



## MARX THEORY OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM: ITS RELEVANCE AND ANALOGY BETWEEN WORK AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE MODERN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

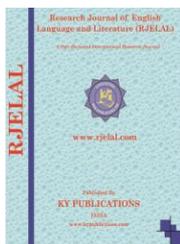
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### Abstract

Conflicts within society are what, according to Marx the view of dialectical materialism, drive society forward. Alienation at work was described by Marx in the 1840s, but continues to be relevant even today. The Industrial Revolution forced people into unfulfilling factory jobs that estranged them. The problem persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly in low autonomy jobs. Today factors such as division of labour and the displacement of certain skills contribute to alienation despite the automation of manual labour. However, new technology also helps to de-alienation through the interactive nature of internet that produces new opportunities. Despite the technological changes, the key factors causing alienation remain similar to 1840s and can be traced back to the dehumanization of work and workers by the capitalist system. For this reason the alienating and de-alienating aspects of technology in the modern contemporary world are relevant but should be viewed within the social and economic context in which the technology operates. Prior to industrialization, work was more creative and flexible, for example craftspeople worked to their own pace and controlled what they make and how they make it. Work on the land fluctuated seasonally and was meaningful, because the product was food a vital necessity. In contrast, factory workers had no control over the process, work hours or the final product due to technological advancements and labour division. They had to perform repetitive routines to survive, creating something that wasn't necessarily useful to them, but generated wealth for their employer. Workers became estranged from employers and each other due to class division and competition that replaced collaboration. Marx believed work was "dehumanised" and no longer offered enjoyment of self-realisation.

**Keywords:** Alienation; Dehumanised; Capitalist; Complex; Automation; Analogy

### Introduction

Karl Marx's thought of the dialectical nature of society and especially history is built on the doctrine of George Willhelm Hegel which viewed

history as a process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, with each force in history creating an opposite one, driving society forward. But while Hegel was concerned with dialectical idealism, one

of spirit, ideas and beliefs, Marx was more concerned with the material-economic side of social reality.

Marx developed his theory of dialectical materialism in the elaborate manner in "The Capital", but his views on the contradiction that propel society forward can be found already in his renowned Communist Manifesto (and in The German Ideology). Marx bases the study of society on the study of inner contradictions. Contradictions within society are what, according to Marx the view of dialectical materialism, drive society forward. While Hegel thought that these contradictions are ideal, meaning that they are contradictions between different views and forms of thought, Marx held that they are in fact contradictions with material substance (hence "dialectical materialism").

According to Marx history can be described as an ongoing conflict between classes over the means of production. Nowadays, under the capitalist mode of production the main contradiction is between the needs of capitalists to profit and the needs of the worker to survive by retaining some of the profit. This conflict according to Marx originates from economic circumstances but is manifested in the realm of ideology, a product of the relations of production which serves to grant justification to the existing state. But under the approach of dialectical materialism, the class conflict will undoubtedly bring about change when the social structure can no longer sustain the burden. Dialectical materialism drives social change through the reciprocal relations between contradicting social factors, factors which have to do first and foremost with material considerations of economy and class, with ideology is a product of these considerations.

### **Dialectical Philosophy and Modern Science**

The dialectical materialism of Marx is not only a useful philosophical method for understanding the processes of society, but is also a powerful tool for the assessment of the scientific method, according to Marxists Grant and Woods. In "Reason in Revolt," they explain the philosophical basis of dialectical materialism and defend its practice using examples from current work in formal logic and physics. They suggest that just as science provides confirmation of

dialectical materialism, so dialectical materialism helps demonstrate where science has lost its way. They are especially critical of the injection of mysticism into current works of theoretical physics. (Book News)The present world situation suggests that the capitalist system is now reaching a similar impasse to the one reached earlier by Stalinism. The crisis can be explained in quite scientific terms. To do so, however, a knowledge of the Marxist method - of dialectical and historical materialism - is necessary. Many blame the activities of the US President, George W. Bush. But Mr. Bush is only the unconscious agent of historical processes that he has inherited and the existence of which he does not suspect. Paradoxically, by acting in the way he has, he is hastening the demise of the socio-economic system he hopes to preserve. Now, America has the reputation of the most counter-revolutionary force on earth; but we may come to witness a very graphic example of the dialectic of history! Ted Grant joined Britain's Independent Labour Party in 1934. His published writings include The Unbroken Thread (1989), Scotland: Socialism or Nationalism (1992), Where is Britain Going? (1995), and Russia from Revolution to Counter-Revolution(1997). Woods is the author of: Marxism in Our Time (1992), China in Crisis (1994), The Socialist Alternative to the European Union (1997), A New Stage in the Capitalist Crisis (1998), Indonesia: the Asian Revolution Has Begun (1998), and Crisis in Russia, the Free Market

### **Alienation and Capitalism**

Capitalism is a system that endlessly promises people happy and self-fulfilled lives. In the United States this vision even has a name: the American Dream. But when we look around us, reality falls far short. We see this reflected in everything from divorce rates, child abuse, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, stress, mental illness, and general feelings of isolation and frustration that so many people experience.

Rather than achieving self-realization and living meaningful and fulfilling lives, many people experience some degree of alienation, and the ones that don't are quite likely engaged in some form of self-deception, perhaps sustaining a sense of

meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about themselves or their circumstances.

Quite a few thinkers, including existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, have argued that alienation is an unavoidable feature of the human condition, but this is not Marx's view. Instead, Marx argues that alienation is largely a product of class society in general and of capitalism in particular, and that we could end a society characterized by pervasive alienation if we radically reorganized our economic system.

Marx's most detailed discussion of alienation is in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which he wrote in 1844 but which were not published until the 1930s. In this work, Marx focuses on what he calls "alienated labour," because he sees alienation at work as the central form of alienation. This is based on the assumption that the need to engage in free, creative labor is a central part of human nature. It's precisely because capitalism systematically frustrates that need, that it is an alienating system.

One of Marx's main claims in the 1844 *Manuscripts* is that for most people most of the time, work is a frustrating, unpleasant experience. That's something that most of us would agree with. In fact it's such a commonplace that there are endless popular songs about waiting for the weekend or Saturday night to arrive. There's even a national restaurant chain named for the relief people feel when they get out of work at the end of the week. (By contrast, no one has opened an eatery named "TGI Monday.")

When Marx was writing in the 1840s, he was thinking primarily of the monotonous brutality of factory labor. But what Marx wrote about blue-collar work in the mid-nineteenth century remains true of much white-collar work at the beginning of the twenty-first. In her book *The Overworked American*, the sociologist Juliet Schor reports the following:

"Thirty percent of American adults say that they experience high stress nearly every day; even higher numbers report high stress once or twice a week... Americans are literally working themselves to death—as jobs contribute to heart disease,

hypertension, gastric problems, depression, exhaustion, and a variety of other ailments."

Now a lot of people think that this is an unavoidable necessity, because work is intrinsically unpleasant. But Marx's argument is that it doesn't have to be this way. Work can be—or could be—meaningful, creative and self-expressive. And if it were like that for us all or most of the time, then our lives could be fulfilling and satisfying.

The problem is that under capitalism work doesn't have these characteristics for most people. Marx emphasizes two reasons why capitalism "robs workers of all life content." The first is that it is an economic system that accentuates the division of labour, breaking production into a series of smaller and smaller, more specialized tasks, each performed by a different kind of worker, because this will increase profitability. Consequently, "the individual labourers are appropriated by a one-sided function and annexed to it for life," depriving them of the well-rounded variety of powers and activities. They need to be full human beings.

The second reason why capitalism generates alienation is that it is an economic system in which a small minority controls the means of production, and in which most people can survive only by selling their own labour power. Workers under capitalism have to work for someone else. As a consequence, Marx argues that work has little or no intrinsic worth for the worker—as he puts it, "it is not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself."

More generally, we find our lives dominated by impersonal powers, from labyrinthine bureaucracies to economic forces, which we are unable to control, even though they are ultimately human creations. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels describe alienation as "the positing of social activity, the consolidation of our product as a real power over us, growing out of our control." Capital describes the conditions of wage labour as "alienated from labour and confronting it independently," and of capital as "an alienated and independent social might, which stands over against society as a thing."

But if we could abolish capitalism and replace it with a society in which workers collectively and democratically control production, then work itself could be transformed into an activity that we would find rewarding for its own sake. It would become a way of exercising our individual creativity and talents, and of contributing to the common good—“not only a means of life but life’s prime want,” as Marx put it in *Capital*.

While capitalism continues, however, labour will continue to be alienated. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx discusses various aspects of this alienation. First, workers are alienated from their product. What they produce does not belong to them, and the particular characteristics of what they produce are of little concern to them. All that matters is that they get paid a wage. Second, workers under capitalism are alienated from their own productive activity. They typically have no control over that activity, and it doesn’t express their own goals or projects.

Third, workers are alienated from what Marx (following Feuerbach) calls their “species-being,” in other words from those qualities that make them distinctively human. What distinguishes humans from other species is our capacity to engage in free, conscious, and creative work. But alienated labour reduces humans to the level of animals.

Earlier philosophers had seen the distinctive characteristic of humans as our capacity for rational thought. But for Marx it is the application of rational, conscious thought to productive activity that distinguishes us from other creatures. As he says in *The German Ideology*, “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence.”

Unlike other species, we can step back from activity we perform to remain alive our life activity consciously assess it, and improve it. As Marx says, “The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from this activity.” By contrast, a human being’s activity “is not a determination with which he immediately fuses.”

Unlike other animals, “the human being makes his life activity an object of his will and consciousness.”

But under capitalism, labour doesn’t get the opportunity to exercise this distinctively human ability. That’s why Marx says that in his human functions, work and man is nothing more than animal. He adds that alienated labour “estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his human existence.

The final aspect of alienated labour is that, as a consequence of these other forms of alienation, workers are alienated from each other. Marx writes: “the proposition that man is estranged from his species-being means that each man is estranged from the others and that all are estranged from man’s essence.”

Marx believes that alienation is a feature not just of capitalism, but of all earlier societies too, even before classes emerged. Even in the earliest pre-class societies, humans were dominated by external forces, and in all class societies, the direct producers are under the control of a parasitical ruling class.

But Marx also argues that alienation is worse under capitalism. In the *Grundrisse*—the notebooks he kept while he was preparing to write *Capital* he wrote: “At early stages of [human] development the single individual appears to be more complete, since he has not yet elaborated the abundance of his relationships, and has not established them as powers that are opposed to himself.”

It is as ridiculous to wish to return to that primitive abundance as it is to believe in the continuing necessity of its complete depletion. The bourgeois view has never got beyond opposition to this romantic outlook and thus will be accompanied by it, as a legitimate antithesis, right up to its blessed end.

So Marx rejects both the romantic view that we should retreat to a bygone era of supposed tranquillity, and the bourgeois view that people by nature will always want more and will never be satisfied.

He thinks that people are more alienated under capitalism because the gap between reality and potential is so much greater today than it was in earlier societies. Capitalism has created the wealth and technology that could allow everyone to lead fulfilled and meaningful lives. It offers us a glimpse of what our lives could be like, not in imagination but in reality. But at the same time it denies most people that kind of life. The solution is not to retreat to the past, which in any case is no longer possible, but to realize the potential that is now available to us by transforming society.

People typically experience alienation as an individual problem, and there is a multi-million dollar self-help industry that has emerged offering individual solutions. Even books that locate alienation and unhappiness in a broader social context, like *Affluenza* by the British psychologist Oliver James, end up offering the same kind of advice.

James attacks what he calls “selfish capitalism” for creating the “Affluenza Virus,” a “set of values which increases our vulnerability to emotional distress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.” But the solutions that James offers all involve lifestyle changes that are beyond the means of most people. He advises mothers who are suffering from stress, for example, to find a nanny rather than use a pre-school.

The truth is that there are no lasting individual solutions to the problem of alienation. Human happiness, wellbeing, and individuality can only be fully realized in a society free of exploitation and oppression, and achieving that kind of society requires a collective struggle to change the world. Simply being participants in that kind of struggle can start to lessen the degree of alienation in our lives, but alienation can only be completely abolished in a society in which “the free development of each” has become “the condition for the free development of all.”

### The relationship between work and technology in the contemporary world

Alienation at work was described by Marx in the 1840s, but continues to be relevant today. The Industrial Revolution forced people into unfulfilling factory jobs that estranged them. The problem persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly in low autonomy jobs. Today factors such as division of labour and the displacement of certain skills contribute to alienation despite the automation of manual labour. However, new technology also helps to de-alienation through the interactive nature of internet that produces new opportunities. Despite the technological changes, the key factors causing alienation remain similar to 1840s and can be traced back to the dehumanisation of work and workers by the capitalist system. For this reason the alienating and de-alienating aspects of technology in the 21st century are relevant but should be viewed within the social and economic context in which the technology operates.

Alienation, from a sociological perspective, can be described as a feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness and estrangement as a result of being unable to find fulfilment in ones work. The idea was formulated in Karl Marx’s early writing (Fulcher, & Scott, 2003) that coincided with the Industrial Revolution when the “agrarian, handicraft economy” was being replaced by “industry machine manufacture” (Britannica, 2015). Marx saw work as a means for people to express them creatively and central to human nature (Fulcher, & Scott, 2003). Prior to industrialization, work was more creative and flexible, for example craftspeople worked to their own pace and controlled what they make and how they make it. Work on the land fluctuated seasonally and was meaningful, because the product was food – a vital necessity. In contrast, factory workers had no control over the process, work hours or the final product due to technological advancements and labour division. They had to perform repetitive routines to survive, creating something that wasn’t necessarily useful to them, but generated wealth for their employer. Workers became estranged from employers and each other due to class division and competition that replaced collaboration (Kellner, 2006). Marx believed work

was “dehumanised” and no longer offered enjoyment of self-realisation (Fulcher, & Scott, 2003).

In 1950s-60s sociologists saw (Subberwal, 2009) that alienation was more widespread than manual labour and relevant to modern work, particularly bureaucracies or service sectors that offered limited freedom. Braverman (Lawson and Garrod, 2001) feared that technology and further labour division would lead to “deskilling” of the workforce, i.e. reducing the skills needed by workers to do their jobs making them less valuable and leading to further disempowerment. Blunter, on the other hand proposed (Subberwal, 2009) that greater automation in work would lead to a decline of alienation as there would be less dull, routine work and people could concentrate on more interesting and meaningful tasks. Nevertheless, some contemporary critics argue that new technologies take alienation to the next level (Kellner, 2006).

In order to compete in today's markets, employers seek to increase efficiency through technological innovation. Today most routine production work has been automated. Many information processing and basic “transactional jobs” (McKinsey, 2012) such as cashing checks and taking calls have also undergone automation or outsourcing to countries with cheaper labour (McKinsey, 2012). This is a result of greater processing and connectivity capabilities of new technologies. Technology has displaced certain skills and created new ones. Employers also seek to increase efficiency through “disintegration” of the most highly paid jobs (McKinsey, 2012). This means routine tasks are separated from the job and automated or reassigned to lower skilled staff, a practice used in healthcare, engineering and computer science, for example. The McKinsey report (2012) points out there is a “growing polarisation of opportunities in the labour market,” with strong demand for both the highest (IT, engineering) and lowest-skill jobs (like food preparation, caregiving), but decreasing opportunities for those in between. This is accompanied by a widening income gap. This growing inequality and division of labour is reminiscent of the factors identified by Marx as contributing to alienation.

Furthermore, critics have argued that new technologies, such as the Internet, create “novel forms of alienation,” (Kellner 2006, p.48). This includes estrangement from other people, our bodies, nature, and “real life”. Kellner dismisses such claims as unsubstantiated. He argues that for Marx alienation equated to the estrangement of workers from their creative potential due to exploitation, whereas claims about “novel alienation” fail to give evidence of negative outcomes for users. For example, there is no solid proof of a correlation between time spent online, or gaming and degradation of social interaction. Similarly, the concept of alienation from our bodies fails to convince as computer mediated communication requires the involvement of our sensory organs, as does personal interaction. Kellner notes that such claims also downplay the “democratising” information sharing capabilities new technologies offer. For example, the interactive nature of Web2 helped to connect like-minded individuals and gave voice to those previously marginalised. In a work scenario, Internet-mediated labour allowed some workers greater flexibility to adapt work to their lifestyle choices (McKinsey, 2012). It also presented new possibilities for obtaining skills and income. This shows that contemporary technology can also be de-alienating and empowering.

Kellner also points out that Marx saw capitalism and the lack of worker control over production and not technology as the main cause of alienation (2006). He believed that under a different system (socialism) technology could free people from arduous labour and be used as a tool of “democracy, justice, and human self-development” (p.57) A 2012 study (Shantza, Alfes and Truss) surveyed 227 manufacturing employees in the United Kingdom and confirmed the relevance of Marxist ideas to the modern workplace. It found strong correlation between alienation and the lack of meaningfulness of work, “not having a say over the work process,” (p.2530) and not having one's skills utilised. It also identified the need to understand and address these issues that “arise from a capitalist mode of production,” (p.2545) that objectifies and commodifies work and workers. This indicates that the social context in which technology

is used may be a greater determinant of alienation than the technology itself.

### Conclusion

The relationship between technology and alienation is still relevant today as it was 150 years ago. Alienation is the estrangement of individuals from work conceptualised by Marx against the backdrop of capitalism and industrialisation that forced workers into exploitative, routine production jobs. Modern sociologists recognised alienation as more widespread across jobs with limited worker autonomy. Today, technology helped automate or outsource many manual or lower skilled jobs, but factors contributing to alienation remain. These include disintegration of skilled jobs, polarisation of demand for skills and a widening income gap. If not addressed these issues could result in the deskilling and degradation of the workforce. However, technology also provided means for greater connectivity, flexibility and empowerment. A recent study confirmed that the factors contributing to alienation today are similar to those 150 years ago and linked to the commodification of workers by the capitalist system. Overall, the relationship between alienation and technology remains relevant in the 21st century. However, it is the social and economic context that determines the extent to which technology will alienate or de-alienate workers.

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