

Concept that
capitalism causes
alienation sociology
essay



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Marx recognised the growth of industrialism and a massive increase in the productive powers of labour. He stated that the growth of wealth at one end of the stratification system was matched by a growth of poverty at the other end. He saw Labour as the main driving force behind the industrial revolution; while history alters depending on the action of various classes of people the Marxist theory of history was seen as historical materialism. “ The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (Marx and Engles 2001 [1848]) Historical Materialism is a theory of the transitions from one mode of production to another. (James Fulcher and John Scott 2011) The least developed forms of society took the form of primitive communism. With the development of technology production expands resulting in a change between property relations. This is how systems with private property and more complex divisions of labour appear. Marx researched feudal societies and found that these were centred on the division of labour between the landowners and the labourers who worked for them. He then stated that Capitalist societies developed only in those societies in which feudalism had already occurred.

Marx identified two main areas within a Capitalist society. The first of these areas is the capitalist assets that can be used or invested to make future assets. This goes together with wage labour. Wage labour refers to the group of working class people who do not own the means to their livelihood therefore must find employment provided by owners of capital. Those who owned capital created a ruling class whilst the majority of the population making up the wage workers Marx referred to as the working class. With the spread of industrialisation peasants who's previous form of work entailed

working for themselves on their own land, moved to growing cities and helped to form this aforementioned working class. According to Marx capitalism is inherently a class system. The ruling class who are the owners of capital and the working class who are the wage earners are both to some degree dependant on each other. However, as Marx stated the dependency levels were highly imbalanced causing an exploitive relationship between the classes. Marx's theory was based on what he called the materialist conception of history. According to this view its not the values humans hold that cause social change but economic influence. However, certain sociologists such as Weber disagree with this statement and say that whilst economic factors are important to some degree the ideas and values of humans have just as much an impact on social change.

According to Marx Capitalism and the division of labour alienates human beings from their work which is where the term " Alienation" first came from. " The object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. (Karl Marx , Manuscript, 1844) Alienation refers to feelings of indifference or hostility not only to work but to the overall framework of industrial production within Capitalism. According to Marx it is where peoples work changes their labour from a creative act in which they enjoy doing, to a dehumanized activity where they are purley working to earn a living and no other satisfaction is gained. Alienated people do not enjoy their work and see it as a means to ensure their survival in order to make sure they are able to turn up for work the next week to do exactly the same. Whereas workers used to have an element of control over their work, the introduction of Capitalism meant that

workers had none or little control over their jobs. Marx argues that work appears as something alien, a task that must be completed to earn a living but that is intrinsically unsatisfying. Durkheim disagrees with Marx's statement and had a much more optimistic outlook on the division of labour. He stated that specialised work roles would strengthen social solidarity and that people would become more linked together through a mutual dependency.

Marx believed that the competing nature of Capitalism compelled employers to force up productivity. Mechanization was their main way of doing so leading to a battle between work people and the machine, causing the workers to become alienated. There were four different aspects to alienation that were established. The first of these were product alienation; paid labour in Capitalism is alienating as the products don't reflect any creative forces of the workers but are simply objects that are produced at the command of the employer. Workers then end up resenting these products and Marx states, in Capitalism the products of labour confront the workers as something alien. The second form of alienation discussed is the act of production itself. As the products are already alienated, so is the act of production. Workers only feel themselves when they are not working causing a feeling of forced labour as they get no form of personal value from their work. Marx says this is known as labour in which man alienated himself. Common purpose is the third form of alienation and is when the workers social actors become alienated from other workers. The portion of life spent working to earn a wage results in relationships with other social actors becoming devalued. The final form of alienation is loss of humanity. Due to all the previously mentioned factors of

alienation, workers begin to develop feelings of being estranged from the very essence of human beings. This leads to people becoming alienated from their own inner selves and the worker feels a constant sense of misery. The condition of alienation for the workers themselves is something very negative. The worker gains no sense of personal value or worth from their work as they are exploited by the higher class and purely there to earn a living, not to better themselves. As well as this alien character such work is shown by the fact that when there is no compulsion, it is avoided like the plague. Furthermore, for Marx work is alienating for the worker because at the workplace the worker belongs to another person and alienations of humans from humans is the germ of class division.

Similarly to Marx, Blauner did some research of his own on the concept of Alienation and stated that workers on assembly lines were the most alienated but levels of alienation were somewhat lower at workplaces using automation. Blauner came up with four dimensions of alienation which were, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Self estrangement came as a result of the previous three dimension of alienation and like Marx meant that workers had an inability to express themselves through their work therefore were unable to involve themselves in it.

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Blauner agreed with Marx's theory to a certain extent in the sense that non ownership characterized all workers under Capitalism. However, whereas this was for Marx the main cause of capitalism, Blauner was more interested in the variation of alienation within capitalism. He found that alienation

increased with industrialisation reaching its highest level with car assembly plants. Blauner accepted that capitalism causes all workers to experience some form of alienation however he claimed that this could be removed by advanced technology that would make work more satisfying and meaningful again. Harry Braverman 1974 dismissed the idea made by Blauner that automation had reversed the tenancy towards increasing alienation. He argued that it was the development in technology that had de-skilled workers by making tasks more complicated and separating mental and manual jobs. Mechanization had turned work in repetitive tasks that required little training. According to Braverman however, there were some advantages to deskilling as it made the labour cheaper and increased employer control. However, with increased employer control and technology becoming more and more developed, there was little need for as big a work force meaning many workers lost their jobs and the workers left still felt alienated as they still experienced little control over their roles and were ultimately under ruling class orders.

In conclusion, it is clear to see that the concept of Capitalism causing Alienation is one deeply explored by the sociologist Karl Marx. He sees Capitalism and the division of labour as the two main factors resulting in alienation. The idea that the working class are exploited by the ruling class is one Marx sees of great importance. He saw economic activity and a Capitalist society as vital characteristics to social life and that aspects such as work, property and the division of labour form the basis of class division resulting in alienation and exploitation of labour. The way Marx sees it is that Capitalism causes class conflict whereby the ruling class have great power

over the working class due to their position in society and their wealth; this then results in alienation. However, Marx theorized the inevitability of a workers revolution which would see the end of the capitalist system and class conflict would no longer exist. He argued that in the society of the future production would be more advanced and efficient than production under capitalism. Still in today's society we witness a hugely wide gap between the rich and the poor. In developing countries there is a clear exploitation of labour where workers are at the mercy of their employers such as sweat shops and the exploitation of children. In situation like this the worker has little or no say over their job resulting in alienation.

Words: 1892

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