Karl Marx's Conception of Alienation

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Karl Marx's thought is wide-ranging and has had a massive influence in, especially, philosophy and sociology. Marx is best known for his two unsparring critiques of capitalism. The first of these critiques maintains that capitalism is essentially alienating. The second of these critiques maintains that capitalism is essentially exploitative. This essay focuses specifically on Marx's theory of alienation, which rests on Marx's specific claims about both economics and human nature.

1. Marx's Analysis of Capitalism

For Marx, the idea of the means of production is a crucial economic category. The means of production include nearly everything needed to produce commodities, including natural resources, factories, and machinery. The key element not included as part of the means of production is labor. In a capitalist economy, as opposed to a communist or socialist economy, the means of production are privately owned, as when a businessperson owns a factory. As a result, members of the capitalist economy find themselves divided into two distinct classes: those who own the means of production (the capitalist class or bourgeoisie) and those workers who do not (the proletariat).

2. Marx's Concept of Species-Being

For Marx, whether capitalism and its class-division is a suitable arrangement for human beings depends on human nature. Because humans are biological beings, and not merely free-floating immaterial minds, we, like all other biological beings, must interact with and transform the natural world in order to survive. But what distinguishes us from all other animals, like bees, spiders, or beavers, which all transform the world based on instinct, is that we transform the world consciously and freely. Thus, the essence of a human being – what Marx calls our species-being – is to consciously and freely transform the world in order to meet our needs. Like many other philosophers, Marx believes that excellently doing what makes us distinctively human is the true source of fulfillment.

3. Alienation in Capitalist Society

We can now make clear Marx's claim that capitalism is alienating. The general idea of alienation is simple: Something is alienating when what is (or should be) familiar and connected comes to seem foreign or disconnected. Because our species-being is our essence as human beings, it should be something that is familiar. To the extent that we are unable to act in accordance with our species-being, we become disconnected from our own nature. So if work in a capitalist society inhibits the realization of our species-being, then work is to that extent alienating. And since we are being alienated from our own nature, alienation is not merely a subjective feeling, but is about an objective reality.

So how are workers alienated from their species-being under capitalism? Marx distinguishes three specific ways.

1. Workers are alienated from other human beings. In a capitalist economy, workers must compete with each other for jobs and raises. But just as competition between businesses brings down the price of commodities, competition between workers brings down wages. And so it is not the proletariat who benefits from this competition, but capitalists. This is not only materially damaging to workers, it estranges them from each other. Humans are free beings and are able to not only transform the world themselves, but to cooperate in order to transform the world in more sophisticated and helpful ways. As such, they should see each other as allies, especially in the face of a capitalist class who seeks to undermine worker solidarity for its own benefit. But under capitalism workers see each other as opposing competition.

2. Workers are alienated from the products of their labor. Capitalists need not do any labor themselves – simply by owning the means of production, they control the profit of the firm they own, and are enriched by it. But they can only make profit by selling commodities, which
are entirely produced by workers. Thus, the products of the worker's labor strengthen the capitalists, whose interests are opposed to that of the proletariat. Workers do this as laborers, but also as consumers: Whenever laborers buy commodities from capitalists, that also strengthens the position of the capitalists. This again stands in opposition to the workers' species-being. Humans produce in response to our needs; but for the proletariat at least, strengthening the capitalist class is surely not one of those needs.

3. **Workers are alienated from the act of labor.** Because capitalists own the firms that employ workers, it is they, not the workers, who decide what commodities are made, how they are made, and in what working conditions they are made. As a result, work is often dreary, repetitive, and even dangerous. Such work may be suitable for machines, or beings without the ability to consciously and freely decide how they want to work, but it is not suitable for human beings. Enduring this for an extended period of time means that one can only look for fulfillment outside of one's work; while “the activity of working, which is potentially the source of human self-definition and human freedom, is ... degraded to a necessity for staying alive.” As Marx puts it in a famous passage:

[1]n his work, therefore, he [the laborer] does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside of work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.

If Marx is right about all of this, then contemporary complaints about the degrading nature of work are not hyperbole. Insofar as capitalism prevents us from realizing our own species-being, it is, quite literally, dehumanizing.

**4. Conclusion**

One may find great inspiration in the idea that true fulfillment can come from creative and meaningful work. Yet most people's actual experience of work in capitalist economies is characterized by tedium, apathy, and exhaustion. Marx's theory of alienation provides a conceptual framework for understanding the nature and cause of these experiences, and assures us that these subjective experiences are about an objective reality – and, crucially, a reality we can change.

**Notes**

1 In general, Marx's theory of alienation belongs to his earlier philosophy (the chapter "Estranged Labor" in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, an unfinished work that was unpublished at the time of his death), and his theory of exploitation belongs to his later philosophy (in *Capital*). It is a matter of scholarly debate to what extent this progression in his thinking represented a substantive change in his position, or merely a shift in emphasis.

2 To keep things simple, I follow Marx in speaking of business being directed primarily at producing commodities. Of course, Marx was writing long before the development of an extensive service sector characteristic of late capitalism. Nevertheless, by tweaking some of the language, his general analysis can also be applied to service industries in capitalist economies.

3 In classical political economy, a "capitalist" is someone who owns the means of production—not merely someone who is in favor of capitalism.

4 This emphasis on biological embodiment distinguishes the Marxist conception of human nature from those which count rationality as the distinguishing feature of human beings — a feature which would equally apply to immaterial minds.

5 Or as Marx puts it, in quasi-Hegelian language, "Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being." Karl Marx, "Estranged Labor," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Tucker), p. 76.

6 Here we are focusing on whether workers – the proletariat – are alienated under capitalism. But Marx believes that the bourgeoisie experiences its own form of alienation: see Marx's "Alienation and Social Classes" in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Tucker).

7 Marx is usually interpreted as presenting four distinct ways in which workers are alienated under capitalism (see, e.g., Jonathan Wolff's "Karl Marx," section 2.3.), and there's strong support for that within Marx's own writing. When looked at in that way, the fourth form of alienation just is alienation from one's species-being. But it is more perspicuous to think of the three ways as constituting workers' alienation from their species-being, rather than being kinds of alienation in
addition to alienation from species-being. I'm grateful to Jason Wyckoff for pointing out the heterodoxy of my interpretation.

8Here we see the seeds of the second critique of capitalism that Marx would develop later: that it is exploitative.


10Marx almost always uses the masculine pronoun to refer to workers. For a discussion of applying Marx's conceptual framework to women's labor, both paid and unpaid, see Alison M. Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, especially chapters 4, 6, 8, and 10.


**References**


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