

Marx and Alienation

It is important to note that for Marx, labour (changing the environment by working on it – usually with others) is what humans naturally do. It is human nature to labour, and to want to labour. In a capitalist society, with its system of private property and division of labour, workers are not labouring in a way that is compatible with their true human nature.

To be alienated is to have a relationship with something **that is not as it should be**. Under capitalism, workers are alienated in 4 principal ways:

1) Alienation from the product of labour

All these consequences follow from the fact that the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object. For it is clear on this presupposition that the more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself. ... The worker puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the less he possesses. What is embodied in the product of his labour is no longer his own. The greater this product is, therefore, the more he is diminished. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently, outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force. (Manuscripts, pp. 13-14)

The product that the worker creates is viewed as alien to the worker. It is owned by the capitalist and is sold by the capitalist for a profit. The product is not a reflection of the worker's true potential and ability. Rather, it is a reminder of her/his inferior status and lack of power. The product may also have power over the worker. Think of how workers lose their jobs when their product is no longer demanded.

2) Alienation from the process of labour itself

... he [the worker] does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker, therefore, feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. (Manuscripts, p. 15)

Because the worker is separated from his/her product, the actual process of labour becomes one which seems alien to the worker. Instead of realizing her/his full potential through work, the worker tries to avoid work whenever possible and only feels "at home" outside the world of work.

3) Alienation from human nature

Since alienated labour: (1) alienates nature from man; and (2) alienates man from himself, from his own active function, his life activity; so it alienates him from the species. ... For labour, life activity, productive life, now appear to man only as means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain physical existence. ... In the type of life activity resides the whole character of a species, its species-character; and free, conscious activity is the species-character of human beings. ... Conscious life activity distinguishes man from the life activity of animals. (Manuscripts, p. 16).

The true nature of a human being (to labour) now appears to be something that is only necessary as a means to other things. In other words, work becomes something which may be seen as a necessary evil and not as something that is central to who we are as a species. In this way, the worker is alienated from her/his human nature. That part of human nature which makes us distinct from animals is something from which workers are alienated.

4) Alienation from other humans

A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that man is alienated from other men. ... man is alienated from his species-life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life. (Manuscripts, p. 17).

Because humans are alienated in the other three ways, Marx argues that humans become alienated from one another. Labour should be a cooperative process. Instead, capitalism encourages workers to view each others as rivals. Workers see themselves as individuals in competition with other individuals. This encourages a lack of solidarity and all kinds of anti-social behaviour.