

The theory of alienation



Outline and Critically Discuss Marx's concept of Alienation

Perhaps one of the pinnacle arguments in Karl Marx's critique of the capitalist regime is the theory of alienation. Marx built this definition upon the philosophical concept of the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel; and Marx's was taken further again and reaffirmed in the work of Feuerbach. In this piece, I aim to discuss Marx's understanding and application of the term alienation in his work.

According to Giddens, 2006, the term alienation refers to 'the sense that our own abilities, as human beings, are taken over by other entities. The term was originally used by Marx to refer to the projection of human powers onto Gods. Subsequently he employed the term to refer to the loss of control on the part of workers over the nature of the labour task.'

During the 19th Century industrial revolution, the economic world saw a huge shift in the workforce. Before this time, most of the work took place in the home, with all members taking responsibility for their designated tasks. However, with the introduction of advanced industrial technology, such as machinery operating on coal and electricity, this led to a separation between house and work. Factories became the focal points of development, machinery became localised and this led to mass production of goods which enveloped the market of hand made products. People on the work force working at factories would have been given specialised training in one area of work, and would receive a wage based on the level of their skills and the work they do. By doing this, Marx made his most pinnacle point; the division of labour. Instead of society living in harmony, or as close to as possible, individuals became alienated from each other. We vie for the same jobs,

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trying to gather more experience than our competitors to ensure we have the edge over them, ensuring our employment over others, thus alienating ourselves from them.

According to Marx, both capitalists and proletarians are alienated in equal measures by society but in completely opposite ends of the spectrum, as the following quotation shows;

‘ The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognizes estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated, this means that they cease to exist in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature. Within this antithesis the private property-owner is therefore the conservative side, the proletarian the destructive side. From the former arises the action of preserving the antithesis, from the latter the action of annihilating it’.

Marx then went on to explain that because we had to work for our money, it meant that we would have to give up our talents and pursue a menial job which we had no interest in, in order to survive and provide for and sustain the family. By doing this, we are alienating ourselves from our given talents,

making sure that we do not follow the path that we are meant to in order to ensure our personal happiness, never allowing us as humans to fulfil our potential and making sure that we are locked into our designated roles within society for life.

Marx used this part of the argument to progress his reasoning behind the communist theory, arguing that in his world each would use their talents to create a utopian society, where each human could live their own life, free from designation, and contribute our own part to the harmony of society, uniting each of us instead of alienating humanity from each other. In that aspect Marx's theory seems to make a lot of sense, with the stress of menial jobs with no satisfaction removed and people doing what they are good at, the world would function more normally and smoother. However, on the other hand how would this be possible, if the world was to function correctly we would need the order and stability provided by labour, governments and other governing bodies such as police etc...?

This is only one side of the alienation concept offered by Marx. The other half emphasised previous work on religion as an implement of alienation. Marx was born in the times of the influential philosopher Hegel. He became influenced by the teachings of Ludwig Feuerbach, a member of the sect known as Hegelians, a group who rejected the so called conservative implications of Hegel's work. Feuerbach attempted to re-interpret the Hegel's teachings of metaphysics, and by doing so managed to provide a critique of the religious and state doctrine. A large portion of the philosophical content of Marx's works written in the early 1840s is a record

of his struggle to define his own position in reaction to that of Hegel and Feuerbach and those of the other Young Hegelians.

However, Marx then began to make the distinction between himself and other radical thinkers within the sect, in particular Bruno Bauer. Bauer argued against the emancipation of the Jews, he believed that religion for both Jews and Christians was a barrier to emancipation. Marx counter argued with what is arguably one of his most enduring arguments of his early writings. He did this by providing a distinction between human emancipation, and political emancipation for example civil liberties. Marx also believed that political emancipation could be seen somewhat as a barrier, making it insufficient to bring about human emancipation. Civil liberties and justice are based that we each need protection from other humans. Therefore civil liberties are there to separate us, providing protection from those perceived threats; therefore freedom from this viewpoint is classed as freedom from interference. This missed one of the most important arguments of Marx however, that real human freedom is to be found in our positive relationships with others. Freedom will not be found in the isolation of ourselves, but in the formation of communities. So by therefore insisting on the formation of a regime of rights forces us to view each other in a way which prevents us from the possibility of true freedom which we might have the chance of receiving in human emancipation.

Marx never actually disputed political emancipation, as he believed that liberalism can help improve upon the system of discrimination and prejudice which existed in the days of his writings. Nevertheless, such politically emancipated liberalism must be transcended on the route to genuine human

emancipation. Unfortunately, Marx never tells us what human emancipation is, although it is clear that it is closely related to the idea of non-alienated labour, discussed above.

It is with regards to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right that Marx made perhaps his most well known statement, namely religion is the 'opiate of the people'; and Marx sets out his religious views in most detail than any other work of his. He also considered how revolution may be achieved in Germany, and set out the tasks of the proletariat in bringing about the whole societies emancipation. Marx fully accepted Feuerbach's view which opposed the traditional theology, that human's created Gods in their own images.

Feuerbach believed that worshipping God's distracted people from enjoying their own human powers. Here Marx criticizes Feuerbach on the grounds that he has failed to understand why people fall into religious alienation and so is unable to explain how it can be transcended. Marx here argued that religion was simply a response to alienation to materialistic life, and as such could not be removed until materialistic life had been also emancipated; at which point religious life would cease to exist, thus freeing us from the alienation which comes with it. A reason for this is suggested that human beings feel a need to assert their 'communal essence'. Whether we recognise it or not, human beings exist within a community, and what makes human life possible is our mutual dependence on the considerable network of social and economic relations which take over us all, even though this is rarely acknowledged in our day-to-day life. Marx makes it clear that we must accept our communal existence within set institutions. At first, the existence is 'deviously acknowledged' by the notion of religion, which creates false

communities in which we are all equal in God's eyes. However, post-Reformation fragmenting of religion in which religion cannot even play the role of a fake community of equals, the state takes over and fills this need of community with a community of citizens, in which we are all equal in the eyes of the law. However, both the state and religion will be one day transcended, according to Marx, when a genuine community of economic and social equals is created, again bringing us back to the argument for Marx's view of the communist society, freeing us from all forms of alienation.