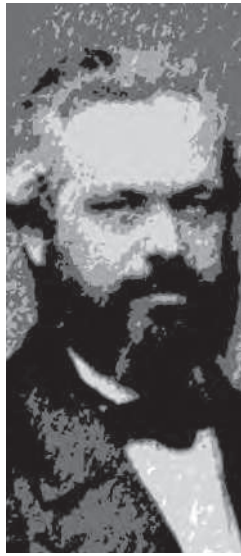


Alienation

John Morris



The term alienation, which Marx took over from the philosophers Hegel and Feuerbach, became in his hands a key concept underpinning his whole critique of capitalism as an anti-human system. He first developed his theory of alienation in his early work, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* but it remained central to all his economic writings including the three volumes of *Capital*

If you look up alienation in the dictionary you will find it has a variety of meanings and uses. The most common of these in both everyday language and in mainstream social science is a subjective 'state of isolation and estrangement' as in X is 'feeling very alienated' as result of being ignored. In Hegel and other philosophers it was a more general description of the whole human condition in which people were 'spiritually lost', 'estranged from their true selves' and suffered from 'a loss of meaning in life.' There is also an older use of alienation, going back to the Middle Ages, to mean 'selling', 'transferring to another', 'surrendering to someone else', as in 'the farmer was forced to 'alienate his land'.¹

Marx's use of alienation encompasses all these meanings, especially the third, but it is also more precise and more down to earth, based on the material realities of people's actual lives, without losing any of its profundity and universal applicability. This is because for Marx the condition of alienation was rooted in people's relationship to the products of their labour and to their labour itself.

That workers are alienated from the products of their labour, i.e. are separated from them, and do not run or centre them in any way, is a simple, 'obvious' and observable fact – so obvious, so taken for granted, that it

is normally not even commented on. It is just assumed, as if it were a law of nature, that when workers at Fords or Hyundai make cars, the cars belong to the company not to the workers; that when they dig coal or weave cloth the coal or the cloth belong to the owners of the mine or the mill. Marx however, noticed it, questioned it, sought its origin and analysed its consequences. He saw that:

This fact simply implies that the object produced by labour, its product, now stands opposed to it as an **alien being**, as a **power independent** of the producer'.²

Working people are dominated by the products of their own labour

and 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 newer life, and the less he belongs to himself.³

As a result:

Labour certainly produces marvels for the rich but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It produces beauty, but deformity for the worker. (As above, p124)

In 2018 we can add that alienated labour has produced nuclear weapons capable of wiping out the human race and the likelihood of catastrophic climate change through the industrial generation of carbon emissions.

Having said this Marx then takes the analysis of alienation a stage further and deeper. He says that if workers are alienated from the *products* of their labour this can only be because they are alienated 'in the *process of production*, within productive activity itself.'

The product is indeed only the *resume* of activity of production. Consequently, if the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation. The alienation of the object of labour merely summarises the alienation in the work activity itself.⁴

There has been a persistent tendency, especially among academic sociologists, to *reduce* what Marx is saying here to the observation that in industrial capitalism many workers' jobs are dirty, monotonous, boring, exhausting, dangerous etc. or even further to the fact that many workers resent doing such boring, monotonous etc. work i.e. to reduce the concept of alienated labour to the physical conditions of work or a subjective feeling on the worker's part. This then leads to the view that alienation can be countered, or at least substantially alleviated, by making the work a bit more varied or interesting, or even with a new coat of paint on the factory walls or pumping out music over the tannoy. But Marx means much more than this. For Marx what is decisive is the social relationship of the worker to their work. It is the fact that the worker *sells* their ability to work to someone else (the employer/capitalist) and in doing so loses control over the purposes and methods of the work. The work is *for* someone else, not for themselves, individually or collectively.

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not profit of his nature.....Its work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labour*. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs.... The external character of work for the worker is shown by the fact that it is not his own work but work for someone else, that is at work he does not belong to himself but to another person.⁵

Wage labour, therefore, **is** alienated labour and the latter can be abolished only by abolishing wage labour i.e. abolishing capitalism.

The fact that Marx locates the origin of alienation in the worker's relationship to work, does not, however, make this a narrow economic concept, applicable only to the workplace. On the contrary for Marx labour is fundamental to every aspect of human existence. In the first place Marx argues it was through labour that humans separated themselves from animals and became human. In the second place it is through labour that people shape their environment and themselves. Labour is the basis of history and society.

Man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their

means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life...This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, as they are. What they are, therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and *how* they produce.⁶ Because labour plays this fundamental role, the alienation of labour distorts the totality of human social relations. Marx analyses the consequences:

Since alienated labour: (1) alienates nature from men, and (2) alienates man from himself, from his own active function, his life activity, so it alienates him from the species..... (3) ...It alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his *human* life. (4) 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*.⁷

Examples of these different alienations abound in the contemporary world. Our alienation from nature is seen not only in climate change but also in the multitude of other ways in which capitalist industry pollutes and damages the environment.⁸ Our alienation from our bodies appears graphically in the phenomena of chronic obesity and anorexia, and the distorted, commodified forms of sexuality with which we are constantly bombarded in the media. Our alienation from other human beings is seen in widespread racism, xenophobia and scapegoating, promoted by our rulers but also accepted and internalised by sections of the working class.

Marx also relates alienation to the question of class. 'If the product of labour does not belong to the worker.... This can only be because it belongs to a *man other than the worker*'.⁹ This 'other man' is the capitalist 'who does not work and is outside the work process'.¹⁰

The capitalist and the worker, Marx argues, are two sides of the same coin of alienation, but there is a crucial difference:

The propertied class and the class of the proletari-

at present the same human self-alienation. But the former class finds in this self-alienation its confirmation and its good, its own power: it has in it a semblance of human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in its self-alienation; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence...Within this antithesis the private property-owner is therefore the *conservative* side, the proletariat the *destructive* side.¹¹

Alienated labour therefore produces an alienated society, an alienated world: a world out of control, a world of extremes of wealth and poverty, a world in which human beings are threatened by the products and consequences of their own work, estranged from each other as individuals and divided against each other by class and nation, by racism, sexism, and religious hatred. A world in which everything from bread and water to sex, art, health and education are turned into commodities which thousands of millions cannot afford to buy.

In a word it produces our world today – a world that has to be changed if the human race is to survive and live free human lives.

Alienation also affects, profoundly, our ability to understand this world in that just as it involves the actual domination of the producers by the products of their labour so it leads us to think of the world in an upside down way as if the products came first and created the people or were endowed with magical powers and a life of their own. We hear this all the time when people say ‘You can’t tax the rich because then there will be no jobs’ or ‘Without profits there would no taxes and with no taxes there would be no schools or hospitals’ as though in the beginning there was money or, more exactly, capital, rather than money and capital being products of human labour. Thus Marx’s critique of alienation was foundational for his analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.¹²

Consequently it appeared on the surface that the values of commodities, the proportions in which they exchanged with each other, were determined by their inherent qualities [the strength of steel, the attractiveness of gold, the sparkle of diamonds etc] whereas in fact, as Marx was able to demonstrate, they were determined by the amount of socially necessary labour time required for their production.

In this way Marx’s theory of alienation not only proved a deep and general humanistic indictment of capitalism but also an indispensable building block for his whole scientific analysis and critique of capitalist production.

Notes

1 The famous reference to ‘inalienable rights’ in the US Declaration of Independence (We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights) relates to this earlier meaning.

2 David McLellan ed, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, London 1963 p.122

3 as above, p.122

4 as above, p.124

5 as above, p.124-5

6 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in D.McLellan, as above pp.160-61

7 Early Writings, as above, p.127 and p.129.

8 See John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York: *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*. New York, 2010.

9 Early Writings, as above, p.130

10 As above, p.131

11 Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*, in D. McLellan, as above, p.134

12 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, London, 1974, p.77