

Unit 17

Alienation

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you will be able to

- understand the concept of alienation and how it is applied in analysing the modern society
- study explain aspects of alienation like objectification

17.1 Introduction

The concept alienation describes the estrangement of individuals from one another, or from a specific situation or process. It is central to the writings of Karl Marx and normally associated with Marxist sociology. There are philosophical, sociological and psychological dimensions to the argument. Hegel provided the philosophical means to overcome the Kantian dualism of 'is' and 'ought' since for Hegel, the actual was always striving to become the ideal. The passage of self-creating, self-knowing idea through history, its alienation through externalization and objectification and its reappropriation through knowledge, provided Marx with his revolutionary imperative. Turning Hegel on his head and rooting his own ideas in a "materialist vision, Marx argued that humanity is lost in the unfolding historical epochs. Thus Marx argued that with the advent of communism, there would be a complete return of individuals to themselves as social beings.

Sociological dimension of the term relates more to his argument that estrangement is a consequence of social structures which oppress people, denying them their essential humanity.

17.2 De-Humanisation of Labour

We will now outline how labour is 'de-humarized' in the process of production

a) Theory of Surplus Value

Following Adam Smith, Marx distinguished in a commodity, two aspects: they have a use-value and an exchange value. A commodity is an article, which can satisfy one or the other human need, is a use value. But a commodity is not just a useful article, which is to be produced and sold in the market, but to be exchanged with other commodities. How to measure the exchange-value of commodities which have different use-values? What do wheat and linen have in common? One is produced by a peasant, other by a weaver. They are the products of different types of useful labour. What they have in common is that they are both products of human labour in general, what Marx calls "abstract human labour". On both products a certain amount of

human labour has been spent. That determines their exchange-value. The exchange-value or simply the value, as distinguished from the use-value, consists of the abstract labour incorporated in the commodity. The measure is not the time which the individual labourer may have spent which may be above or below average, but the average time needed on a given level of productivity, what Marx calls the “socially necessary labour-time”.

Capitalist production becomes possible when along with other commodities labour-power can be bought as a commodity. As any other commodity labour-power has a use-value for the buyer and an exchange-value for the seller. For the buyer, (the capitalist), it has the use-value that it can work (produce). He uses, he consumes it for this purpose and pays the price – strange enough only afterwards - in the form of wages. For the worker his labour power has only an exchange value. He cannot use it for his own purposes, because he has no means of production. But he can sell it in order to make a living. The exchange value is determined as in the case of every other commodity by the labour-time necessary for its production or reproduction; that means, in this case by the cost of the “means of subsistence” needed to maintain the worker and his children, the future workers. The level of subsistence and of essential needs varies from situation to situation according to the level of development and other factors.

The wage covers only what is needed to maintain the labourer, his value. But what he produces is more than that. The difference is called the surplus-value. The capitalist appropriates the surplus. To understand this concept of surplus-value, it may be helpful to have a look at the historical development. In early history people produced hardly enough for their own subsistence. As soon as they were able to increase their productivity and to produce a surplus – i.e. through cattle breeding instead of hunting – the question arose how this surplus was going to be used. In course of time, it released a section of the people from work for their own subsistence like chiefs, and priests. They became the ruling class. Thereafter, one can analyse the labour of the producers as partly “necessary labour”, i.e. labour for their own subsistence, and partly “surplus-labour”, i.e. labour to maintain the ruling class. In the middle-ages, the serfs worked three days on their own lands for their own subsistence and three days on the lands of the feudal lord without being paid for it. With that surplus-labour they produced a social surplus which was appropriated by the ruling class. This appropriation can take place in different forms, in the form of kind - as in the case of share-cropping or in the form of money (rent). In the case of money, it is surplus value.

The capitalist tries to increase the rate of surplus value, which can be achieved in two ways: absolute and relative surplus value. Absolute surplus value is produced by “prolongation of the working day”. By such prolongation the time of surplus-labor is expanded. This method is especially applied in the earlier stages of capitalism. We find it still in the unorganised sector of industry in India.

Box 17.1: Relative Surplus

Relative surplus value arises from the “curtailment of the necessary labour-time, in other words from the increase of productivity. If a worker produces more in one hour than he did before, then the time needed to cover the supply of his means of subsistence (necessary labour-time) is shortened.

This increase of productivity is pursued in many ways, including increasing supervision and discipline, piece-rate wages, and above all technological innovations. Relative surplus value becomes dominant in fully developed capitalism. It presupposes the accumulation of capital, which is needed for further mechanisation and expanding scale of production.

In the early stages of capitalism we find the extraction of surplus value without the impressive and conspicuous technological revolution which characterises the later stage of capitalist development. The level of technology is still more or less the same as in pre-capitalist society. Most other aspects of society are yet un-changed or only slowly changing. But one decisive thing has changed: *the labour process is subordinated to capital*. The labourer is no longer an independent producer or a serf tied to the soil. He is under the control of the capitalist in one way or the other. Marx calls this the “formal subsumption of labour under capital”. Once capital has established its hold and has accumulated sufficiently it may proceed to the “real subsumption of labour” when it starts transforming the process of labour, re-organising it and bringing it on a new technological level.

It may be noted here that this distinction is relevant to the on-going debate about the dominant mode of production in India. Whereas capitalist farmers in the Punjab get their crops sprayed with pesticides from small aeroplanes, there are sharecroppers in other parts of India making out a meagre existence in ways, which seem to belong to a pre-capitalist form of society. But the appearance may be misleading. Even where no technological changes have taken place and where the old society still is alive culturally and ideologically, capital may already be in charge economically, through the formal subsumption of labour, extracting absolute surplus value.

Reflection and Action 17.1

What mode of production is used in the Indian state: discuss and make notes in your diary.

The key to Marx’s critique of capitalism is his theory of surplus-value which explains how capital grows by consuming living labour. Because only labour power produces surplus value, its exploitation is the basis of the capitalist system. But labour power is not only an economic factor, as it appears in the calculations of the capitalists. Labour is not only “variable capital”. Labour power is provided by living human beings who have their own needs and aspirations. Capitalism has separated labour and the satisfaction of human aspirations. Labour-power is treated as a commodity in exchange for which workers may satisfy some of their most immediate needs. But for Marx labour itself is the most essential characteristic of human life. Without it, human kind not only cannot survive, it even cannot become human. Human labour is imaginative, it is conscious and not instinctual. “We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises its structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement”.

Human labour is social. It is self-realisation through the production for

others and with others. Isolated individuals cannot survive on their own. Productive interaction with nature requires co-operation, division of labour and exchange. In the process, the human species realises itself. One might even say that the meaning of labour lies in this self-realisation of the human species. As a social process human labour creates society in its various forms. But as such it is also conditioned by society in its different forms. In the course of history the development of class societies threatens the human quality of labour. The climax of this threat is reached in capitalism, the main target of Marx's critique.

Box 17.2: Concept of Alienation

The capitalist mode of production has increased the productivity of human labour on a gigantic scale. But it has done so at the cost of the producers. They are forced to sell their labour-powers to the capitalist. The meaning of all his productive activity lies for the worker no longer in the activity itself but in the wage which, he receives at the end of a day. Life is being active, creative, and productive. But the activity of the workers does not belong to himself, but to the capitalist. His life starts only when the work is over. He works only for getting the means of life, not for life itself. That is what Marx calls Alienation.

b) Emergence of Classes

When humanity first developed fire, it took thousands of years to complete the process – being able to turn heat back into motion. The same kind of process can be seen in the development of classes. When humans began to organise themselves in accordance with their relations of production (the division of labour), classes in society formed based on the different positions and roles humans found and created themselves in. What once was a society with little or no class structure, i.e. tribal or nomadic society, became a society that split and divided itself into a diversity of classes fulfilling a broad range of productive roles.

The motion of nature, dialectics, applies in class development as it applies in all things. As the productive forces of humans increased, and class distinctions deepened and divided further, soon the advancement of the productive forces reached such heights that certain classes were no longer necessary. The small craftsperson and shop owner were pushed out of existence by the advancement of modern industries that could produce a much greater quantity at much lower cost.

Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels explained the processes of change brought forth by Industrial revolution just beginning to unfold in a particular direction:

“Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army, they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the over-looker, and, above all, in the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is”.

“The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon, the workers begin to form combinations (trade unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots.

“Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lie not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by Modern Industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes (Marx: *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*).

This “alienation” [caused by private property] can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises. For it to become an “intolerable” power, i.e. a power against which men make a revolution, it must necessarily have rendered the great mass of humanity “property-less”. And at the same time should have produced, the contradiction of an existing world of wealth and culture. Both these conditions presuppose a great increase in productive power, a high degree of its development.

17.3 Alienation as a Process

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (EPM) published in 1844, Marx analyses various aspects of alienation.

- 1) Firstly, the worker is alienated from the product of his labour. The product in which he expresses and realises himself does not belong to him. It is appropriated by the capitalists and sold on the market. With realisation of surplus-value capital grows, and with capital the alien power which controls and dominates the life of the worker. The more he works, the better he produces, the stronger becomes this alien power of capital.
- 2) Under the capitalist conditions the worker is alienated from the act of producing itself. The most human activity does no longer belong to the producer himself. It has become a commodity sold and bought on the market, the commodity of labour power. The buyer of this commodity, the capitalist, determines what the worker does and how he has to do it.
- 3) Capitalist production alienates the worker from his being a member of the human species and from his humanity, as being a fellow being with other human beings. His social activity, production turns into a means for his individual existence, for earning a wage. This implies his alienation from other human beings with whom he competes for scarce jobs.

Box 17.3: Wages price and profit

Marx documents in detail how alienation takes place, both in the extraction of absolute surplus-value and in the extraction of relative surplus-value, both in the lengthening of the working day and in the technical division of labour and mechanisation pushed forward by capital. Time is the room of

human development, as Marx puts it in "Wages, Price and Profit". Being forced to sell his labour-power the worker has not time to be and to develop himself as a human being.

a) Features of Alienation

Marx's exposition of the functioning and prospects of capitalist economy cannot be studied in isolation from his anthropological ideas and his philosophy of history. His theory is a general one embracing the whole of human activity in its various interdependent spheres. His successive writings culminating in *Capital* itself are more and more elaborate versions of the same thought which may be expressed as follows:

"we live in an age in which the dehumanisation of man, that is to say the alienation between him and his own works, is growing to a climax which must end in a revolutionary upheaval; this will originate from the particular interest of the class which has suffered the most from dehumanisation, but its effect would be to restore humanity to all mankind".

The fundamental novelty of *Capital* consists in two points, which entail wholly different view of capitalist society from that of the classical economists:

- a) what the worker sells is not his labour but labour power, and that labour has two aspects - abstract and concrete. Exploitation consists in the worker selling his labour power and thus divesting himself of his own essence; the labour process and its results become hostile and alien, deprivation of humanity instead of fulfillment.
- b) Marx, having discovered the dual nature of labour as expressed in the opposition between exchange value and use value, defines capitalism as a system in which the sole object of production is to increase exchange-value without limit. The whole of human activity is subordinated to a non-human purpose, the creation of something that man cannot as such assimilate for only use-value can be assimilated. The whole community is thus enslaved to its own products, abstractions which present themselves to it as an external, alien power. The deformation of consciousness and the alienation of the political superstructure are consequences of the basic alienation of labour - which, however, is not a 'mistake' on history's part but a necessary precondition of the future society of free beings in control of the vital process of their own lives.

In this way, *Capital* may be regarded as a logical continuation of Marx's earlier views.

- 1) Alienation is nothing but a process in which man deprives himself of what he truly is, of his own humanity.
- 2) Marx unlike Hegel did not identify alienation with externalisation, i.e. the labour process whereby human strength and skill are converted into new products. It would be absurd to speak of abolishing alienation in this sense, since in all imaginable circumstances, men will have to expend energy to produce the things they need. Hegel identified alienation with externalisation and could therefore conceive man's final reconciliation with the world by way of abolishing the objectivity of the object.

Reflection and Action 17.2

Explain the phenomenon of alienation in the production process. Can this be reduced or eliminated? Think and comment on your dairy.

To Marx however, the fact that people 'objectivize' their powers does not mean they become poorer by whatever they produce; on the contrary, labour in itself is an affirmation and not a denial of humanity being the chief form of the unending process of man's self-creation. It is only in a society ruled by private property and division of labour that productive activity is a source of misery and dehumanisation. And labour destroys the workman instead of enriching him. When alienated labour is done away with, people will continue to externalise and 'objectivize' their power, but they will be able to assimilate the work of their hands as an expression of their collective ability.

17.4 Division of Labour

The other aspect of alienation is the de-humanisation of labour itself. This happens in the course of the new division of labour promoted by capitalism. Division of labour is not invented by capitalism. It developed at an early stage of history. It is at the same time the source of material and cultural progress and of human alienation. It increases the productivity of human labour, it make it possible to produce a surplus, which again is the necessary condition for the development of culture, art, politics, and also religion. The existence of philosophers and artists, priests, and kings is possible only on this fundamental principle of division of labour. But the progressive development of culture takes place at the cost of the direct producers. Their horizon narrows down, they get specialised and lose their relation to the process as a whole. The same philosophers, priests and kings monopolise the control over society as a whole. They enjoy the freedom, which is based on the understanding and control of the total process. The others lose this freedom. They are no longer responsible members of a tribe, but isolated villagers in a huge empire, or slaves without rights, or serfs in a feudal set-up. Their life gets more and more dominated by alien forces beyond their control. In this way all division of labour lead to alienation.

Box 17.4: Capitalist Mode of Production

There is a fundamental difference between the division of labour in pre-capitalist societies and the new forms developed by capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies we can speak of a social division of labour. Various social and economic activities are divided between various crafts. It specializes the social production so that different crafts produce different commodities. But the capitalist mode of production while intensifying the social division of labour introduces also a technical division of labour which divides one particular craft, the production of one commodity into as many detail functions as possible and profitable. The weavers, carpenters, peasants of old produced different commodities. The industrial workers in capitalism have become detail labourers who individually no longer produce commodities but only collectively as part of a whole assembly of machines and workers. This process started with the co-operation of individual artisan, in one workshop under the control of an owner-capitalist. They still worked as before, producing the whole commodity. But it was the beginning of direction, control, management.

In the next stage of manufacture the technical division of labour begins. Each worker is assigned to a few operations on which he specialises. Out of this a hierarchy of labour-power develops from most skilled to unskilled. Management becomes more important. Apart from control it assumes more and more the function of planning and conceptualisation of the work. The workers have to execute the task assigned to them. But as long as they are skilled they have still a certain freedom and control within the limits of their function.

Thus in this period — 16th to 18th C — three fundamental changes in the character of productive work took place:

- 1) Capitalist management imposes strict discipline of labour through means of despotic control. The artisans of old had the freedom to choose their own rhythm and style of work. Once forced into workshop and manufacture they have to subordinate themselves to the will of the managing capitalist. To manage originally meant to train a horse in his paces, to cause him to do the exercises of the manager. And control is the central concept of all management.
- 2) Under capitalist management also that fundamental division develops which separates the conceptualisation and execution of the work. This is given with the development of the detail workers who is no longer related to the production of the whole.
- 3) The Capitalist drive for profit creates for the first time a large scale unskilled labour i.e. workers who for their lifetime are condemned to do cheap unskilled labour.

In the social division of labour, the producers may have been alienated from the whole society, but there is still a possibility of meaningful self-realisation in the work. In the technical division of labour, alienation involves the process of labour itself. The social division of labour, subdivides society, the technical division of labour subdivides humans.

Braverman shows that it is capitalism which first creates this scarcity of skills:

“Every step in the labour process is divorced, so far as possible, from special knowledge and training and reduced to simple labour. Meanwhile, the relatively few persons for whom special knowledge and training are reserved are freed so far as possible from the obligations of simple labour. In this way, a structure is given to all labour processes that at its extreme polarizes those whose time is infinitely valuable and those whose time is worth almost nothing. This might even be called the general law of the capitalist division of labour.”

a) Objectification

Marx analyses the impact of machinery and modern industry on labour in ch. XV of Capital I. He shows how the development of technology under capitalism is geared towards the maximum production of surplus value and how it transforms the worker on the basis of the capitalist division of labour in to a living appendage of a lifeless mechanism.

“In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the

instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes it mere living appendage”.

The fundamental characteristic of machinery is that it removes the tool from the hands of the worker and fits it into a mechanism, which is moved independently from the worker. This opens new avenues for exploitation. And above all it leads to the further degradation of the worker by completing the “separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour”. Thus machinery becomes:

“for most the working population, the source not of freedom, but of enslavement, not of mastery, but of helplessness, and not of the broadening of the horizon of labour but of the confinement of the worker within a blind round of servile duties in which the machine appears as the embodiment of science and the worker as little or nothing”.

Reflection and Action 17.3

Discuss the process of “objectification”. What effect does this have on the production process? Think and note down your answer in your dairy.

Technically speaking it is the transformation of labour from processes based on skill to processes based upon science. That this process led to the degradation of the workers is not an unavoidable result of the development of science and technology, but it is the consequence of the subordination of science and technology to the purpose of capital. Marx repeatedly characterised the alienation of the worker who faces the gigantic machinery of modern, capitalist, industry, and who experiences his powerlessness in front of it, as the rule of dead labour over living labour. The worker does not see it like this. He sees the machinery as representing the wealth, the capital of the capitalist and the superior knowledge of the scientists compared to which he himself is poor and ignorant and doomed to remain so.

What confronts him is in fact “objectified labour”, the result of labour in the past. In pre-capitalist society the producer was not confronted with means of production dominating and threatening him as alien power.

“Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer... what we are confronted by here is the alienation of man from his own labour. To that extent the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist from the outset, since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it. Whereas right from the start the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel and experiences it as a process of enslavement”.

Box 17.5: Marx’s Work Ethic

According to Marx, work should be the expression of man and his creativity. Work should be one which he loves and enjoys doing it. Capitalist mode of production has distorted the meaning and nature of work. Work ceases to be an expression and becomes a yoke under which the labourer groans. The human being (the subject) is treated lower or valued lower than the commodity

(object) that he himself would contribute to what is called as objectification. In a capitalist society, the wealth generated by the mode of production is appropriated by one class i.e. owners of land and capital. Thus as capitalism progresses, the devaluation of the worker also increases. This leads to objectification, where the worker gets assimilated to the product (object) and consequently loses his own identity. Marx summarizes the alienation of labour in the following words:

First, the fact that, labour is external to the worker i.e. it does not belong to his essential being. That in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when is not working and when is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character merges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual - that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity - in the same way the worker's activity, is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.

Alienation is inevitable in modern society because with the demand for better technology, and rising consumerism, men will continue to be alienated in one form or the other. Increasing division of labour and emergence of specialists make men dependent on the product and it is not likely that this phenomenon of alienation will stagnate and regress.

17.5 Conclusion

Alienation is an objective condition inherent in the social and economic arrangement of capitalism. It is impossible to extricate Marx's ideas about alienation from his wider sociological discussion of the division of labour, the evolution of private property relations, and the emergence of conflicting classes. In the Marxian terminology, alienation is an objectively verifiable state of affairs, inherent in the specific social relations of capitalist production. For Marx, the history of mankind is not only a history of class struggle but also of the increasing alienation of man.

17.6 Further Reading

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