58). The new ways of living which the period of modernity brought with it did not suit everyone, as Marshall Berman argues. Everyone had to continuously adjust to the new ways of life, otherwise one would “become a passive victim of the changes imposed by those who dominate the market” (Berman 94). This is something which Jimmy’s friend Martin is discussing at a dinner when he says: “‘But good God hasnt a man some rights? No, this industrial civilization forces us to seek a complete readjustment of government and social life […]’” (Dos Passos 222-23). Everyone has to change in order to survive. Jimmy agrees and says: “‘The result has been to put more power in the hands of a few men than there has been in the history of the world since the horrible slave civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia […]’” (223). Jimmy is clearly a representation of a person agreeing with the working class and their strivings in order to improve their living conditions. A different friend of Jimmy’s, however, sympathises with the capitalists: “‘I think that all these downtrodden masses really want to be downtrodden, they’re not fit for anything else…. If they werent they’d be flourishing businessmen…. Those that are any good are getting to be.’” (223). These are two very distinct, contrasting standpoints Dos Passos brings up. Either one is a Marxist who wishes to overthrow the capitalists, or one is a capitalist who believes that the workers have put themselves in their situation and that they are not good enough to become something else
than what they are. As stated in the “Marxism, Heaviness and Seeking Characters” piece in my theoretical framework, workers do not, in the eyes of a capitalist, have the right to choose what they want to do in their life. They have to remain labourers because that is what they were meant to be.

In the end of the novel Jimmy understands that to have the slightest chance of being happy, he has to leave New York, since nothing good and honest can come from there. He compares his life to Congo Jake’s saying:

“The difference between you and me is that you’re going up in the social scale, Armand, and I’m going down…. When you were a messboy on a steamboat I was a horrid little chalkyfaced kid living at the Ritz. My mother and father did all this Vermont marble blackwalnut grand Babylonian stuff … there’s nothing more for me to do about it […]” (Dos Passos 325)

Georg Simmel argues that money can create both joy and grief (279). You need money in order to survive in a city like New York, but money is not everything that is essential. You have to feel at least slightly at home with yourself. Jimmy feels alienated in the sense of not wanting the background he has. His Marxist opinions do not make him popular in the circles where he comes from, so he has to give the people in those circles up in a sense. He realises that if he stays in New York he does not have the chance to change his life. He has to leave in order to become a better version of himself. Congo Jake moved to America and New York since the United States is seen as the land of opportunity where you have the possibility to become anything you want. Jimmy on the other hand has to escape New York in order to be someone he can stand.

“Say will you give me a lift?” [Jimmy] asks the redhaired man at the wheel.
“How fur ye goin?”

“I dunno…. Pretty far.” (Dos Passos 342)

Conclusion

As Gretchen Fosters discusses in her article “John Dos Passos’ Use of Film Technique in Manhattan Transfer & The 42nd Parallel”, Dos Passos wrote his novel in the style of film, using the characters in Manhattan Transfer as montages. This is a valid point since some characters we meet once, others appear more often. This specific use of characters really shows the diversity of human life in the early twentieth century Manhattan.

The mentality of a worker and the middleclass seems to be that you should not only make money, it has to mean something for you as well according to Marx, and even though you move up in the world, your social class stays with you. It is difficult to adjust to new ways of living and this can be seen in almost all of the characters I have discussed in my analysis, except perhaps Congo Jake who seems to thrive in this unsettled time period. In a sense I believe Ellen can be connected to Joe Harland. Even though Harland’s life has changed immensely, he has been very rich and lost it all, he still has the mentality of a rich person. Ellen still has the mentality of the middle class even though she has made progress from that, because she starts to detest acting and instead desires to do something that is meaningful to her with her life. Jimmy can also be said to, in some way, stay within his class’ mind-set. Even though he does not want to become a capitalist in the sense of his uncle Jeff, he does not want to be a labourer either. He seems to desire to have a certain standard of living.

Ferdinand Tönnies discusses how people living in our society are not entirely connected to each other. We spend our lives living next to each other but we are nevertheless
feeling alienated from one another (52). This is something which can be argued for
*Manhattan Transfer* as well. The characters represent everyday life people whom we might
have met on the streets of New York if we had lived there in the early 1900s. Their lives
sometimes intertwine but mostly only on a superficial level.

Capitalism is what is making their lives go around, the exchange of commodities and
services has to continue constantly, and if you do not keep up with it you will find yourself on
the outside. As discussed in the analysis, Dos Passos displays different standpoints regarding
the class system in New York, one can be a worker who, in a capitalist’s eyes, deserves to be
in the position he or she is in because that is their rightful place in society, or a capitalist who
constantly has to fight to stay in business and not to go bankrupt. Another perspective which
is clear is that if you want to become successful, you have to be dishonest. Congo Jake, for
example, becomes rich and successful due to his illegal bootlegging business.

Lukács discusses how novels in this period differed from how epics had been written
in earlier times. The characters in a novel are utilised to look for something, at the same time
as they longed for a time that was gone, and this is evident in *Manhattan Transfer*. Lukács
argues that the seeking for something became a vital part of a novel and this can be said to be
a theme of *Manhattan Transfer*.

The discussion on the different types of emotional alienation which Melvin Seeman
brings forward: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-
estrangement (784-89), can easily be connected to almost all of the character representations
in the novel. They, at some stage, feel alienated from either themselves or from others
surrounding them.

To bring this essay to a close, I think that it is fair to say that Dos Passos’
representation of characters is true to how he perceived life during the period of modernity.
He, as stated previously, had a first-hand experience of life in the big cities of the United States. Capitalism and the constant issue of having to improve and become richer and better all the time led, and still leads, people into ruin if they do not have the possibility to escape it. However, I think that it is clear to say that neither the capitalists nor the workers find any particular success, except perhaps Congo Jake, in the fast moving city of New York in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*. People from various parts of the social scale feel alienated both from each other and from themselves, and this seems to have been a very common feeling in the era of modernity, and they feel in that way, as Madsen argued, “either because they choose to, or because there is no other way in the city” (40). However, I would not argue that this is because of the city in itself, but because of a variety of reasons all having to do with everyone’s life changing. It became difficult to adapt to new ways of living which led to people having the sensation of standing on the outside, looking in. To paraphrase Berman and Marx, everything that previously had been solid, has now melted into air.
Works Cited


