



# Understanding Alienation: A Marxian Perspective

**Prof. Dr. K. Santiago Mary**

Head & Department of Philosophy  
St. Joseph's College (Arts & Science)  
Chennai

## Abstract

Karl Marx, a 19th-century philosopher, economist, and sociologist, introduced the concept of alienation in the context of capitalist societies. This paper delves into the concept of alienation from a Marxian perspective, examining its multifaceted dimensions and implications within the realms of social, economic, and political structures. The exploration begins by delineating the four interconnected forms of alienation identified by Marx: alienation from the product of labor, alienation in the labor process, alienation from human potential, and alienation from fellow human beings. Each form is dissected, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intricate web of estrangement that characterizes capitalist societies. Furthermore, the paper investigates how alienation operates within contemporary frameworks, considering the influence of technology, globalization, and evolving modes of production. It scrutinizes the impact of alienation on individual consciousness, mental well-being, and social cohesion, drawing connections to pressing issues such as inequality, commodification, and the erosion of human connections. Parents struggle to capture the attention of children absorbed in their technological worlds, while children yearn for love from workaholic or materialistic parents, leading to a breakdown in the foundational micro-society of the family. By synthesizing Marx's conceptual framework with contemporary realities, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of alienation, offering insights that resonate with ongoing discussions on social justice, labor relations, and the pursuit of a more equitable and fulfilling human experience. Ultimately, it seeks to provoke critical reflections on the nature of modern society and the possibilities for transformative change.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Karl Marx, estrangement, Labour, Communism,

## Introduction

In the contemporary world, marked by advanced technology, globalized economies, and fast-paced lifestyles, a pervasive sense of alienation from productive activity has become increasingly prevalent. This phenomenon, often associated with the works of Karl Marx and other social theorists, refers to the feeling of disconnection and estrangement individuals experience in their engagement with work and the products of their labor. This article delves into the roots, manifestations, and consequences of alienation from productive activity in today's society. However, the modern world appears to be alienating its inhabitants, as pursuits of money, possessions,

and power lead individuals to extreme actions such as killing, self-destruction, war, conflict, and hatred. Consequently, the pressing need for reconciliation, both at the individual and societal levels, becomes increasingly evident.

The term alienation has many different meanings in everyday life, in science and in philosophy. Most of the term can be regarded as modifications of one broad meaning which is suggested by the etymology and the morphology of the word the meaning in which alienation is the act, or result of the act, through which something or somebody, becomes alien to something or somebody else. (82) In Marx's sense an action through which a person, a group, an instrument or a society becomes alien to the results or products of its own activity or to the nature in which it lives or to other human beings. According to Karl Marx, alienation can be succinctly defined as the producer standing aloof from the produced, whether material or physical. This detachment, driven by self-gratification, poses a significant threat to society, as the producer may not perceive the harm caused by their actions. While numerous philosophers have attempted to define alienation, Marx's distinctive perspective contrasts its authenticity with human life itself.

### **Karl Marx's General Thinking**

Marx developed his philosophical ideas from the various aspects. He considered his work to be scientific, historical and sociological as opposed to 'philosophical' divagations on social affairs, which he rejected as class-based ideology. (Neil McInnes, 1972, P.173) He has been called "the first great user of critical method in social sciences". He criticised speculative philosophy equating metaphysics with ideology. By adopting this approach, Marx attempted to separate key findings from ideological biases. (Karl Marx, 2017) Human Nature Marx criticized that all human acts, movements, relations are the principle of utility. We must deal with human nature. Marx had such a conception of man power and need. (Tom Bottomore, 1983, P. 74) Marx believed that every man has some power and need apart from these he calls 'natural' and 'species'. Man shares his natural powers and needs with every living entity. Species powers and needs on the other hand man alone possesses. This distinction between natural and species man is generally the unrecognized foundation on which Marx brings his all conception of human nature. (74)

Society in Marx's trio of all-group expressions is defined as 'the sum of relations in which individuals stand to one another'. These relations are sometimes treated as existing eternally to man, as when Marx calls society the product of man's reciprocal activities; and sometimes lying within man himself, as when he says, 'society itself, that is man himself in his social relations'. (Bertell Ollman, 1976, P. 104) The term society at the limits of its definition covers both man and the world he inhabits. The concept of class was the starting point of Marx's whole theory. This class holds central importance in Marxist theory. Marx refers to this class as 'the class which stands in immediate need of work,' but he extends beyond what Hegel had articulated in that context (Sholomo Avineri, 1968, P. 25). In capitalist society, there are two principal classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It was the structure of early capitalism, and the class struggles in this form of society. (Tom Bottomore, P. 74) The struggles arise out of a production which divides society into classes, one of which carries out the actual process of production (slave, wage-worker) while the other (slave-owner, capitalist employer) enjoys a part of the product without having to work to produce it. (Emile Burns, 1987, P.34) The struggle between the classes helps

man go forward to a higher stage of production. When a successful revolution takes place the higher form of production is brought in or widely extended. Finally, an issue of a different kind which has confronted Marxists of the present generation concerns the emergence of a new class structure in the socialist societies.

Communism is the central political idea of Marx's thought. It is a social conception with a philosophical and historical meaning. (Peter Osborne, 2005, P.72) The political meaning of Marx's thought has often been obscured by its association with the actually existing state Socialism of the Soviet Union, this communist movement more generally in the period following the second world war. (73) Marx must describe the development of communism as a set of stages. If these stages represented different degrees of the gradual perfection of communism. (Sholomo Avineri, P. 221) Marx puts it in the manuscripts, "communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism is not itself the goal of human development – the form of human society." (222) According to Marx communism is necessarily driven to asceticism, to making a virtue of its low standard of living. It reduces the human needs. In such a society communism means only the community of work and wages, not the mutuality of common life. (224) He thought that human emancipation would be fully realized only in communism, the second stage of post capitalist society. (Lawrence H. Simon, 2006, P. 743) Productive activity develops powers capable of their ultimate fulfilments only in communism, and through the communism only such activity exists. About this communism Marx says that in the communist society all the work is self-activity. Through this activity we realize the genuinely human powers that constitute the 'self' in this period. (Bertell Ollman, 1976, P.101) Then Marx used two concepts that were the central to Hegel's philosophy to theorize the transition from capitalism to communism. The alienation refers to the estrangement or separation of individuals from the products of their labor, from the labor process itself, from their fellow workers, and from their own humanity. Karl Marx believed hard work and human dignity as a prime duty of both the society and the individual as well. The society in his time made dramatic change in his personal life. Thus we can explore the multifaceted dimensions of alienation as conceptualized by Karl Marx and its relevance in understanding the complexities of our present social dynamics.

## **Alienation from Labor**

According to Marx, alienation from the product occurs when human beings become estranged from the things they produce and lose control over their product. To understand how a worker can lose control over what they produce, let's briefly examine production in feudal society. In a feudal society, production serves the immediate purpose of existence, with the produced goods consumed directly to satisfy material needs without entering into circulation for buying and selling. (Ken Morrison, 2006, P.121) The product of labor directly fulfills material needs, sustaining life and existence. Additionally, in feudal society, what the laborer produces not only has immediate use value but also affirms their relationship to themselves through their productive powers. Product alienation occurs when the product no longer belongs to the worker and circulates in the medium of exchange, appearing detached from the laborer who created it. (122)

In modern society, this situation is reversed. Production is primarily for exchange rather than immediate use, and what the worker produces must enter the market. Here, the worker loses control over the product of their labor, as the product belongs to the owner of the means of production, who puts it into circulation for purchase

and sale. Marx argues that product alienation alters the individual's social relationship to what they produce and to the natural world. (Marx, Karl, 1964, P. 110-111) In feudal society, workers derive subsistence and self-definition from the product, while in industrial society, the worker is alienated from what they produce because both the product and the means of production no longer belong to them but are privately owned by capitalists. Alienation, in this context, manifests as the worker's separation from both the product and the means of production.

At the core of Marx's theory is the notion of alienation from labor, where individuals are estranged from the products of their own work. In the capitalist mode of production, workers are reduced to mere cogs in a machine, with their creativity and autonomy stripped away. The commodification of labor turns workers into commodities themselves, leading to a sense of detachment from the fruits of their labor and a loss of control over their destinies. Considering the current situation, it's important to explore how technological advancements, globalization, and changes in labor markets may exacerbate or alter the dynamics of alienation in the contemporary workplace. Additionally, examining the impact of emerging economic models and the gig economy on worker alienation can provide insights into the evolving nature of labor relations.

## **Alienation from the Self**

Marx explores the idea of alienation from oneself, emphasizing the impact of the capitalist system on an individual's sense of identity. As individuals become increasingly defined by their roles in the production process, their own desires, values, and authentic selves are often suppressed. This alienation from selfhood can result in a profound sense of emptiness and a disconnect from one's true essence.

Alienation is always self-alienation. It is the alienation of man from himself (from his human possibilities) through himself (through his own activity). Alienation is not just one among the forms of alienation, but the very essence and basic structure of alienation. On the other hand, self-alienation is not merely a concept; it is also an appeal or a call for a revolutionary change of the world. It characterizes more profoundly the alienation of labor and sometimes the product. The point emphasized is that a man's labor is his life, and his product is his life in objectified form. Therefore, when they are alienated from him, his own "self" is alienated from him. It is taken that the substance of my being or my "self" is made into another's property to the extent that I give another the use of my labor. (Syed Sagidul Islam, 2000, P.303) A man is self-alienated if his true 'human' nature is something alien to him, if his life fails to manifest the characteristics of a truly human life.

According to Marx, the worker in contemporary civil society is dehumanized qua producer in several ways. He is dehumanized in the sense of being reduced to the level of an animal because he produces merely "under the compulsion of direct physical need". (304) When he does not produce in freedom from such need, his production falls to the level of mere animal production, and he loses his advantage over animals. He is also dehumanized in the sense of being reduced to the subhuman condition of a slave, by virtue of surrendering his labor power to another man. Labor directed by another man becomes akin to slave labor. As a result of the division of labor, the worker is dehumanized in the sense of being reduced to the condition of a machine. In short, under the system of alienation, the worker is reduced to the level of an animal, a slave, and a machine. Common to all of

these descriptions is the idea of sinking to a subhuman level or dehumanization. The worker is truly human only if his labor is truly human, manifesting and developing his personality. This is one dimension of his self-alienation in which his actual condition fails to correspond with his essential nature. (305)

### **Alienation from the Product**

According to Marx, alienation from the product occurs when human beings become estranged from the things they produce, losing control over their creations. To understand how workers can lose control over what they produce, let's briefly examine production in feudal society. In such a society, production serves the purpose of immediate consumption to satisfy material needs directly, without the product entering the market for buying and selling. (Ken Morrison, 2006, P.121) The product of labor not only satisfies immediate needs but also affirms the laborer's relationship to their own productive powers, sustaining their life and existence. In addition, what the labourer produces in feudal society not only has immediate use value, but it affirms their relationship to themselves in their own productive powers, because it sustains their life and existence. Product alienation thus occurs when the product no longer belongs to the worker and circulates in the medium of exchange where it appears to be detached from the labourer who creates it.

Contrastingly, in modern society, production is geared towards exchange rather than immediate use. The products created by workers must enter the market for sale. Here lies the essence of the worker losing control over their product, as it now belongs to the owner of the means of production, entering circulation for purchase and sale. Marx argues that product alienation alters the individual's social relation to what they produce and to the natural world. (Karl Marx, 1964, P. 110-11) In feudal society, workers derive subsistence and self-definition from the product they create. In industrial society, however, the worker is alienated from their product, as both the product and the means of production are privately owned by capitalists. Therefore, alienation manifests as the worker's separation from both the product and the means of production.

### **Alienation from the Productive activity**

In this type of alienation human beings lose control over the capacity of their laboring activity to affirm their being and define their self-existence. To understand this term, it will be useful to look at a concept he used frequently throughout his work called as 'social relation'. The term social relation is primarily used by Marx to describe the relationship that is formed between the individual and the outer world in the labour process. And to pinpoint the way in which human beings are essentially connected to existence and to the external world through their labouring activity. (James K. Feibleman, 1973, P.164) Understanding in this sense, individuals are connected to existence by their labour in two broad ways:

- It connects them to themselves to the extent that they receive self-affirmation from it in the form of material satisfactions.
- It connects them to others and to the social world in that by their labouring activity they form relation with history and society.

Marx stated that alienation from productive activity breaks the connection the worker has to the self-affirming



and self-defining aspects of their labouring activity and it does this in three broad ways. (Ken Morrison, 2006, P.123)

First, according to Marx, when the workers cannot dispose of their labour as they see fit, and when they are compelled to sell it to the capitalist in exchange for wage. Because the workers lose control over their labouring activity in this case, their labour does not “affirm” them because the labour no longer belongs to them. This type of alienation takes place in industrial society when the worker’s movements are not their own, are directly controlled by a superior. When workers lose control over their labouring activity and cannot control their own body movements. (Bastiaan Wielenga, 1984, P.70)

Second, alienation from productive activity reverses the individual’s relationship to themselves and their own productive powers. Under these circumstances, the labour of the worker does not hold out the direct satisfaction of their material needs as it once did in feudal society. Since what is produced enters into the medium of exchange. Marx said this, converts the worker’s activity into nothing more than a means to satisfy their human need so that the sole purpose of life becomes that of fulfilling needs. This alienates individuals from the capacity of their labour to define their essential beings. (Karl Marx, 1964, P.113-114)

Third, alienation from productive activity reverses the individual’s relations to their own physical body. While in feudal societies productive activity defined the sphere of free actions in all functions. In capitalist productive activity is free only in those functions which workers share with animals such as eating, sleeping, drinking and procreating, since only these functions are free and unsupervised. In their human labouring functions therefore, workers feel themselves to be like animal. In this case individuals are alienated from their physical bodies. (Ken Morrison, 2006, P.125) Since their productive activity no longer belongs to the worker, their defining relation to themselves and their powers are reversed: activity becomes emasculation. In this state the worker can no longer depend on their own activity for their life. (Ollmen, Bertel, 1971, P. 140)

Four fundamental principles affected when man is alienated. Prime among the four would be God. The separation of man from God religiously called sin. This is reconciled through contrition, reparation and reconciliation. Next alienation could take place within himself. When one is not happy with his intellect and outlook or the relations surrounded, he hates his own self. He alienates himself from him. This could repair through proper consultation and counselling. Most of the times it is in danger that if one feels this alienation tries himself to be destroyed by means of suicide and addiction to the destructive forces such as alcohol and some other means. Next one could be alienation from the society. This causes real damage and puts the neighbors in mess. These alienations would lead one to alienate himself from the nature. Natural alienation can be done due to the use and through mentality of man. Certainly this would lead the human race to face the natural catastrophe.

## Conclusion

Today alienation emerges as a pervasive danger in society, manifesting in the busyness of individuals immersed in various pursuits. The authenticity of human life will be completed only if he feels secure with his own life, the life of others which would definitely lead to society as a whole. The human condition requires us to work

for a living. Moreover, work must be done for the common good. When a person feels insecure in his working place this also leads him to stand afar off. Society should also enhance a person to feel the warmth of love and concern. Alienation leads one to renounce his faith, betray his love to the fellow human being and deny his responsibility in the overall development of the society.

Man is the mystery said Karl Jasper. Man is from the society and the mob form the society. Man is the mixture of feelings and emotions. Man is like a glass which must be handled with care. Caring and sharing leads the society to attain its fullness. The real need of society is love and care. The crying child seeks its presence amidst the busy crowd in various celebrations and gathering. That cry is the cry of each and every man in the society. When one feels the insecurity and dismay he really feels the meaninglessness of his presence there. Consequently, it leads him to forego the role of his presence there. There his emotions and feelings shattered.

Philosophers like Karl Marx call this absence as alienation. The one who is present willfully and freely makes restrain to be present. Mind, thoughts, emotions and body form the whole human being. If one is absent in obtaining the responsibility of the particular person it will be termed as alienation. Alienation affects not only the growth of the individual but also the growth of the community as a whole. Alienation is the most common and destructive emotion we all express frequently. Most often it came into existence through anger, irritation, rage or fume. Indeed, there can be many towards one's children, parents, spouse, friends, workers, superiors and strangers. Some types of anger however like cancer that stays in our system silently eating up our happiness from the inside.

Today's society is more developed in terms of money, power and wealth. There are plenty of things which man makes for the sophisticated life style. Yet man fails to understand the real need of loving and caring his fellow human being. Thus we face regularly religious riots, wars and violence. Justice is at stake in this developed society. The compartmentalized life style adds fuel to the notion alienation in this technical and developed society. The call to unite and reconcile is the ardent call given not only by the religious heads but also by the civil heads too.

Society is the combination of various persons with lot of creativity, intellectual caliber above all, emotions and feelings. A good rapport taken place in the society imprints in each one of us a positive tone to grow. Rapture in the relationship makes the relationships and persons involved in individual's growth fragile and shatters the person's personality into pieces. There the great need and urgency of the heart of love and open hand to accept the fellow men serves as bridge to enhance the relationship. It is the role and conviction of the individual to build the bridges to augment relationships amiable and effable. Real human society should be built in the hearts of the people, consequently bridges which unites the hearts the people is stronger than wall that separates and makes alienated.

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