

Paper I

Unit-3 Sociological Thinkers

Karl Marx: Alienation

Alienation is one of those concepts that educate us about the uniqueness of exploitation that is found in capitalism. Marx discussed it in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 for the first time. It is a philosophical term that Marx discussed in his early works on capitalism.

What is Alienation?

Alienation informs us about the peculiar form that our relation to our own labour takes under capitalism. Marx talked about alienation to refer to how the relation between labor and human nature is perverted by capitalism.

Our labor is in accordance with the purpose of the capitalist who hires and pays us. So while it is our labour, it is not an expression of our purpose. Simply put, our labour is no longer our own.

It is essentially a profound conceptual reference that throws light on the relationship between capital and labour that acquires an inhuman and exploitative character in capitalism. To borrow from Marx's celebrated essay "Working Day" from *Capital Volume One*, *Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks*. In *EPM* of 1844, Marx points out that rather than being an end in itself—an expression of human capabilities—labor in capitalism is reduced to being a means to an end i.e. earning money.

The sociological basis of alienation is the division of labour in capitalism (two-class system in which the capitalists employ workers, own the means of production, as well as the ultimate products).

Some of the important aspects to keep in mind while looking at Marx's theory of alienation are:

- Labour is external to the worker. In other words, it does not belong to his essential being. This is why in his work the worker does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy.
- The worker only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. His labor therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor.
- Labour is not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.
- Consequently, people feel freely active only in their animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating. In the essentially human process of labor, they no longer feel themselves to be anything but animals. What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal.
- Productive activity in capitalism is reduced to an often boring and stultifying means to the

fulfillment of the only end that really matters in capitalism: earning enough money to survive. Productive activity ceases to be a process that is satisfying in and of itself.

According to Marx, alienation has four basic components. It could also be said that Marx talked about alienation as a process and not an event and this process can be understood by looking at its four stages:

1. Workers in capitalist society are alienated from their productive activity because productive activity belongs to the capitalists, and they decide what is to be done with it.
2. The workers in capitalist society are alienated not only from productive activities but also from the object of those activities i.e. the product. The product of their labor belongs not to them but to the capitalists, who may use it in any way they wish because it is the capitalists' private property.
3. The workers in capitalist society are alienated from their fellow workers. Marx's assumption was that people basically need and want to work cooperatively. But in capitalism this cooperation is disrupted, and people, often strangers, are forced to work side by side for the capitalist.
4. Lastly, workers in capitalist society are alienated from their own human potential. Instead of being a source of transformation and fulfillment of the workers' human nature, the workplace is where they feel least human, least themselves. Individuals perform less and less like human beings as they are reduced in their work to functioning like machines. Even smiles and greetings are programmed and scripted.

Alienation: Criticisms

With respect to alienation, concerns have been raised on three counts; content, extent, and prognosis.

1. Issue in terms of content: What constitutes alienation? What are the true indicators of alienation? It has been argued that it is difficult to identify the content of alienation. One would need to judge, not only whether existing work is rightly characterised as alienated (as forced, frustrating self-realisation, not intended to satisfy the needs of others, and not appropriately appreciated by those others), but also, if so, whether it could be made meaningful and un-alienated.

2. Issue in terms of extent: The degree of alienation faced by people is highly contextual. Certain systematic forms of alienation—including alienation in work—are not a universal feature of human society. Moreover, at least some systematic forms of alienation—religious alienation for instance—are widespread in pre-capitalist societies. Therefore it is extremely difficult to measure the extent onto which alienation exists in any particular context.

3. Issue in terms of prognosis: Marx's prediction was that communist society will be free of certain systematic forms of alienation, such as alienation in work. This he held because he held that it is

the social relations of capitalist society, and not its material or technical arrangements, which are the cause of systematic forms of alienation. However, critics point out that Marx does not tell us how adopting of machinery in the capitalist present (where it increases the repetitiveness of tasks, narrows talents, promotes 'deskilling', and so on) will be different from its adoption in the communist future (where it will liberate us from uncreative tasks, create greater wealth, develop all-round abilities, and so on). No serious discussion about how precisely alienation will be reduced, if not completely removed.

4. In the end, it can be said that not all jobs in advanced capitalism are alienating. People who create new video games, direct movies, do designing, perform popular music and so forth are less alienated from their work, even though they are firmly entrenched in a capitalist system. Although there are only a few such jobs, their presence cannot be overlooked.