

Good worker alienation in a modern economy essay example

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Worker Alienation in a Modern Economy

The term “ worker alienation” was coined by Karl Marx decades ago. Built on the principles of capitalism and socialism, it addresses the concept that workers feel apart from the products of their labor. The result is a loss of his sense of humanity. In a capitalist society, exploitation of the worker exists through selling his labor and not the product of his labor. His labor is sold as though it were an intangible product. The product is sold and the profit goes to the capitalist. The proletariat now owns neither his labor nor the product it produced; however, he has received the wage for which he sold his labor.

Worker alienation was a term used in the 1800's. But do workers in the 19th century continue to feel alienation from their efforts and the product of their labors? In the essay, I will look at the society preceding and comprising the modernity period. I will define and incorporate the meaning of worker alienation, and discuss the philosophies of Karl Marx and J. S. Mill. I will compare the two philosophies, and conclude with a statement that, while modern workers experience alienation similar to the laborers in the 18th century, it has become incorporated into our society; workers have found other means for self-actualization and recognition of their humanity outside their jobs.

The modernity era is philosophically characterized by loss of certainty and realization it cannot be established again (Delanty 2007). The period is associated with an industrial society; Karl Marx was one of a number of intellectuals of that period who tried to present scientific and philosophical ideas to meet challenges presented by the new conditions. In the shift to secularization, society transformed from association with religious

institutions and values to nonreligious values and the secular institutions that replaced them (Norris and Inglehard 2004). Modernization caused religion to lose regulation over social life (Larrain 2000), replacing it with the values of industrialization. Marx believed capitalism expanded the influence, replacing traditional values associated with religion. The creation of a global market promoted the “ bourgeoisie”, the strata of society opposed to the working class (Dictionary. search. yahoo. com, 2014). Marx saw it as a new class that was revolutionary. He believed the working class were victims, “ and the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes of the property owners and the propertyless workers (Marx and McLellan, p. 85)”. By being designated to a particular class in society, Marx felt people were separated from their sense of humanity. The working man felt a loss of control over his life and his destiny. He thought he was unable to manage his behavior and character development. He didn’t own what he produced in his employment. His daily goals are dictated by the bourgeoisie. By using the worker’s ability to produce, the upper class took the value, and subsequently, the humanity from the worker. The result was one of four types of alienation within a capitalist industrial nation, according to Marx. The first was the concept of the worker alienated from his work. The capitalist determines the product and how it will be produced. The consumers of the product and the workers who produce the product have no input. The capitalist also takes the intellectual labor of the designers creating the product. The consumers are trained to buy the products and services created by the worker. The goods are assigned the value, but the labor that produced them. The concept of exploitation of the worker rises from the idea that the worker is paid the

lowest rate possible to allow the highest return rate on the capital that was invested. The profit generated by the sale of the goods to consumers is not distributed among the workers, but continues to add to the wealth of the industrialist. Second, the worker is alienated from the act of producing. In a capitalist society, the worker is not involved in the final product of his labor. He does not psychologically benefit from the repetitive actions that are part of the creation of the final product. He feels no connection between his work and the end product sold. He becomes only his work and the wage paid to him for it. “ The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production . . . (Marx and McLelland 2000, p. 85)”. The worker has no say in how the end product will be used or how it will be sold. Because his labor is not the total expense of the production, he has no identity with the total value that comes from the product’s sale. Therefore, the worker has no sense of satisfaction from his work. He is only an instrument, defying his human nature. Third, the worker is alienated from himself as a producer. A man has the need to see the result of his actions. He wants to see himself as a subject that creates an object. He determines his own actions and ideas to produce an end product. This actualizes his human potential and connects him to his humanity. In a society, classes are based on the type of work a person performs. The worker must associate with others in his class. On occasion members of the working class organize into labor unions in an effort to change their working conditions and assume a modicum of control over the production of the goods. They commit to solidarity when a strike is called to accentuate their demands. In truth, a form of camaraderie grows in the act of asserting their humanity. But during a strike, there are other workers who act in opposition

to break the strike, others who are indifferent, and even fellow laborers who work against the union. Economics favors the social class receiving the most benefit from the technology contributing to production, the bourgeoisie. Although it was thought industrialization would raise the lower class to a level of honorable work and a sense of self-worth, it did not. The men and women in the working class remained helpless in a system of exploitation. They are forced into a narrow performance of work for the least amount of wage possible and lose sight of themselves as a producer. Finally, the worker is alienated from other workers. Workers in a non-capitalist society performed activities that were part of a community effort to survive and improve their society. Marx states the competition between workers promoted separatism; “ The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life (Marx and McLellan 2000, p. 639-640)”. Capitalism made the labor of the worker into a commodity to be sold in a competitive market. This arrangement creates a competition between workers for promotion and improved wages. In the United States when white males dominated the work force, they were antagonistic toward necessity forcing black people and women into competition with them for jobs. The basis for sexism and racism is often found in the working class as a result of competition for employment. It put another face on workers alienated from each other. The worker society no longer produces together. Karl Marx addressed the mentality of the worker and his alienation because they were victims of class struggle. Their mental state resulted from losing their sense of humanity secondary to their situation. As an activist for change, he wanted the working class to seize the responsibility for their own

freedom from the upper-class domination; they should not rely on a political movement or other organization to do it for them. By forming unions, they empowered themselves and their fellow laborers. “Combinations and the trade unions growing out of them are of the utmost importance not only as a means of organizing the working class for struggle against the bourgeoisie ((Marx and McLellan 2000, p. 633).” Marx felt it was more important for people to actualize themselves rather than accumulate possessions. He wanted them to use their education, formal or not, to be responsible for their own destiny. Marx was a proponent of personal autonomy. In agreement with Kant and Fichte, he was a proponent of workers becoming shapers of their own destiny and not passive objects.

“The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working

classes themselves. We cannot therefore cooperate with people who openly be freed from above by philanthropic big bourgeois and petty bourgeois (Marx and McLellan 2000, p. 622).”

Another 18th century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, believed a person must separate his public life from his private one (Philosophy. tamu. edu 2014). An individual functions in a society within the parameters of acceptable behavior, but his personal will is not ignored. The threat in a capitalist society is loss of freedom when the majority imposes their will on the minority. Mill felt the government has a responsibility to protect the individual by controlling the information they receive. Controlling the economy protects issues such as inappropriate use of natural resources by

an individual. A public that is educated creates policies through the government that benefit the greatest number in society. Weng (2013) discusses the differences between the perspectives of Marx and Mill concerning personal freedom. Marx states labor in a capitalist society removes the creative aspect for the worker. The laborer becomes alienated from his work, his product, and his humanity. The search for freedom becomes an action apart from the worker's labor. Mill believes freedom results from lack of social or legal coercion. Limitations on expression, actions, and associations are removed. This allows discovery of personal opinion through debate. Diversity within a society results from freedom of action. But the bourgeoisie inhibit freedom by placing the worker in a position of subsistence. Rather than working toward self-realization, the worker labors for an unseen product. For Mill, even the upper class suffers because they do not work themselves. As a result, they develop a false consciousness.

Karl Marx defined a high living standard in terms of emotions fully developed, rich experiences, education, close friends and family, and so on. The individual able to afford cars, clothing, and a fine home was poor unless he also had intrinsic value in his life. He truly felt money did not buy happiness. In fact, a member of the working class who spends his spare time idle and not pursuing personal betterment was a victim of a society and alienated in every way. Marx believed every person, but especially members of the working class, had a personal obligation to understand his society and to work with others in his social class to improve the political system of his country and his work conditions.

Society has experienced reformation (facultyfiles 2014). Workers make more money and employers provide benefits so the working class consumes as much or more than the upper class of previous times. Living conditions from the 19th century have greatly improved in countries that are developed. However, what a laborer earns has worsened when compared to the capital gain of the owners of companies. While a previous owner earned fifty times what his worker earned, today he earns hundreds of times more. The average worker is happy to have a steady job with benefits. In America, the gap between the rich and the working class continues to widen. This translates into a gap in political office and societal influence as well. Although democracy continues to function in the United States, the policies are shaped by the wealthy rather than the average citizen. This casts a shadow of oligarchy over America's democracy. A recession results in unemployment of workers regardless of their skill level or desire to work. A laborer suffers due to unseen forces in the economy. Yet, the labor of workers keeps these forces in power. People comfort themselves with distractions and few concern themselves with becoming involved in government for change. They do not relate to what they produce; they are alienated.

Marx's theory of alienation is applicable today. While capitalism is accepted in our society today, workers continue to live for wages and are apart from the products and services sold by their employers. Many are only one paycheck away from poverty in an economy that is insecure. They are helpless in influencing politics and the society that dictates their freedoms. Yet, few activity work for change through governmental involvement.

Workers function in their alienation in a society that continues to maintain a capitalist mentality. They no longer find self-actualization from the product of their labor, as in the 18th century. The labor itself holds value in the 19th and 20th centuries for the worker to define their humanity. The importance of perception of worth has shifted from the product produced to the work that produces it.

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