

# Marx's views about freedom in a capitalist society



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Is Marx right to think that people are deluded if they think they are free in a capitalist society ?

Marx uses his theory of alienation to demonstrate why workers in a capitalist society are not free. For Marx, a person is un-alienated and, therefore, free, when their human essence is fully expressed. Marx's theory of alienation offers an interesting social perspective on the life of the individual in modern society: while Marx's analysis typically prioritises ' non-human factors', Ollman (1971) notes, ' his theory of alienation places the acting and acted upon individual in the center of this account' (p. xi).

Whereas some interpretations see alienation as a problem concerning individual subjectivity, Marx's notion of alienation is grounded in the objective social relations that are prevalent within a capitalist society. As Musto (2010) observes, ' Mainstream sociology treated alienation as a problem of the individual human being, not of social relations' (p. 92). In other words, many subjectivists argue that if a person does not feel alienated then they simply are not. Marx, though, argues that a person may indeed not feel alienated, while still being objectively alienated.

In this essay, I will argue that Marx's objective conception of alienation is compelling and that his assertion that people are deluded if they think they are free in a capitalist society is defensible in at least some, if not all, instances. I will examine the four alienating factors which together, Marx says, result in the objective negation of freedom: self-alienation, production-process alienation, product alienation and community alienation.

Self-alienation, or species alienation, occurs when an individual's labour acts as an oppressive force against them. In other words, self-alienation implies that an individual's life-activity has become the very means for reproducing their alienated life-activity – the individual can no longer exist as an end in themselves. According to Marx (1992), then, capitalism transforms human potential into something to be used, ' a commodity, the human commodity, man in the form of a commodity' (p. 336). Moreover, this objective transformation, Marx says, results in ' a mentally and physically dehumanized being' (ibid.).

Marx's theory self-alienation is inversely related to his conception of human nature. For instance, his account of the self-alienated, unrealised citizen is dialectically related to his positive account of human nature:

' Estranged labour not only (1) estranges nature from man and (2) estranges man from himself, from his own active function, from his vital activity; because of this it also estranged man from his species . . . The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious activity constitutes species-character of man' (ibid., p. 328).

By transforming the labourer into a commodity, capitalist society alienates the individual's potential for conscious development and transforms their life into a mere pursuit of capital.

The historical normalisation of human commodification is one way in which Marx envisaged that people might mistakenly feel free in a capitalist society. Self-alienated individuals come to lack awareness of their human essences

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and, over time, collective human consciousness becomes increasingly commodified; whereby individuals are perceived as objects to be bought and sold. Eventually, the alienated self comes to normalise its existence as a commodity and this apparent reality is ingrained as a necessity, and thus an inevitable feature of the human species.

Marx argues that alienation is not limited to the labourer's relationship with the product of their labour, and it can also manifest itself during the process of production itself. In other words, individuals can become alienated from – and therefore have no control over – their own productive activity. To this effect, Marx (1992) poses a rhetorical question: “ How could the product of the worker's activity confront him as something alien if it were not for the fact that in the act of production he was estranging himself from himself? (p. 326). Here, Marx is highlighting that alienation from the production-process necessarily results in alienation from the product of labour, and inversely that if the labourer is alienated from the product of their labour, they must have also been estranged from the production process.

Marx describes production-process alienation in terms of the mental and physical toll that the worker must bear in the name of capital accumulation. In a capitalist society, a capitalist's primary objective is to maximise profit and, therefore, they are tasked with controlling how profit is produced – in other words, they must decide which productive practices will be most efficient – with little consideration required of the mental and physical wellbeing of the worker. Marx, however, argues that the labour process should not be – and is not – simply about capital accumulation. Instead, it should be about creating the social and economic conditions that will

facilitate the creation of a 'true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself' (Marx, 1993, p. 959). Thus, the implication here is that, under capitalist systems, labour productivity does not serve to nurture the human essence but rather to suffocate it.

The theory of product alienation – that is, the labourer's estranged relation to their own product – is the most persuasive of the four alienating factors and Marx (1976) himself suggests views it as 'the real foundation and starting-point of the process of capitalist production' (p. 716). The phenomenon of product alienation is defined as when 'the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer' (Marx, 1992, p. 324). In other words, the final product of the production process is kept separate from the labourer.

Moreover, the product is owned and appropriated by the capitalist so becomes an alien force over and above the labourer. According to Marx, the strength of this now alien force depends on the energy exerted by the labourer during the production process. Specifically, the more energy that is spent on the production process, the greater the capacity for the final product of the individual's labour to be used as an oppressive force over the labourer. 'The worker places his life in the object', Marx (1992) writes, 'but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object' (p. 324).

The fourth of Marx's alienating factors is community alienation. According to this theory, labourers are alienated from other labourers, who are viewed as a source of competition, and from capitalists, who are viewed as an external,

exploitative force. On the social relation between labourers and capitalist, for instance, Marx (1992) writes:

‘ If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, and if it confronts him as an alien power, this is only possible because it belongs to a man other than the worker . . . If he relates to his own activity as unfree activity, then he relates to it as activity in the service, under the rule, coercion and yoke of another man’ (pp. 330-331).

Thus, according to Marx’s interpretation, the manner of the social relations labourers have with other labourers and their capitalist employer is symptomatic of the alienated relation they have to the product of their labour. In other words, community alienation can be seen as the inevitable result of both product alienation and production-process alienation.

Through product alienation, capitalist systems of production foster a culture of endless competition that pits labourers against other labourers, as well as capitalists against other capitalists. According to Marx (1990), community alienation is a direct consequence of this condition: ‘ The driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is . . . the greatest possible production of surplus-value, hence the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist’ (p. 449). Marx is implying here that, in a society without product alienation, labourers could instead exist within a system of mutual cooperation, rather than one of ongoing competition in service of capital accumulation.

Despite the persuasiveness of Marx’s theory of alienation, critiques can be made which challenge the assertion that it is impossible to be free, under

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any circumstances, in a capitalist society. For instance, in relation to Marx's conception of self-alienation, it has been suggested that Marx's view is somewhat essentialist, as it ascribes one particular way of living as being the best for everyone. An example of such a critique is presented by Midgley (1995): while considering the question of ' what is the best and most important thing within human life?', she argues that ' it is not about biological classification', but rather ' moral philosophy' (p. 143). Here, Midgley is challenging Marx's apparent belief that production defines humans simply on the basis that it is what differentiates us from animals.

Furthermore, Kymlicka (2002) argues that Marx's fixation on ' productive labour' is inherently sexist: ' why is production a more ' human function' than reproduction (e. g. raising children)?' he asks, ' for family life is surely as important to our humanity as production' (p. 193). This critique is compelling as it is surely true that people who do not participate in Marx's conception of production can enjoy fulfilling lives.

Ultimately, I find Marx's theory of objective alienation compelling, however, I do acknowledge that there are exceptions to Marx's assertion that people are deluded if they think they are free in a capitalist society – perhaps more than Marx realises or is willing to admit. It is conceivable that individuals cannot participate in Marx's idea of production and still achieve fulfilment and therefore is it not inevitable that everyone in a capitalist society is unfree.

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