

The alienation of the proletariat: an explanation and critique of marx's theory o...



In a colloquial context, a state of 'alienation' is one in which an individual is excluded or isolated from a group with whom that individual belongs or should be involved (Merriam-Webster, 2015). However, in the context of Marxist theory, 'alienation' is the state of existence for an entire sector of — in fact, the majority of — society. This concept developed by Karl Marx, aptly named the Theory of Estranged Labor, explores the notion that, within a Capitalistic regime, the working class members of the labor force — the proletariat, who comprise the majority of the population — are intrinsically alienated due to the inherent lack of wealth distribution and equity present within an economic system based upon class hierarchy. As demonstrated by Marx's 1844 text "Estranged Labor", as well as critiques of this theory by Bertell Ollman (Alienation: "The Theory of Alienation", 1976) and John Holloway (Historical Materialism: "A Note on Alienation", 1997), the process of labor, the product of labor, and the act of production interact with one another. These forces also function within the larger context of the class dichotomy between property owners and propertyless workers — the bourgeois and the proletariat. Additionally, these interactions cause alienation of the proletariat, in a way that has a clear influence on both individuals and society at large. Through this exploration, as well as thorough examination of the rhetoric therein, it becomes possible to ascertain whether Karl Marx wrote "Estranged Labor" with the intent of developing a direct commentary on alienation in Capitalism as a perpetual struggle of the working class, or rather depicted alienation as a condition spanning throughout economic history.

In his 1844 text *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Karl Marx discusses the concept of “estranged labor” in the context of labor relations and conditions within Capitalism. It is important, first, to understand the concept of Capitalism. Capitalism can most easily and formally be defined as “an economic and political system in which a country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). In his critique of Capitalism specifically in regard to the alienation- the estrangement- of the worker, Marx defines this concept of “estranged labor” as the process which occurs during the economic moment in which:

“The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates” (“Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 2).

In this economic moment, the laborer — the proletariat, as Marx will later define as the ‘working class’, the class of “propertyless workers” in contrast to the “property owners” (“Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 1) — exists as an object in a Capitalistic marketplace. The labor is external to the worker; he does not “develop freely his physical and mental energy... He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor” (“Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 5). Marx expands on this ideology by explaining that the laborer is, in fact, the object of the process of labor, and furthermore, the object of the product he creates. This occurs because the process of production — as well as the product being produced and that <https://assignbuster.com/the-alienation-of-the-proletariat-an-explanation-and-critique-of-marxs-theory-of-estranged-labor/>

products' entrance into the economic marketplace — is beyond the control of the laborer: “ the object which labor produces...[exists] as something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (“ Estranged Labor” Karl Marx, 2). The laborer is not the owner of the machinery necessary to produce the object, nor is he the designer of the product, nor the executive who settles the object's sale or distribution. In this system of mindless labor, the labor which an individual produces is not his own object. He is simply performing a virtually inhuman act of assembly for the greater purpose of 1) the production of a good for another, and 2) a means of life or a “ means of physical subsistence for the worker” (“ Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 3). The separation of the laborer from his production can be most clearly exemplified by the requirement of a laborer to purchase a product, which he has created, from the company under which he produced it, using the wages which he used to produce it. In this economic moment, the concept of “ estranged labor” becomes evident: the laborer is estranged from the object of his labor, and thus is estranged from not only the purpose of his labor, but also his sense of self within the bounds of his role within the means of production in a Capitalistic system. The object is alien to the laborer. This fact exemplifies the intrinsic concept that the laborer himself loses value as a human and as a member of society in direct proportion with the increasing value of the objects of his labor (“ Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 2). In this way, the worker is dependent on labor more than labor is dependent on the worker; the worker is an object of the act of production. Furthermore, the laborer is forced to view his labor as “ an object which he can obtain only with the greatest effort and the most irregular interruptions” (“ Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 3). He is forced to value this exploitative labor more than the <https://assignbuster.com/the-alienation-of-the-proletariat-an-explanation-and-critique-of-marxs-theory-of-estranged-labor/>

owner of his labor values him. He must appropriate the external, sensuous world through the separation of himself from his activity, taking on activity belonging to another, instead of a “spontaneous activity...of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, [operating] independently on him” causing him to further lose his sense of self (“Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 3). Perhaps in this circumstance, assimilation is a more fitting term than appropriation, as he is a member of a marginalized group who must take on the standards of another in order to comfortably survive in system in which he is doomed to failure.

As a result of this loss of his sense of self — and ultimately a loss of his sense of humanity in the context of species-characteristics (freely active, self-separating actions and activities based in individuality and willful choice) — the laborer:

“only feels himself freely active in his animal functions — eating, drinking, procreating, dwelling, etc., and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal” (“Estranged Labor”, Karl Marx, 5).

These facets of estrangement — including alienation from the object, alienation from oneself, and alienation from humanity/human species-characteristics (and nature, therein) — provide the framework for classifying estrangement of labor within Capitalism as a fact within the boundaries of the laws of political economic theory.

This then raises the question: who owns the labor, if not the worker? Marx explains that it must “belong to some other man... If the worker’s activity is <https://assignbuster.com/the-alienation-of-the-proletariat-an-explanation-and-critique-of-marxs-theory-of-estranged-labor/>

a torment to him, to another it must give satisfaction and pleasure. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man". In this vein, it is necessary to deduce that " someone else is the master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of [the worker]" (" Estranged Labor", Karl Marx, 9): this other is, of course, the " property owner"; the " Capitalist"; the bourgeoisie. This other — who behaves a sort of malevolent god-character — requires the worker to " perform...service, under the domination, the coercion" of him (" Estranged Labor", Karl Marx, 9). In this context, the laborer is not only a slave to his labor, to his wages, to capital, and to the Capitalistic system, but also ultimately a slave to another man. This, in itself, is " the real soul of production" (" Estranged Labor", Karl Marx, 10).

Marx's critique and discussion of the economic system of Capitalism — and its downfalls — has been studied, analysed, and built upon by many Communist-oriented sociologists over the course of the century and a half subsequent to the release of " Estranged Labor". These analyses have frequently produced the same question, one which Marx himself did not explore: " is the position of the estranged laborer within Capitalism one of struggle, or that of a condition?". Two notable Marxist scholars, John Holloway and Bertell Ollman, raised this question, and responded to it with very different interpretations of Marx's thoughts and theory. Holloway's text " A Note on Alienation", published in the anthology *Historical Materialism* in 1997, suggests that there are two standard approaches to considering and interpreting alienation. First, in the scope of humans as objects which suffer under Capitalism, we are the victims of capital, but second, in the scope of

alienation as a condition, transcending alienation is possible. He continues to say, however, that a third interpretation exists: “not a condition, but a process... a constant struggle”. He claims that, within Marx’s text on estranged labor, there is an overarching narrative of the importance of understanding alienation in terms of activity” (“A Note on Alienation”, John Holloway, 147). He continues on to express his belief that, if alienation is in fact an activity, the laborer himself is creating his own alienation within capitalism, because capital depends on labor. In fact, “Alienation is not an aspect of class struggle: it is the struggle of capital to exist” (“A Note on Alienation”, John Holloway, 148). Holloway’s solution, then, to the concept of alienation within Capitalism and the ultimate end-goal of reaching a state of disalienation is found in his claim that “disalienation is here now, in our existence as insubordinate labor, in our existence not only within, but against, capital” (“A Note on Alienation”, John Holloway, 148). This approach to the concept of alienation is problematic at best. It presupposes not only that a predetermined future exists in which alienation will no longer affect the working class, but makes the claim that modern society has reached a point at which the proletariat class is able and willing to self-separate from capitalism in order to cause its fall, not with a revolution, but with sheer power of will and dedication. Holloway writes from a position of privilege in this regard, as this interpretation of “Estranged Labor” completely disregards the actual and realized struggle of the proletariat: laborers trapped within a system which dehumanizes and devalues them, but allows them the means of life. To suppose that an individual — let alone a society — should relinquish access to existence as well as basic security (regardless of how small it may be) is idealistic at best, and an aloof, ideological, elitist

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recommendation from a member of the bourgeoisie appropriating the proletariat struggle at worst.

Bertell Ollman's interpretation of Marx's "Estranged Labor" focuses instead on alienation as a condition which exists in the present, but has the capacity to be overcome in the future. Ollman considers the condition of the proletariat through the lens of a medical analogy:

"Without some knowledge of the future millennium, alienation remains a reproach that can never be clarified... We only know what it is to have a particular disease because we know what it is not... as the absence of one is a necessary element in the measuring of the other. When we declare someone ill, we consider this a statement of 'fact' and not an evaluation based on an outside standard.

Similarly... Marx posits an internal relation between the states of alienation and unalienation. There is no 'outside' standard from which to judge" ("The Theory of Alienation", Bertell Ollman, 3). We therefore cannot consider alienation to be a struggle, rather than a condition, because for a society which has transcended from feudalism to capitalism, there is no basis or example of a disalienated state, leaving nothing to compare a "struggle" against, or to model a basis of transcendence upon. He continues to explain that all individuals within a capitalistic system, whether of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, are affected by alienation, and the "tag 'realm of estrangement' is applied to the most infected areas" ("The Theory of Alienation", Bertell Ollman, 3). Ollman explains that the affliction of the proletariat within the Capitalistic regime is extremely oppressive and

alienating, and that those facts need not be invalidated through theorization that laborers have not yet reached a state of enlightenment in which they are able to fully realize their 'ability to walk away', as implied by Holloway. He presents the end of a system of estrangement and alienation much more closely related to Marx's commentary in "Estranged Labor" by theorizing that Communism will not reunify the severe estrangement that has been caused by institutionalized and systematic alienation of the proletariat, but will rather give all men the opportunity to reach the "complete return of man to himself a social being — a return become conscious, and accomplished with the entire wealth of previous development...

[Communism] is the positive transcendence of all estrangement" ("The Theory of Alienation", Bertell Ollman, 8).

Marx's text much more clearly aligns with Holloway's interpretation, paving the way for a self-guided and focused concept of the result of transcendence from Capitalism. These texts, working together, provide a clear and present theory of what is at stake when considering the alienation of labor as a condition. In this consideration, the future of Communism as a regime is 'at stake', or at least put into question. The concept that there is no predetermined future for the transition from a Capitalist to a Communist regime is, though most realistic, perhaps a dangerous ideology. The lack of a plan or system of governance in a Communist society could potentially cause the downfall of Communism; this has been proven in red-state China, as well as in the USSR. Without a clear path, a Communist system can easily be overtaken and exploited by fascism. However, an accurate interpretation of the "Theory of Estranged Labor" is, indeed, the first direct and appropriate

step toward the eventuality of a disalienated Communist state based upon justice, inherent humanity, and equality.