# A Reconstruction and Analysis of Marx's Theory of Alienation

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Marx begins by explaining that humans are fundamentally productive creatures and that labor is the essence of being human. In their quest to survive, humans produce their own means of subsistence by using the raw materials from the environment around them—the means of production. In that way, they distinguish themselves from animals. Through labor, humans not only utilize nature to survive, but also express themselves; labor becomes an extension of humanity, and it's through work that they affirm their own existence. Humans become alienated when they can no longer see themselves expressed in their work. In a capitalistic society,[1] argues Marx, humans become alienated from the product of their labor, the act of production, and from their species-being.

Under capitalism, humans are divided into two classes: the capitalists, who acquire ownership of the means of production (such as machinery), and the workers, who are forced to sell their labor to survive. By selling their labor in return for wages, workers lose control of their labor and become alienated from the product of their labor. A worker expresses herself through her labor, identifies herself with the object she produces and sees it as an extension of herself. When capitalists seize control of the product of her labor, they sever the connection between the worker and her labor, denying her the ability to use or enjoy the product of her life-activity. This distorts the worker's sense of self and alienates her from her work.

In addition, because workers are forced to sell their labor to capitalists, they no longer live to work, but rather work to survive. In effect, a worker's laboring body and mind now belong to those to whom she sold her labor, as she cannot break her relationship with the

[1] A capitalist society presupposes private property, division of labor, competition, etc…

capitalist without forfeiting her wages and means of subsistence. Consequently, the worker loses her identity outside of being a worker; she exists only to work, and her work goes directly against her self-interest. Additionally, she can no longer determine the ways in which she will use her labor and loses her ability to exert control over herself. Labor no longer satisfies a need, but rather provides the means to satisfy external needs; as a result, the worker becomes alienated from the act of production.

At the same time, the worker becomes alienated from her species-being and from society. A species-life activity—for humans, labor—constitutes the nature of the species. By transforming the world around them, humans transform themselves. For Marx, humans achieve freedom by developing and realizing their innate capacity to transform their environment; thus, freedom is only achieved through labor. When workers become alienated from the product of their labor and the act of production, they're also alienated from themselves and their human nature. Humans are also fundamentally social beings who work together to achieve a common goal: survival. Alienated labor warps the connection between a worker and her labor by turning the social life of the human species into a means of individual life. Capitalism reduces a worker's social relationships to economic transactions and creates increasing competition between workers, which prevents them from joining together to achieve a common goal. The competition for better wages prevents workers from participating in shared social projects. Overall, the worker's life force, her labor, becomes nothing more than a commodity used to purchase the means of subsistence needed to continue to work. The worker becomes trapped in a perpetual cycle in which she slaves over her work to survive and in so doing enriches the very capitalists that enslave her. Her economic and social interests are

thus in direct opposition, and she is nothing more than an object, a source of profit for the capitalist.

Marx constructs a compelling theory demonstrating why workers inevitably become alienated in a capitalist society, and his theory successfully explains much about the condition of workers over the last two centuries. There's little doubt that most capitalists exploit the working class, and through their exploitation, strip many of the human characteristics from their workers. By receiving wages instead of the product of their labor, workers are separated from their work, and an increased degree of division of labor leads many workers to hold menial and monotonous jobs that require little to no skill and offer no chance for self-expression. These jobs divorce many innately human qualities from their work—such as creativity and innovation—and stifle their intelligence. The result is that much of the working class feels largely useless and replaceable; they lose their sense of individuality, and revert to a more animalistic existence performing routine and tedious tasks. In short, the subjugation of the working class does lead to their alienation from their distinctively human capacities.

Nonetheless, Marx's theory raises some critical questions. Most importantly, Marx lays out his ideas in theoretical terms, and the real conditions of the workers may differ from those presupposed by Marx. One of the chief premises of his theory relies on the fact that capitalism divides society into two classes: the workers and the capitalists. In particular, Marx characterizes the working class as suffering the results of an ever-increasing degree of division of labor; their jobs become oversimplified and turn into perfunctory and unsatisfying routines. However, while this may be the case for factory workers, many working-class citizens pursue jobs outside of factories, such as teaching, cooking, art or any other of the host of possible

professions. These citizens are still clearly members of the working class, but it's much more difficult to contend that, for example, chefs are alienated from the product of their labor and from the act of production. While they do receive wages, they are still able to express themselves in their work, and they do not *a priori* forfeit the fruit of their labor to the capitalist class.

In addition, it's difficult to analyze to what extent workers are alienated from their species-being. For example, workers can unionize to protect their rights and increase their bargaining power. Not only do unions highlight the social aspects of society—workers band together, rather than outcompeting one another—but they also collectively improve the living conditions of the working class. Capitalists are unable to subjugate the working class to the same extent, and workers receive increased wages and benefits. While it's true that the government has often passed laws prohibiting or restricting efforts to form unions and exercise collective bargaining rights, and capitalists have devised schemes to de-unionize workers and reverse the progress unions have made in improving the living conditions of workers—through methods such as arbitration clauses and conditional contracts that prohibit unionizing—at the very least, unions have in some instances reduced the extent of the worker's alienation.

In addition to unions, there are other reasons to believe workers are not necessarily alienated from their species-being. While workers do compete against one another, it does not immediately follow that humans are alienated from their human nature. In addition to being inherently social creatures, humans are also innately competitive ones and improve themselves through competition. In fact, one of the core tenets of evolution—natural selection—suggests that humans evolved to compete; consequently, competition is part of human nature. This

suggests that the competition bred by a capitalist society may actually affirm human nature, rather than conflict with it.

Lastly, Marx argues that because humans are fundamentally productive creatures and because workers are unable to affirm their humanity in a capitalist society, they become alienated from their human essence. However, humans are not solely productive creatures—they have other distinctly human characteristics—and they are consequently not just characterized through economic terms. In his *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx does not address whether humans can affirm their humanity by expressing themselves in other human capacities, such as art, politics or religion. These superstructures of society—which Marx contends ultimately depend on the economic conditions of society—can nonetheless serve to satisfy uniquely human needs. Workers also socialize outside of their work place, and these relations are not dictated by the working conditions of the workers. Still, Marx does provide a powerful framework for understanding the fundamental relationship between workers and their work in a capitalist society, and establishes important ideas that are still relevant today.