

ALIENATION IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Introduction

Alienation is one of those terms that started off as a philosophical concept and yet has now become almost a part of everyday speech. In this process new meanings have been ascribed to it and old meanings have been reinterpreted and broadened, so that, at times, it is hard to tell exactly what it does mean – other than denoting a general feeling of being dissatisfied in some way. Although at times it appears to be part of the common currency of everyday speech, it is also apparent that it has a close connection with various schools of thought that identify themselves with Marx where it has consequently taken on a distinctly political tone. But what is the relation between the term alienation and Marx's major theoretical contributions to the fight for socialism – the materialist conception of history and the theory of value? And of what significance can this term be now in the Party's work for socialism? This bulletin will attempt to look at some of these issues in an introductory way.

Marx's early writings

Marx put forward his theory of alienation at a time when he was still strongly influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach's book *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841, in which Feuerbach, an ex-student of Hegel, had gone beyond Hegel in his critical analysis of religion. Feuerbach argued that the notion of god is a product of the way people see themselves. He argued that people ascribe to god just those qualities that they see as being essentially human qualities.

“ . . . in religion man necessarily places his nature out of himself . . . God is his alter ego, his other lost half” (p.195).

For Feuerbach, people alienate their essential being by attributing their human qualities to a god who is then worshipped on account of these qualities. In worshipping god, therefore, people are unconsciously worshipping themselves. Thus Feuerbach argues that religion is a form of alienation which prevents people from attaining realisation of their own species-being. Feuerbach's thinking has been described as humanist in that his theory of alienation is based on a theory of human nature as species-being, as innate to the human species.

Marx gave his fullest treatment of alienation in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 1844. At this time Marx was developing his critique of Feuerbach and Hegel whilst still being very much influenced by Feuerbach's work.

Marx had rejected Feuerbach's starting point of an abstract notion of human nature disconnected from the social and economic environment. Marx therefore attempted to look, not at people in the abstract, but at the position of the worker under capitalism. Therefore in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx starts his studies on political economy in order to understand the material conditions of the wage worker. It is in this context that Marx introduces the notion of estranged labour and alienation.

In the passage on “Estranged Labour” in the first manuscript, Marx outlines four different aspects of the alienation of workers under capitalism. Firstly, workers are alienated from the product of their labour.

“The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him” (p. 108).

Marx seems to have three points in mind here. First, that the product of labour is legally owned by someone other than the workers who made it, and that in spite of their toil the workers are physically deprived of the fruits of their labour.

“So much does labour’s realisation appear as loss of realisation that the worker loses realisation to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects made necessary not only for his life but for his work. Indeed, labour itself becomes an object which he can obtain only with the greatest effort and with the most irregular interruptions. So much does appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital” (p. 108).

Second, Marx is also pointing to the absence of any control that workers have over the product, that, indeed, it is the product that controls them. The worker has become the slave to the product.

“. . . the object which labour produces – labour’s product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer” (p. 108).

Third, Marx is underscoring the fact that the working class can only have existence in capitalism in so far as they are workers. Being a worker comes first; being a person comes second.

“The height of this bondage is that it is only as a worker that he continues to maintain himself as a *physical subject* . . .” (p. 109).

The aspect of alienation follows from the first. Here Marx considers the alienation of the workers from their productive activity.

“If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation” (p110).

Here Marx argues that the kind of work and the condition of work that wage-workers have to accept is inimical to their essential-being. This work does not bring satisfaction but wears the worker down leaving only frustration.

“...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 he is not working, and when he 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” (pp 110-111).

In the third aspect of alienation we can see more clearly that the influence of Feuerbach’s humanism is still working strongly on Marx, Here Marx argues that workers are alienated from their essential species-being. By this Marx means that the character of every species is contained in the character or its life activity, and that the human species-being is “free conscious activity”. But Marx argues that wage-labour does not conform to this notion or free and conscious activity, and is not, therefore, truly human activity.

“The object of labour is, therefore, the *objectification of man’s species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of this production, therefore, estranged labour tears from his *species life*, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him” (p114).

Finally, the fourth aspect of alienation follows on from the first three aspects, and is the “estrangement of man from man”. In other words, instead of truly human relations between people, relations are governed by people’s roles as agents in the economic process of expansion and accumulation of value.

Marx and the theory of alienation

As we have seen above, Marx’s analysis of alienation is firmly embedded in a recognition of the material conditions of the wage-worker under early capitalism. This separates Marx most emphatically from all those writers on alienation from Hegel to the existentialists who see alienation as a necessary characteristic that haunts people through all time, irrespective of their material conditions. Instead of seeing alienation as part of the human condition, Marx argues that it is the result of a specific set of social relations where human productive activity is reduced to wage-labour and where the worker has no control over the means of production or productive activity. In short, for Marx, the worker’s alienation is the direct result of capitalist relations of production. Hence, for Marx, there is a solution. If alienation is caused by capitalist relations, then the removal of those relations will remove the alienation itself. Marx’s solution, then, was not one of metaphysics, but the revolutionary transformation of social relations.

But there is one strand of thinking derived from Feuerbach that Marx had not completely discarded in the *1844 Manuscripts* – the humanist notions of what it is to be “truly human”. Marx argued that under capitalist social relations workers were prevented from leading “truly human” lives and that only a socialist/communist revolution could secure a “truly human” existence for them. This aspect of Marx’s work has aroused considerable controversy, and a consequent ambivalence can also be seen in some of the literature published by the Party on this subject .

The problem is this. If according to the materialist conception of history it is argued

that human nature is not pre-given to society, but is formed by it, and that the ideas prevalent in any age are largely determined by the material conditions of that age, then how can a humanist position be accepted with its notions of “species-being” and “truly human” activity determined abstractly for all time? In directly political terms this issue questions whether socialism is not only a means for ensuring control over the material means of life, but also represents a more “human” form of society in a broader sense.

Following on from this, there has been considerable controversy as to the value of Marx’s early works such as the *1844 Manuscripts*, and the theory of alienation in particular. Some have argued that they represent an important supplement to Marx’s later works on political economy and politics where, they argue, the theory of alienation is itself still much in evidence, and represent a forceful insight into the human problems of living under capitalism. Indeed, the notion of alienation has been broadened to include many of the personal problems felt by people living and working under capitalism, from the boredom of work to the loneliness of the concrete jungles where have to live.

Others however would regard the theory of alienation as a piece of juvenile criticism of the very Hegelian-Feuerbachian framework that Marx had still not completely rejected at that time. It is then argued that Marx himself later rejected these earlier works. Specifically, it is argued that Marx later rejected all remaining Feuerbachian notions when, together with Engels, he began to work out the materialist conception of history. For example, in the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx is said to have directly repudiated any humanist notion of a human essence.

“Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations”.

Here Marx is saying that there is no such thing as the human essence. What people have taken to be the human essence has actually been dependent on the material and general conditions of that society, the “ensemble of the social relations”.

Hence it is argued that, in spite of the presence of the notion of alienation in Marx’s later writings, Marx abandoned his early theory of alienation. The presence of the notion of alienation in the later works is then explained away in some way. For example, it is argued that the concept of alienation shifted and no longer refers to its earlier formulation but instead refers only to the alienation of the worker from the product in that the worker does not own the product. Alternatively it is sometimes argued that the later presence of the concept of alienation represents some kind of sentimental attachment to or vestigial remain of Marx’s earlier thinking and as such is largely redundant, having no place in the theoretical framework of the later works.

Alienation and socialism

Whether or not Marx came to reject the notion of alienation, a more important question for us to consider is that of its usefulness now in our work for socialism. Our fight for socialism is based on an economic and historical analysis of capitalism which shows that in a material sense, capital can never be made to work in the interests of the working class and that it is in our interests to overthrow it. But where does this

leave the notion of alienation?

There is a strong feeling that a socialist society will allow a free development of human potential in a way that is impossible under capitalism and that alienation will be impossible in a socialist society. But is it possible to reconcile this aspect of the theory of alienation with a materialist analysis of human nature? One possible way forward to a reconciliation would be to argue that our notion of what it is to be is culturally conditioned. Thus the material advances that capitalist development has opened up have produced new notions of what it is to be human. But at the same time capitalism prevents the realisation of this for the working class. Indeed, this can be seen as one of its many contradictions. It is this alienation that the socialist revolution will abolish, whilst, in addition, new notions of what it is to live “humanly” will themselves be developed in the course of socialist development.

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