

Sociology: Karl Marx's 'Theory of alienation'

Paper 1: Sociological thinkers: Karl Marx – historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle.

For Marx, "the history of mankind is not only the history of class struggle but also the increasing alienation of man". The notion of alienation is central to Marxian thought.

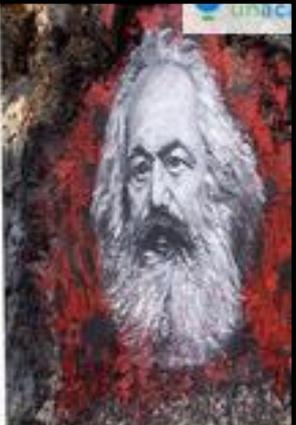
According to Marx,

"Alienation appears not merely in the result but also in the process of production; within productive activity itself. If the product of Labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation. The alienation of the object of Labour merely summarizes the alienation in the work activity itself."

Karl Marx's theory of alienation describes the estrangement of people from aspects of their Gattungswesen ("species-essence") as a consequence of living in a society of stratified social classes.

KARL MARX

- ✓ Born on 5th May 1818 in Germany.
- ✓ Marx's theories are about Society, Economics and Politics collectively understood as Marxism.
- ✓ His theories formed a sociological perspective called Conflict theory.
- ✓ Fredrich Engels was the most influential person in Marx's life, they demanded a better order of society.



1818-1883

Introduction

In his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" first released in 1932 by researchers from the Soviet Union, German philosopher and economist Karl Marx presented the Theory

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of Alienation in which he argued that workers become estranged from their humanity as a consequence of living in a society in which capitalism is a mode of production.

The Theory of Alienation specifically argues that an individual loses the ability to determine his or her own life and destiny, as well as the capacity to direct actions and characters of these actions, define relationships with other people, and own those items produced by his or her labor. A capitalist society does this through the mechanization of an individual.

Context of alienation

For Marx, the essence of human nature, what singles out humans from other aspects is their capacity to control their own environment by creative activity; they can work out a conception of what they wish to create and then put this into practice. Humans express their humanity in and through work. However says Marx, work can be the expression of human intellect and creative capacity, unless it is alienated by being either concerned with mere survival or organized in such a way that work is debarred and made into a burden. The conditions for true humanity are therefore the conditions which abolish alienated labour. The source of this alienation, Marx finds in the structure and social relations of production under capitalism.

FOUR BASIC COMPONENTS OF ALIENATION

- First the workers alienation from the object that he produces.
- Secondly alienation from the process of production.
- Thirdly alienation from himself.
- Fourthly alienation from their fellow workers.

Types of alienation

- ✚ *Alienation of the worker from their product:* The design and development of a production rest not in the hands of a worker but within the decisions of the capitalists. A worker does not have control over what he or she intends to produce or the specifications of his or her product.
- ✚ *Alienation of the worker from the act of production:* The production of goods and services within a capitalist society is repetitive and mechanical that offers little to no psychological satisfaction to the worker. Labor seems coerced because a worker undertakes this as a means of survival.
- ✚ *Alienation of the worker from their species-essence:* The species-essence or “Gattungswesen” of an individual comprises all of his or her innate potentials. Under a capitalist mode of production, an individual losses identity and the opportunity for

self-development as he or she is forced to sell his or her labor-power as a market commodity.

- ✚ *Alienation of the worker from other workers*: The reduction of labor to a mere market commodity creates the so-called labor market in which a worker competes against another worker. Labor is traded in a competitive labor market instead of considering it as a constructive socioeconomic activity characterized by collective common effort.

Conclusion

When individuals in a society are alienated, they feel powerless, isolated and they think that, social world is meaningless. They consider social institutions oppressive, and beyond their control. Marx believed that, all the institutions (religion, state and economy) in capitalist society were marked by the condition of alienation. Alienation is hostile towards mankind in every institution of the world, in which it entangles.

However, he considered alienation in the workplace of vital importance because it is the work which separates mankind from other animals. Marx stated that, labor is the essence of mankind. This statement obligated him to explain, division of labor affect mankind essence. Marx believed that, human beings are the only species in this world, all the other animals are merely objects. He considered human alone as a subject because they are conscious, the quality which do not exist in other species.

Questions

1. According to Marx, Capitalism transforms even the personal relationships between men and women. Critically examine with illustrations from the contemporary Indian Context.
2. Enumerate the types of alienation.
3. Alienation for Karl Marx is an inevitable and inseparable feature of all capitalist societies. To what extent can one justify this observation with reference to the contemporary society?