

To what extent is labour under capitalism always alienated?

Political Anthropology

Marx's theory of alienation highlights the issue that workers must sell their labour and have little control over the task which alienates them from their own labour (Archibald, 1992: 63). Alienation is defined by Carrier (1992: 540), as a 'sense of separation' where 'people who have little control over a thing or activity are likely to be more alienated from it than people with more control'. For Marx, the term alienation plays a significant role in his critique of capitalist modes of production. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he underlines three main different types of alienation to suggest that labour under capitalism is always alienated. This essay will examine the different types of alienation proposed by Marx and to what extent labour is alienated under capitalism by exploring various ethnographies.

By creating a historical timeline of alienation, Carrier (1992) discusses how Marxist and Maussian theories are used to analyse different societies. He suggests that the Mauss's model is used to analyse the 'relations amongst people' and the relations 'between people and objects' and a pre-capitalist society where 'people and things cannot exist independently of each other' (Carrier, 1992: 540). The Marxist model however, is used to 'analyse the nature and consequences of the social organisation of production in capitalist societies' where people and things 'exist as entities with their own independent sources of being and no enduring obligations' (Carrier, 1992: 540). In his chapter 'Estranged Labour', Marx (1988

[1844]: 69) suggests that the political economy of capitalism creates a class system in the society: the property owners and the property-less workers.

In his first point about alienation, Marx states that the workers are alienated from the products of their own labour, and they eventually become a slave of the object produced. “The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him” (Marx, 1988 [1844]: 72). He also suggests that the more objects the workers produce, the fewer he can possess, consequently falling ‘under the dominion of his own product’ (1988 [1844]: 72). The object produced does not benefit the worker even though he “puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object”. The product is the property of the capitalist, and not that of the labourer, its immediate producer (Marx et al, 2013: 126), thus alienating the worker from his own labour product.

Secondly, Marx states that the workers are alienated from the process of labour itself; labour produces both itself and the worker as a commodity (1988 [1844]: 71). Moreover, explaining what constitutes the alienation of labour, he suggests that on top of the alien activity not belonging to him, the labour is external to the worker. The labourer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs (Marx et al, 2013: 126). Lastly, Marx argues that workers are alienated from their own bodies and human potential. The forced labour creates unhappiness for the workers, where they ‘do not develop freely their physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind’ (1988 [1844]: 74). The worker loses his sense of individualism as ‘he belongs not to himself, but to another’, thus ‘it is the loss of his self’ (1988 [1844]: 74).

Carrier's essay explains the emergence of capitalist societies by highlighting its significant features such as increasing alienation. In his first example, he describes a 'cottage industry' of cloth production in England, which was one of the first areas of manufacture to become industrialised (1992: 542). The production took place within the household, and the producers used their own tools, equipment and raw materials. Moreover, they managed their own timings and pace of work, which gave them greater control as it was 'subordinated to their needs rather than to the demands of some outside agent' (1992: 542). Additionally, the cloth produced had identities of the household workers embodied in them. By analysing these features of the cottage industry, it is clear that alienation is not evident. None of Marx's concepts of alienation could be applied as workers were not alienated from the labour product or process; they were still able to work freely and keep their individual identities.

However, Carrier then introduces the 'putting out' industry, which 'reduces the autonomy of the producer' (1992: 543), where we then see the emergence of alienation. The control over production was slowly starting to be taken over by the merchants, as they began to exercise control over the raw materials, timings and pace of production. As a result of loss of control over production, it would mean that there would be 'less embodiment of the producers' now (Carrier, 1992: 544). Although, he suggests that alienation was only partially visible as the workers were still able to use their own tools and equipment. However, everything changes with the emergence of factory production; 'production moved out of the household to a separate place under the control of capitalist' (Carrier, 1992: 544). This allowed for the division of labour to take place, where all the machinery belonged to the factory, and the workers had to exercise

tedious routine operations. Marx states that ‘each workman becomes exclusively assigned to a partial function, and that for the rest of his life, his labour powers is turned into the organ of this detailed function’(2013: 235), and this ‘converts his body into the automatic, specialised implement of this operation’ (2013: 236). In his ethnographic example, Carrier (1992: 547-8) discusses the manufacture of the Ford Motor Company, where the factory was ‘organised spatially around the different sorts of operations’, and used ‘machinery designed to perform only one job, extremely efficiently’. Marx’s concept of alienation can be applied here to a great extent; the workers were alienated from their own labour products and the labour itself, they were alienated from their bodies and human potential - performing only one task kills the chance for an individual to perform his own skills when doing work, they were alienated from other workers as they only had machines to interact with, or the parts they had to assemble (Carrier, 1992: 548). As a consequence of patriarchal capitalism, Carrier presents how it facilitates the disappearance of family. It is significantly different from the cottage industry where the workers exercised their own control over labour production, tools and relationship with other workers. Alienation is greatly evident in the factory productions where ‘workers had less control over production and were less likely to be linked to each other in durable relationships’ (1992: 551).

Tyler & Hancock (2001) gives a good example of an airline industry where the bodies of female flight attendants are both naturalised and commodified to fit the consumer culture of the capitalist society. The way they dress, behave and talk are closely regulated by the industry; women are expected to be more ‘caring, patient and thoughtful by nature’ (2001:

35). It is implied that the female body is an organisational icon and the skilled labour performed by them is naturalised; they are expected to achieve and maintain a particular state of embodiment (2001: 34). Marx's theory of concealed labour is applied, where one commodity is transformed into another with no additional labour costs. By doing so, the female workers are exploited, and have no awareness of this. This example outlines the concepts of alienation to a great extent as well. As Marx (1988 [1844]: 71) states, "labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity". The flight attendants are treated as commodities, thus alienating them from the process of labour, moreover alienating them from their own identities. Their own individual identities are furthermore alienated from them as they are trained to dress and behave in a certain way - which represents the notion of the ideal women' set by the airline industry to please the capitalist consumers.

Ong's example, the *Production of Possession* (1988) provides another good ethnographic example to explore how female workers specifically, are alienated under capitalist labour productions. Ong's example is set in rural Malaysia in a patriarchal society, where women are subjected to male supervision. The multinational corporations set in the rural contexts sought young unmarried women with 'nimble fingers' (1988: 35) 'as a source of cheap and easily controlled labour'. It is already evident here that the workers themselves are commodities. The young women are expected to be 'shy and obedient'. Similar to the airline industry, we see how women are generally naturalised as a commodity to be exploited. Ong describes various incidents of spirit possessions, where the women have mental or physical breakdowns. Ong suggests that these 'spirit' possessions were a way of rebelling against the authority, as they are not punished for

this, because of the superstitious and cultural beliefs (1988: 33). They break the traditions by working in a male dominated environment, and an unclean place where the spirits live. The horrible working conditions for the young female factory workers meant that there was constant enforced regulation that 'confined workers to the workers' bench' (1988: 33), where they even had to ask permission to use the bathroom. Alienation is greatly evident here as the workers are alienated from their own personal freedom, with no rights over the working conditions. "EJI plant, foremen sometimes followed workers to the locker room" (1988: 33) - this suggests the lack of control the women have over their bodies and the social relations in the factory. If the breakdowns suggests 'rebellling' as Ong suggests, it would mean that the workers are greatly unhappy. This can be related directly to Marx when he talks about forced labour 'the worker does not feel content, but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical ind and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind' (1988 [1844]: 74). This is greatly evident in the case of Ong's example as the workers are having mental and physical breakdowns. To support this, Ong (1988: 35) furthermore states that 'as factory workers, Malay women became alienated not only from the products of their labour, but also experienced new forms of psychic alienation'. These women faced alienation in various ways; alienated from their own labour, their own bodies and selves, and from other workers and social relations.

Overall, different ethnographies from different scholars have been analysed to determine the extent of alienation present. In the ethnographies studied, alienation is evident to a great extent under capitalist productions. For instance, Carrier's timeline presents how

alienation gradually increased with the establishment of industrialisation and factory production. The cottage industry showed no signs of alienation, but it started to emerge with 'putting out'. Carrier (1988: 552) concludes by saying that the increasing alienation has resulted in more 'impersonal forces' which is problematic as it causes us to lose important relationships and personal identities. Moreover, with Tyler & Hancock and Ong's example, we see the alienation of female workers and how they are exploited under capitalist modes of production to a great extent. The Malay factory workers are forced to work under horrible working conditions, causing them to be alienated from their own bodies consequently having physical breakdowns. Marx (1988[1844]): 71) states that the workers become all the poorer the more wealth he produces, and the worker himself becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodity he creates. The term 'poorer' can be analysed subjectively as the worker is alienated from his own self and social relations in addition to being alienated from his labour and labour process.

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