

Marx's Alienated Labor Theory

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"Alienated labor" came from Marx's Manuscript of Philosophy and Economics in 1844. This theory was formed on the basis of Marx's critical inheritance of predecessors' thoughts on alienation and the reality under the capitalist system. It is of great significance to understand the final formation of Marx's historical materialism.

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The Concept of Alienated Labor

"Alienation" refers to the fact that in the process of development, the subject splits out something opposite to himself, and this kind of thing becomes an external alien force. "Alienated labor" is a concept first put forward by Marx in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Marx used it to summarize the relationship between workers, their labor products, and labor itself under the capitalist system. Marx believed that labor was the essence of human beings, but it was alienated under the condition of private ownership. The forms of alienation are as follows: people are alienated from labor products, people are alienated from labor itself, people are alienated from their own kind essence, and people are alienated from each other.

The Proposition of Alienated Labor

Alienation can be traced back to the Enlightenment, which was used by French enlightenment scholars when expounding political issues, and then Rousseau and Croesus all used the concept of "alienation". Marx criticized Hegel's thought of alienation, inherited and surpassed Feuerbach's thought of "human nature", applied alienation to the labor problem under the capitalist system, and clearly put forward the viewpoint of alienated labor in Economic Manuscripts of 1844. Marx pointed out that under the condition of capitalist private ownership, labor is not only creative, but also destructive, and put forward four regulations of "labor alienation".

Four Provisions of Alienated Labor

Workers Are Alienated From Labor Products

Labor products produced and created by workers should belong to themselves, but under capitalism, this product is not only not occupied by workers as the main body, but also means the loss of this objectification. As Marx said in the Economic Manuscript of 1844,

The more wealth a worker produces, the greater the influence and scale of his production, and the poorer he will be." The more goods a worker creates, the cheaper he becomes. The value-added of the material world is directly proportional to the depreciation of the human world. (Marx and Engels selected Works, 2012, p. 51)

Alienation From Workers' Own Labor

Alienation is not only manifested in workers and labor products, but also in the process of labor, that is, labor itself. Marx pointed out: "Labor is the essence of human beings, and labor itself is a free and conscious activity and a way of human existence" (Wang, 2019, p. 9). Workers should feel comfortable and happy in the process of labor, but under the conditions of capitalism, labor becomes something external to people and something that does not belong to the essence of people. "Laborers' labor is not voluntary, but forced labor" (Compilation Bureau of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin Works of the CPC Central Committee, 2012). In such forced labor, workers can't experience the pleasure and happiness brought by labor, but are forced to do harm to their physical and mental health, thus causing a burden on people's body and spirit. Once this kind of physical or mental coercion stops, "people will escape labor like the plague" (Compilation Bureau of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin Works of the CPC Central Committee, 2012, p. 54). As a result, as Marx said,

People only feel that they are free to move when they use their animal functions-eating and drinking, at most, living and decorating, but when they use their human functions, they feel that they are just animals.

Animal things become human things, and human things become animal things. (Marx and Engels selected Works, 2012, p. 54)

People no longer feel their own characteristics as human beings, and labor has become a means of making a living to sustain their lives, rather than being the first need of life. Marx pointed out sharply the essence of this alienated labor.

Alienation From the Nature of Man's Own Kind

The human nature, that is, the nature of human beings, refers to the essential characteristics of human beings as a whole and the fundamental differences between human beings and animals. In Marx's view,

The essence of man is to create the object world through practice, that is, to transform the inorganic world, which proves that man is a conscious kind of being, and it regards class as its own essence or itself as a kind of being. (Compilation Bureau of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin Works of the CPC Central Committee, 2012, p. 56)

Simply speaking, through conscious activities, people can regard nature as their own spiritual or material objects in theory or practice, and transform the object world through practical activities, which are free, active, and conscious (Meng, 2022). In this process, human beings know how to use the laws of nature to carry out all-round production, which is different from the one-sided production of animals. In Marx's words:

Animals are only built according to the scale and needs of the species to which they belong, while people know how to produce according to the scale of any species, and know how to apply the internal scale to objects everywhere. (Compilation Bureau of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin Works of the CPC Central Committee, 2012, p. 57)

However, alienated labor has seized the object of his production from human beings, which makes the initiative and creativity of human beings in the process of transforming nature no longer exist, and human beings are just mechanical repetitive production. Consciously participating in and using one's own creative life activities has become a luxury. The human nature is thus removed from the physical species.

Alienation of Human Beings

The direct result of alienation from people's own labor products, labor itself, and the essence of class is the alienation between people. Labor products produced by workers, as alien forces, are opposed to them. The

value created by workers as the main body does not belong to themselves, which makes the accumulation of capitalist wealth inversely proportional to the accumulation of workers' poverty. Therefore, the workers are all in the production activities controlled by the capitalists, and they are in opposition to the capitalists.

The Modern Significance of Marx's Alienated Labor Theory

Marx's theory of alienated labor aims at criticizing the disadvantages of capitalist oppression and exploitation of workers and property rulers under the capitalist system, and then expounds the future social ideal of cracking alienation and realizing people's free and all-round development. At present, the Internet, as a new representative of productivity, is self-evident (Li, 2022). The influence of the capitalist system and its mass production on the workers engaged in productive labor in the 1930s-40s and the influence of the further development of science and technology on human beings today are of great practical significance. Marx's alienated labor provides theoretical support for today's targeted avoidance of technological alienation.

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