

# Applying marx's alienated labor theory to women's domestic labor essay sample

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In his work *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states one of the most outstanding theories which is Alienated Labor. His theory mainly analyzes the labor in the public of society, in other words, the men in working class. Thus, Marx's Alienated Labor Theory applies mainly to the alienation of workers in the public production field. Women at that time are considered as a second class, which have no status in society. They can be seen as the private property of men. " One of the problems with domestic labor from the Marxist perspective was seen to be the fact that it produced use values, as opposed to the exchange values produced by paid labor, it was only the form of work that was directly related to capital" (Andrew 1994: 105). " Thus, the housewife has no direct relationship to capital, since she is unpaid and does not produce surplus value" (Andrew 1994: 105). However, this statement is somehow doubtful. The fact is that a woman's domestic labor not merely serves a single man, but serves the whole capitalist system; her unpaid domestic housework contributes to and is closely linked to the capitalist economy system.

This paper will discuss about how Marx's Alienated Labor theory can be applied to women domestic labor back in the ninetieth to mid-twentieth century. Some analysis demonstrates that " housework was productive labor, as it reproduced labor power. Women's domestic labor prepared the male worker for another day's work as well as reproducing and rearing the next generation of workers" (Andrew 1994: 105). Therefore, domestic labor can represent the " hidden source of surplus labor" (Andrew 1994: 105), which creates surplus value for the capitalist economy system. Thus, women's domestic labor and the men working labor are both alienated labor.

As the housewife's domestic labor can create surplus value, the capitalist indirectly possess this kind of surplus value by giving the working class husband wage. Thus, the woman becomes the slave of the slave of wage; and woman's domestic labor becomes a kind of alienated labor. According to Marx, there are four rules for alienated labor. First is the alienation of the man from the product he made. "The worker relates to the product of his labors as to an alien object" (Marx 1977: 78).

In other words, the worker has no control to the product he made. For the woman in household, she mainly does the housework such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry to keep the household run smoothly and serve for her husband. Her product sometimes seems abstract and invisible, which prepares her man to work for the capitalist. Second is the alienation of the man from his own labor. "Alienation shows itself not only in the result, but also in the act of production, inside productive activity itself" (Marx 1977: 79). And "labor is exterior to the worker, that is, it does not belong to his essence" (Marx 1977: 78). "His Labor is therefore not voluntary but compulsory, forced labor" (Marx 1977: 78). That means the productive activity of the worker is no longer belonged to the worker, but the capitalist. Regarding to the woman, her productive activity does not belong to herself. She does not need to do all those housework in order to carry out the functions she shares with animal, such as eating, sleeping and drinking.

The woman has to use her productive activity to exchange the maintenance of her family. Thirdly, the worker is alienated from his own nature. "While alienated labor alienates (1) nature from man, and (2) man from himself, his

own active function, his vital activity, it also alienates the species from man; it turns his species-life into a means towards his individual life" (Marx 1977: 80). Marx differs the productive activity of men from the productive activity of animals. Animals only passively adapt to the nature, while men can actively change the nature. But under the condition of capitalism, "in that alienated labor degrades man's own free activity to a means, it turns the species-life of man into a means for his physical existence" (Marx 1977: 81). "The work becomes 'despecialized' as well as "dull and repetitive', thus contributing to 'the low esteem that many people have for domestic labor and, consequently, for the women who do it'" (Marx, 1994: 108). This description illustrates that the repetitive domestic housework for the woman is like the assembly line for the worker, which creates dissatisfaction and alienation for woman.

The woman therefore, performs such domestic labor only to fill her immediate physical needs. Fourthly, man is alienated from man. "An immediate consequence of man's alienation from the product of his work, his vital activity and his species-being, is the alienation of man from man. This kind of alienation is even worse for the woman. The man can live not only in the family, but also in the industrial society; therefore he can express himself in different areas. But for the woman, her activity is only limited in the household; and she works individually at home. In industry, the exploitation of the product made by the man makes the man objectification, which expressed by a form of alienation. But alienation is expressed in a more oppressive way on women's life and consciousness. The man can remit the

alienation through the relationship with the woman, but the woman cannot remit the alienation, because it is the relationship that oppresses her and brings her the alienation. In the alienated life of capitalism, what the woman experiences is not herself nor a complete person, but the existence as a fragment that lives for others.

#### Reference

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