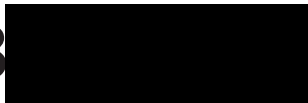


Marx's Alienation Theory

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Alienation: a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment; estrangement

– S.L. Halleck¹

Moving to the East Coast didn't bother me at all. The idea and the sense of adventure, tied along with exploring a region across the country I had never been, had the perfect balance of controlled danger and intrigue for my four year old self. I quickly cut ties with my preschool acquaintances with little remorse. Besides, I knew we were moving to the greater New York area so my mom could pursue her job, which would ultimately, directly or indirectly, benefit us. I didn't know how, but I was told it would, and so it would.

My mom began waking up at early hours to catch her Metro North train to New York City. By the time I woke up in the morning to go to school, she would have already been gone for a substantial amount of time or she would be in too much of a rush to say goodbye. She would return every night on the same Metro North train shortly before my bedtime. I couldn't understand why she seemed physically and mentally exhausted by the time she came home every night, or why she seemed significantly less talkative, even when she hadn't gotten the chance to speak to me all day. I couldn't understand why she would get upset when we chose to eat dinner without her if she was on the later train. I didn't know the names of the people she complained about, and I couldn't understand why they seemingly had more power over my mom or why they would wrong her if she's *my* mom. My dad told me stories of her sleep talking about work and waking up from nightmares in a feverish sweat, worried about whether or not she would be able to maneuver herself through the throng of young midtown businessmen in suits, simply because she had to make a nonexistent conference call.

Though I was young, the idea of my mom having nightmares about work bothered me. Why were her nightmares grounded in her daily routine, rather than something that seemed genuinely scary like monsters or heights? The idea of commuting into New York City daily to work alongside the creators of *Sponge Bob* and *Blue's Clues* seemed thrilling to me, and almost glamorous, but I couldn't understand why work caused her so much pain. I couldn't understand why she willingly devoted so much time to something that caused her restlessness. By the time I reached my freshman year of high school, the memory of my mom's work-related nightmares still resonated with me. I began to loosely draw parallels between our circumstances.

My parents thought I would get lost at the public high school down the street from me. To avoid this entirely, they decided to send me to a college prep school a few towns down from us on the i95 and a 30-minute train ride from our local train station. The logic was that if I was never put in an environment where I could get lost, I never would get lost. They thought I needed rigorous academics and a tight knit community to combat my hormonal, *angsty* years of middle school, and to an extent they were correct. The idea of being part of a close community seemed nice, but the reality of the community was far different from how it was advertised by the school and marketed to me by my parents.

As my freshman year began, I started waking up before sunrise each morning so I could catch my Metro North train, just like my mom. Most days I would return home at 7 PM because of mandatory afterschool activities, with hours of homework and studying to complete. Every day on the train ride home I would curl up into a ball on the torn, stained seats under the

¹ "Alienation." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

fluorescent lights and fall asleep due to the mental and physical exhaustion of my new burdensome schedule. The only time I could be by myself was occupied by sleeping and eating, but in both of those time slots I was never truly by myself because I was too busy fretting about going to school during my meals and dreaming about what I would have to inevitably face the next morning.

Strangely, there seemed to be something off about the student population. I found it difficult to connect with them, which was odd for me as conversing usually comes easily. I wanted to meet new people, but I was at a loss at what to talk to them about. I vividly remember one of the first mornings of my freshman year, standing by my locker nervously unpacking my bag. A group of indistinguishable boys and girls whose faces I vaguely recognized from exploring the unknown hallways stood in a cluster a few feet away from me. They were prematurely talking about where they want to go to college and scrolling through the internet in attempts to discover which top 10 Forbes certified school they should attend. They must have watched my eavesdrop on their conversation and read my confusion because moments later they called over to me and asked where I'm planning on going to go to college, to which I responded with, "I have no idea and I don't think I need to know now, but I feel like it won't be on that list. I don't know." They were taken back, as if the idea of planning on going to a school for reason other than its merit was so outlandish and bizarre, that they could do nothing but stare. This interaction set the mood for the rest of my high school career. I felt no need to talk to people that I couldn't connect to and hassled to even try, so I stopped all together.

I developed crippling stomach aches. They would occur each morning before I left my house to make the train and each morning I would tell my dad how horribly it hurt. They began to happen steadily every morning within the 10 minute marking period of me leaving my house. My stomach aches were my constant and I could always rely on them happening at 6:40 AM. It was the sharpest pain. It felt like everything inside my body froze except for the sharp, stinging pain creeping through my body. I was unable to move and I was completely unable to rationalize it, but I knew it was happening. As a result, my dad grew angry with me and would tell me, "It hurt yesterday. It hurt the day before yesterday and it's going to hurt tomorrow. It's purely a mental phenomenon." I couldn't argue with him because I knew it was mental. I knew it was triggered by my anxiety. However, I did know that though I was not running a fever, the pain was existent. It was just another sort of illness and anxiety is physical. Each morning felt worse than the next. Connecting with people was increasingly difficult and I became more and more distant. I felt drained. I was weakened. The alienation in my school setting transferred into my home setting. I no longer felt like myself, even when I was in the space that I am meant to feel most comfortable in.

Part 2: Alienation

While it is comforting to think of yourself as in control of your actions, and to an extent you are, alienation is a friendly reminder that though you may not be, it is attainable. In the dictionary, work is defined as “exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something.”² The word *work* has a tendency to conjure up images of factories, office blocks, and unwanted chores they are obliged to take care of. There is a certain repulsion to the modern usage of the word *work*. Though there are no actual ties between a person’s work and their income, the definition of the word has been changed and altered to become more suiting for our modern conception of “work.” Work does not solely exist as a duty. Work should be a projection of each individual’s pursuits and their activity, but it is far from that. Why is it that “work” and “job” share the same meaning? Our alienating concept of work is a result of our current social and economic condition.

Humans have been living in a culture of feudalism, mercantilism, and capitalism for so long, that imagining the world otherwise seems outlandish and childishly idealistic. This culture not only prescribes, but necessitates work in order to be at least moderately successful.³ As soon as a child is able to properly understand English, they begin to overhear stories of unfamiliar people on the television and the guardians in their own homes complain about their jobs and their bosses, but withstand their unhappiness because they need to. From early on it is accepted as a fact of life that subordinating yourself to someone higher and more worthy than you is natural. However, this limits one’s human nature, or species essence. Humans, because they are free willed beings with a conscience, are multi-faceted individuals with a multitude of interests. Humans benefit from working on what they choose to work on, but for most what they would like to work on is only a release that they are not able to fulfill as a result of their time consuming, demanding jobs. Because of the widespread phenomenon of renting yourself out to someone more powerful than you, labor, in exchange for money, species essences everywhere are limited and repressed. According to Marx, it is inherent in human nature for the individual to want to engage in activities, i.e. work, that will mutually benefit the greater the community and allow for emotional connections with other people and society.⁴ It is alienating and unhealthy to be so deeply restricted by something that does not result in contentment. However, our society is far-removed from these ideals, and alienation lies everywhere.

Workers become alienated from what they spend the majority of their lives doing, the act of working. They become the objects of production to the capitalist, bourgeois class when they are forced to offer themselves over to work for a livelihood. However, they are often left no other choice. They dedicate the entirety of their lives to perfecting the art of creating a product that they have no creative sway in and never truly own. The product, once finished, is transformed into a commodity and swiftly taken away from them to be sold in big box stores across America. The worker’s labor is transformed into the lowest possible wage they could earn for the amount of hours they are working. This system allows the already privileged, wealthy

² "Work." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

³ Rius . *Marx for Beginners*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. Print.

⁴ Szelényi, Iván. "Lecture 9 - Marx's Theory of Alienation." *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. Yale University, New Haven. *Open Yale Courses*. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.

men in America to get a pat on the back and become even more wealthy and successful through paid slave labor. The worker is exploited and they become alienated from their own labor.

The capitalist class appropriates the worker's labor and intellect for their own profit, while the worker is a mere tool in their own success. In a sense, working for someone allegedly superior to you is a paid dictatorship. The worker is required to wake up every day, even when they are not well, get to work on time, be presentable within the dress code of the venue, and censor what they may want to say based on whether it is or is not appropriate for the work environment. The worker is dependent on the delicate compromise of what the boss is willing to spare them. If they somehow fall out of line, they are forced to find another way to support themselves and their families. The work that they immerse themselves in daily is generally not a task they are willing to do, but an obligation because of the need to create an income. The act of working alienates the worker from their work because they wholly devote themselves to an unmediated relationship between their hard work and the low wages they receive. This devalues the work they are physically doing and themselves as human beings. It restricts their species essence because the worker is unable to live up to their full potential through working on something meaningful or psychologically pleasant.

The species essence of a man or a woman is intrinsic to the work they either willingly or by force accomplish. However, people work to remain stable. Their species essences thrive when they are indulged in meaningful, enjoyable work, but suffer deeply when they are menially working for someone or something they don't care for. Their species essence is compromised when they subordinate themselves to the impositions of others and sacrifice their own well-being. My mom, like many others, has been wholly alienated from herself by her labor, and by extension, the capitalist class.

We live in a culture that allows, and even encourages us to be so consumed in our work that we have no time to think, or even dream, of other interests. Ergo, species essences are constricted and reduced to what an unwanted job limits a person to. People everywhere are drained in the same way that midtown drained my mom and prep school drained me. Workers lose a part of themselves when they rent themselves out to businesses because they are forced to behave within certain boundaries and appear a certain way that is not true to their inherent nature. Not only are they repressing their species essence, but at a certain point, the repression is innate to their person. Their work wholly absorbs them and they are reduced to merely the label of a worker, rather than themselves.

Part 3: A Case Study

The Metamorphosis, by Kafka, was published in the midst of the Industrial Revolution and draws heavy influence from Marxist ideology. It was written in reaction to the epidemic of alienation present in this time period that Kafka observed and was part of. The protagonist, Gregor Samsa becomes the embodiment of absolute alienation and isolation as a result of the dreariness of his engrossing work life. The story is not about the absurdity of simply becoming an insect overnight, but of what the transformation is representative of. When Gregor reflects on his family, he recounts that, “The fruits of his labour were transformed into the provision of money... and he earned enough to meet the expenses of the entire family and actually did so. They had just become used to it, the family as well as Gregor, the money was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but that special warmth was missing.” There is a certain amount of optimistic delusion and pressure placed on the person of the household who ventures off into the world to support the family. There is an image of the working person and an incentive for them to suffer unconscious alienation, that is deeply rooted in our culture. When a working person gets hired, their initial intent is to supply their family with a comfortable home, some luxuries, and give their children a proper education that will eventually allow them to become successful, have their own children, and carry on the cycle. These are all actions that display their unconditional love and devotion to their family for mutual comfort, but the worker loses sight of these intentions as a result of the alienation they undergo in the act of lowering themselves to another person. Not only is the worker leading an unhappy life, but their work becomes menial when they lose all concept of the root of their ambition and work without a purpose, like an animal. When Gregor wakes up in the morning, his biggest concern isn't that he now physically sees himself as a bug, but that he will not arrive at work on time as a result of his current body form.

The role work plays in the domestic setting employed by Kafka is nearly mirrored in the line, “The bourgeoisie has torn away the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money relation.”⁵ In our current time period, even more so than before, marriage is hardly about the sentimentality and mutual affection between two people, but the legalities of this bond. The tax breaks, government benefits, and family inheritance take precedence over the relationship itself. Not only does Gregor Samsa menially work to support his immediate and extended family residing in the same cramped apartment space as he is, but to pay off his father's unwanted debts. The family is absolutely reliant on Gregor.

When Gregor wakes up late for work and realizes he has taken the form of a a “monstrous vermin” he immediately reflects on how dreary his working life is, implying that there is some connection between his physical state and his emotional state. Not only is his happiness alienated from him, but Gregor soon discovers that milk, once his favorite drink, has lost its charm and he no longer enjoys it. Rather than milk, he has grown a taste for rotting food scraps. He is alienated away from his own taste and his tastes begin to become more suiting to not a human, but a bug. His family's greatest worry, like his, is not that he is now a bug, but how Gregor will manage to financially support them. They begin to treat him like an animal, perpetuating his current state. He overhears his family members who have now shunned him speak of their financial difficulties without Gregor's assistance, and feels immense guilt for merely existing. Gregor was never truly a family member, but an instrument to their stability.

⁵ Engels, F; Marx, K. The Communist Manifesto.

Now that he is unable to work for them, Gregor is purely a burden they are required to care for, the same way that Gregor was forced to care for them before his transformation. He devoted his existence to working for the dream of comfort for him and his loved ones, but he ultimately became alienated from himself and his original intentions. His work was objectified, in the same fashion that he was. Gregor was his work, and so Gregor had always been a bug.

Not only does alienation exist as an abstract, intangible idea or exist exclusively in literature, but alienation is present in our every day lives and goes unseen. It is a socially accepted and considered the norm as a result of living in a culture with its foundations set in the values of a capitalistic society. Alienation occurs not only on the scale that Marx insisted, in the workforce, but on a smaller scale in school systems and in public institutions. Marx's concept of alienation can be applied to a myriad of cases. Alienation not only serves as a model for the injustice that arises from social stratification and hierarchies, but as a means of understanding human nature. Alienation still prevails everywhere.