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Alienation and Unemployment - Work in Progress

by

G. Bruce Irvine,  
Clinical Masters Student  
University of Natal

1. Introduction

The term alienation has many different meanings based on many different notions of people, society and the relationship between the two. There are however two specific useages which predominate. These are isolated as broad groupings which clearly encompass a wide range of perspectives. The first refers to alienation as a social and economic process and the second as a psychological state.

A.P. Ogurtsov, writing in the Soviet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (cited in Bottomore, 1983) defines alienation as:

"the philisophical and sociological category expressing the objective transformation of the activity of man and of its results into an independant force, dominating him and inimical to him, and also the corresponding transformation of man from an active subject to an object of social process." (p. 13)

The tendency of bourgeois sociology to psychologize alienation and by so doing transforming it into a psychological category is perhaps best demonstrated by the work of Seeman (1961) who definies alienation in terms of

five states experienced by the individual. These are powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness isolation, and self estrangement. Israel (1971) states that all five categories refer to psychological states, experienced subjectively independent of sociological processes.

A materialist understanding of alienation implies an integration of these broad perspectives, seen as being dialectically related and not as exclusive or opposing. In concrete terms what this involves is a two stage process. Firstly, an analysis of the socioeconomic processes which effect the individuals and their role in society including an analysis of processes which effect the individual relations to work, social relations and relationships established to non human objects. Secondly, an analysis of the psychological consequences of the individual's relations to themselves, persons and objects. In the first instance what is being analysed is the process of estrangement and in the second states of estrangement.

This article then attempts an integration of these two perspectives. A discussion of Marx's theory of alienation provides us with an understanding of both the process of estrangement and in an implicit way the consequences of that estrangement for the individual. This provides the basis for further discussion of the latent functions of alienated labour and the resultant consequences of their loss - states of estrangement experienced by the unemployed. The article

concludes with a brief discussion of the process needed to combat these effects and looks at work in progress in this area.

## 2. Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx's analysis of alienation, most clearly outlined in the 1844 Manuscripts, The Grundrisse and The German Ideology contains 3 main aspects :

- 1) Religious alienation, analysed in connection with an article analysis of Feuerbach's philosophy of religion.
- 2) Political alienation, a criticism of Hegel's Philosophy of the state.
- 3) Economic alienation, rooted in the alienation from work.

For the purposes of this discussion economic alienation will be focused on. Religious and Political alienation falls beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say that for Marx the form taken by religious and political alienation is dependant upon existing economic conditions and in particular, the mode of production.

### Economic alienation

An understanding of economic alienation rests on an understanding of the role of labour. Marx saw labour as a person's most important activity. In essence it is through work that people create their world and as a consequence create themselves. Central to the role of labour is the concept of objectification. Objectification of people was seen as arriving through the creative activity of people in using their capacities to transform raw materials into objects which reflect their ability.

When labour is free and not enforced people are able to experience themselves as active subjects. By this what Marx means is that since objects of work represent the nature of the person, the person is able to evaluate themselves through their activity becoming an object for themselves. The activity and the objects which are produced are used as a basis for self evaluation and in turn this evaluation influences the individuals activity. It is then through work that the individual moulds and transforms nature and produces objects for their own need satisfaction.

It is only when work is creative that the process of objectification is acceptable and seen as functional.

Free labour is represented by the active, consciously willing,

self-realizing individual in a social process of production where activity is a goal in itself.

Any other kind of labour is an alienated activity. Labour becomes alienated when production is the acquisition of a nature by the individual within and through a certain social structure. Marx continues in the Grundrisse to stress the necessity of and analyzing the social structure of an existing society, dependant upon the level of development of the means of production and the social relations within which the process of social production occurs.

Later, in Capital Marx shows how economic laws are dependant on certain social conditions and the social structure of the society to which they apply. Thus demonstrating how economic theories are ideologies which are based on existing conditions, but which never question the conditions or discuss the consequences of changed conditions.

Three profound conditions in capitalist society "cause" changes in the work situation and in the individuals social relations. It is these conditions which transform labour into an alienated activity and are :

- 1) Private property and especially private ownership of the means of production.
- 2) the process of the division of labour, a consequence of

the development of the productive forces.

3) Subordination of labour to the market laws of capitalist society as a result of human labour being arranged into a commodity on a par with all other commodities.

Alienation is conceived of as a social process occurring under certain conditions. The process of alienation can be divided into two sub processes.

#### 1. Entausserung - exteriorization

In the 1844 manuscript Marx sees exteriorization as constituting the process by which work is external to the worker. By this, Marx means that work is no longer part of the individuals nature and that as a result the individual cannot be fulfilled in work. Marx sees this as resulting in the working having a

"..... feeling of misery rather than wellbeing...does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor." 1844 manuscript: (McLellan, 1977, 84)

Exteriorization is experienced by the individual as detachment. Work has ceased to be a goal in itself and has become instrumental.

2. The second process is seen as disposal by the worker of labour power when it is sold as a commodity. The worker is able to confirm himself/herself by subordinating his/her products and activity to the domination of an alien entity, money. Herein lies the basis for the concept of the fetishism of commodities' developed in capital. By fetishism of commodities what Marx refers to is that when money becomes the universal exchange object, it becomes a commodity usually with a value independent of what it represents - a symbol of power.

Alienation, being a social process, created under specific social conditions, affects all. The alienating process is experienced in different ways depending on the class to which the individual belongs.

In summary Marx views the process of alienation as being created by three conditions:

- 1) the fact that people and their working power is transformed into a commodity
- 2) division of labour
- 3) private property.

In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx outlines 3 psychological consequences which arose from the social conditions and the process of alienation. These psychological consequences can

be usefully referred to as states of estrangement.

- 1) The worker becomes alien to their own activity. Work is no longer the satisfaction of a need but a means to the satisfaction of other needs.
- 2) The individual becomes estranged from the result of their activity :- the product has power independent of the producer. The consequence of this relationship to the product of the individual leads to the experiences of alienation from the physical world.
- 3) The worker also becomes alien to the social world within which they live resulting in the loss of their humanity. Estrangement in social relations is then a result of experiencing other humans as subjects of cooperation in relation to other things.

The above discussion follows a similar framework used by Israel (1971) and acknowledgement is made thereof.

## 2. Work, unemployment and its consequences.

"The position people hold in society and the jobs they perform play an important role in the conception they learn of themselves. Being a father or mother, daughter or son, manager or worker, engineer or painter carried with it codified forms of behaviour, fixed tasks and a daily, monthly, or annual routine." Stanton (1983 : 1)



Jahoda (1979) in an examination of literature on work in an effort to establish why people work comes to the conclusion that apart from material reward the reason people work and why work is seen as psychologically supportative relates to that which is implicit in work - its latent functions.

The latent functions which are identified are firstly that employment imposes a time structure on the day, secondly provides regularly shared experiences and contacts with people, thirdly that it links people to goals and purposes which transcend their own, fourthly it defines aspects of personal status and identity and finally that employment enforces activity (Jahoda 1979). Research comparing employed and unemployed men shows that while workers experience states of estrangement unemployed workers experience these states of estrangement more acutely. (Irvine 1984).

The acuteness of the experienced estrangement states seems to be directly linked to the loss of the latent functions of work. More specifically the pathological states which are displayed include anxiety, depression, psychosomatic complaints and depersonalization. (O'Brein and Kabanoff, 1979; Hayes and Nutman, 1981,; Irvine, 1984 a and b). In addition psychological deterioration is caused by a reduction in income which results in the restriction of variety in a persons life, a smaller score for decision making, reduction in skill use and development insecurity about the future and increased

psychologically threatening activity, (Warr, 1983).

The above specific symptoms which form the phenomenological picture of the estranged state of the unemployed can be seen as the exasperation of the the estranged state of the worker contained within the psychological consequences which Marx sees as arising from the social conditions and process of alienation.

The estranged state in which people find themselves caught has repercussions on the social structure of society, as well as on the basic social process of production. According to Marx, the individual's consciousness, their apperception of reality, is influenced by their social position within the structure of society. At the same time it is the individual who creates and changes the basic social process of production and the resulting social structure of society.

This dialectical relationship is explored in The German Ideology leading Marx to reiterate that alienation of man is created by special social conditions. These social conditions, however, are the result of human activity, so people create alienation and by their own activity they can also overcome it. The alienated person is then the product of special conditions and corresponds to peoples nature in a definite historical period. This leads Marx to differentiate between human nature at a given historical period being a consequence of personal, existing social relations and a

persons general human nature as it is changed in the historical process, through always being a consequence of the social relations they have created themselves. In essence then what Marx is talking about is the potential which humankind has on the one hand and the existing human being seen as a consequence of a certain social structure, on the other, (Israel, 1971).

In the same way as there exists a dialectical relationship between man's creation of alienation, and his ability to arrange the processes which lead to alienation so too is there a dialectic relationship between a persons understanding of what is normal and its social construction.

Under capitalism, commodity relationships, the starting point for the theory of reification and the concept of false consciousness lead the estranged state of the worker to be understood as normal and functional. In terms of this what is asserted is that the fact that psychological alienation are not understood as such should be seen as a necessary continuation of the process. Berger & Pullberg (1966) talk of this stage as being one in which the individual is so alienated that their alienation is no longer experienced.

A detailed discussion of the theory of reification and the concept of false consciousness lies beyond the scope of this article. What is important to note is that the

characteristics of alienation outlined by Seeman (1961) while having a negative connotation, are currently viewed as part of the human experience and when present in a person who is "functional" occupationally and socially, is considered normal.

When these conditions are experienced by the unemployed they are of a more extreme nature and likely to be seen as pathological. Research conducted in the motor industry in Port Elizabeth bears this out. The comparison between employed and unemployed motor workers showed that while employed persons experienced anxiety levels considered to be disfunctional, unemployed workers experienced a greater degree of disfunctional anxiety, (Irvine, 1984b).

An analysis of a large amount of the literature on unemployment and its effects yields a few common trends. Firstly, what is clear is that the psychological effects of unemployment are so debilitating to the individual that their potential to be successfully organized is limited. Secondly, that without some degree of psychological intervention, these effects are long lasting and not ameliorated by finding employment. Thirdly, that if the latent functions of work can be restored to the individual in the interaction of the individual with their community and family, the debilitating effects of unemployment can be reduced and, lastly, that until the effects of unemployment are combated the potential for the individual to be involved

in actively participating in the process of reorganizing society is limited, if not unlikely.

### 3. A perspective on treating the effects of unemployment.

Bandura (1975) has commented that if psychologists are to have a significant impact, they must apply their corrective measures to detrimental societal practices, rather than limit themselves to treating casualties of these practices. Instead then of offering to act as controlling agents, psychologists would be offering to pass on their knowledge and skills. Instead of being the passive recipients of modified environmental contingencies, clients would become active controllers of their own lives.

It is against this backdrop that treating the unemployed emerges. Any program which aims at reducing the experience of alienation - estranged states-by necessity emerges from a clear understanding of prevailing social and economic relations and is seen as a forerunner of the participation of the unemployed in altering those social and economic relations which generate unemployment. Combating the effects of unemployment is seen as the necessary prerequisite to any further positive development of the individual.

Current work in this area in Durban is dealing with the development of a group program for rehabilitation of the

unemployed person. Participation in a group process is seen as being a viable means of restoring the lost latent functions of work. Participation in the group activity would contribute in the development of structure for regularly shared experiences and contact with others, like the individual to goals which transcend his/her own and aid in the development and definition of personal status and identity leading to the mobilization of collective resources and power for effective actions, however that is defined by the group.

In addition the use of a group process is based on the assumption that major threats such as unemployment can be faced and overcome by the group which bands together to mobilize its resources to withstand a seige or bombardment, utilizing the collective power of the group to change the individual.

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#### Unpublished Paper

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