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Essay by Justin Sutton
Marx's Alienated Labour defended in the context of Neo-liberalism

Karl Marx argues in *Alienated Labour*:

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, assumes an *external* existence, but that it exists independently, *outside himself*, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.¹

This paper will endeavor to unpack and explore the contemporary significance of the Marxist concept of *alienation*. In so doing, it will be argued here that Marxist economic theory is not only relevant in the twenty-first century, but provides a useful dialectic for understanding the largely unseen, or at the very least unspoken, effects of rapacious, neo-liberal capitalism. As the developed world enters a new phase of industrial evolution, what some regard as post-industrialism, or a second Industrial Revolution,² it is my contention that Marx's assertions about *alienated labour* and the nature of capitalism presciently captures what has become the dilemma and reality of twenty-first century labour. A state of affairs that has seen global corporations, such as automobile, electronics, and appliance manufacturers, mineral refineries and so forth, abandon the very labourers whose toil contributed to their enrichment.

North America finds itself in this position primarily because its economic system has been based on neo-liberalism since, roughly, the early 1980s. This system is resolutely anti-statist, thus rejecting all manner of economic regulatory schema, social programs, or other *personal* interference. The guiding ethos of this market-based economic system puts primacy on profitability and shareholder value. Accordingly extreme pressure is brought to bear on workers to reduce their wages, entitlements, and inevitably, their hard-won rights. The proof of which is to be found by simply comparing national wealth distribution pre and post-neo-liberalism. We see a demonstrable change reflected in the numbers, which, it must always be remembered, coldly reflect tangible, psychosocial human reality. Beginning with the Great Depression of the 1930s, and accelerating in the post World War Two era, the North American economy was organized according to Keynesian economics. Keynesianism advocates that the state has a vital role to play in both managing the economy and managing the well being of its people. The results were, it is fair to conclude, remarkable. The North American economy boomed, creating heretofore unknown prosperity across all segments of society. Social programs such as the Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, Universal Health Care, Employment

¹ Karl Marx, "*Alienated Labour*." *Applied Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Smith and H. Gene Blocker. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1994), p. 154.

² Sometimes referred to as "post-industrial." For an excellent discussion on the first and second Industrial Revolutions see: Kirkpatrick Sale, *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution*. (Don Mills ON: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

Insurance, and welfare among others, were created and funded to the betterment of all. However, the elite stratum of society saw its share of the nations wealth decline, a state of affairs that could not be allowed to stand. Hence the introduction of neo-liberalism, championed by political leaders such as Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank also took up the cause and began to demand neo-liberal structural change to so-called Third World countries as a proviso for financial aid. The results have been as predictable as they are lamentable. In the developing world governments faltered, poverty spread and the elite grew unfathomably wealthy. In North America, government debts increased, trade unionism was demonized and eroded, middle and lower class wages stagnated, entitlement programs came to be seen as burdensome and the people who benefitted from them were cast as parasitic. Conversely, the top stratum saw their share of the economy grow exponentially.³

Returning to the quote that began this discussion, we must parse the meaning of what Marx calls *alienated labour* and determine its relevance to our contemporary state of affairs. It is my contention that Marx is suggesting the capitalist construct of wage-labour alienates the worker from himself, from the product of his own labour, from his own society, and from the natural world.⁴ The actual labour of an individual becomes a commodity, or an object that “assumes an *external* existence”⁵ independent from the worker himself. The worker in effect does not sell himself to an employer. Indeed the employer cares nothing for the actual person for hire, rather it is their labour she is after. In an unskilled setting and absent a regulatory framework, anyone will do as long as the price is right. This sets worker against worker, thus driving down costs at the same time as it drives up the poverty of the worker and profitability of the corporation. The worker is *alienated* from himself in the sense that, within this framework, he, as an autonomous, sentient individual disappears from view. His labour is a thing, to be bought and sold without regard for his humanity. Should he fall ill, or below expectations, or should the circumstances of the business change, he is discarded like a spent light bulb only to be replaced by another, or left dark depending upon the need. Within the neo-liberal context, it is not the responsibility of the larger society, as represented by the government, to do anything about this situation. The worker is on his own, to sell his labour elsewhere, or, if no one is buying, to live hand-to-mouth in whatever way he is able. His fate is emphatically *not* the responsibility of the state.

Similarly, the worker is *alienated* from the product of his labour. That which he creates does not belong to him, nor does it reflect his individual character. The labourer is a mere cog in a larger machine that turns out a product for profit. Whether an assembly

³ Armine Yalnizyan, *The Rise of Canada's Richest 1%*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2010. Also the introduction and first chapter of Donald T. Critchlow's monograph *The Conservative Ascendancy: How The GOP Right Made Political History*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007) offers excellent insight into the gradual, post-World War II, ascendancy of neo-liberalism in the American context.

⁴ István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. (London: Merlin Press, 1982), p. 14.

⁵ Marx, p. 154.

line worker in an automobile factory, or a television producer putting together a story for broadcast, the end product will not resemble the individualism of the worker. Indeed, the factory worker will have contributed to a small aspect of the overall vehicle, and when it rolls off the line his particular contribution will be indistinguishable from the whole. It is also likely that he will never see the finished product, not to mention the customer who is destined to purchase it. He has no relationship with the object of his labour beyond his small contribution, a contribution that will be taken up by another worker on the next shift. The television producer, it can be argued, possesses a more specialized skill, but regardless of skill level the end result is virtually the same. The television producer will either turn in a product that reflects the branding and values of his employer or he will be replaced by someone who will. True, he will have written the words, selected the images and directed their order, but the end product will conform to the edict of managers, regulators, advertisers and so on, not his individual sensibilities. When the story airs, like the autoworker, he will not see the impact of his work on the customer or audience, he is in short *alienated* from the object of his labour and its attendant impact. In the neo-liberal milieu this is the price of efficiency and efficiency is eminently profitable. As soon as the worker is *alienated* from the object of his labour he is replaceable. Any other hand could produce the same, uniform results; distinctiveness comes at too high a price. Further, as Marx asserts, the object of the worker's labour, in both scenarios, becomes a power opposed to the worker who contributed to its creation.⁶ The automobile and the story each enrich the respective companies that own and sell them. This enrichment contributes to the relative power of each company, a power that far exceeds that of the individual worker whose labour made possible their production; a power that is then used by the corporations in question, absent regulatory protections, or robust trade unionism, to subjugate these same workers.

The worker is also *alienated* from society in that if he is *alienated* from himself and from that which takes up most of his waking hours – the product of his labour - he will inevitably be *alienated* from others. If all members of a given society are in competition with one another for the same scarce resources, including a limited number of available jobs, they are in essence soldiers on the field fighting for the same patch of earth. If I must have it, and so must you, there is no unity of purpose, no brotherhood, or association, only pitched battle. This has a distorting effect on social relations. Traditional kith and kin relations are broken down and replaced with a kind of social instrumentalism that concedes its manufactured source. The workers social world shrinks as the majority of his life's energy is consumed by work that “is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion it is avoided like the plague.”⁷ For most, the physical compulsion to work never comes to an end. The need for food, shelter, clothing and so on is perpetual. Again, in the neo-liberal context where regulations are pitched as anathema to business growth, and entitlements such as pensions and paid overtime are eroded, even excised, the perpetual enslavement of most

⁶ Marx, p. 154.

⁷ Marx, p. 155.

is assured. The working classes are expected to take *personal responsibility* for their own needs, even as the elite receive gold-plated remuneration that is said to be *mandated by the market*. When the lived reality of the top and bottom strata is poles apart, and the bottom is left to fight for its very survival, the result is social fragmentation, which in turn causes democratic institutions to falter. Much of the polity stops participating for want of time, energy, or positive results. Indeed, because so many see their efforts undermined by a type of government/corporate hegemony that sees them as an enemy to be either minimally placated or defeated, in service to the dictates of perpetual economic growth, many replace civic engagement with simple amusements.

The fourth aspect of *alienation* - the *alienation* of the worker from nature - closely follows the other three. Marx argues that, “nature affords the *means of existence* of labour...”⁸ This assertion has two meanings according to Marx. First, that nature provides the raw materials (ore, rubber, oil, timber), which labour then turns into products. Second, that nature provides the raw materials (food, water, timber for shelter, oil for heat) that literally make life possible. In an industrialized setting the worker is divorced from the source that gives him life in both senses. He does not see where from, or how, the raw materials that fuel his labour or his home life come to him. They are simply put before him in order that he may do his work. In a modern city or suburb the same is true of the raw materials of life. Food is acquired in a warehouse, packaged and ready to eat. As is every other commodity of everyday life. We do not see the field, the barn, the open pit mine or deep sea drilling platform and its attendant labour and destruction that make our coffee, cereal, meat, vegetables, and commute possible. Marx goes on to say this process has a depleting effect in two related senses. The more that is taken from the “*sensuous external world*”⁹ the fewer raw materials are left to sustain both work and life in the literal sense. The industrialized worker is *alienated* from this process as his world is a complex web of interrelated, logical, built systems, detached from seen or felt consequences. In the neo-liberal context government’s role is to facilitate this system, not regulate or mitigate it. Environmental degradation is the cost of doing business and when the costs outweigh the benefits the market will rationally bring the system back into balance. So too the worker’s *alienation* from the natural world is simply a reality of modern life, far from being negative, such *alienation* is, at the very least, efficient, if not value neutral and not worth discussion. Mental and physical health is also not the purview of government according to neo-liberalism. Rather, it should be given over to business, which will deliver more efficient, cost-effective, and profitable results. The public discourse surrounding health care has been so skillfully manipulated that the very notion that these same businesses, and their attendant mechanized processes, might actually be responsible for *creating* many of the physical and mental maladies suffered by society has disappeared from view. Thus their self-generated, continuous, loop of profitability also remains veiled. Again, the *alienated* worker is hardly in a position to fight back, let alone keep up with the sheer momentum of corporate dominance. He has so little life energy left at the end of a workday, if they are fortunate, his family will get

⁸ Marx, p. 154.

⁹ Marx, p. 154.

what little he has in reserve. Democracy then becomes the manipulated domain of the moneyed class, and their corporate bedfellows.

“Labour certainly produces marvels for the rich but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It produces beauty, but deformity for the worker. [...] It produces intelligence, but also stupidity and cretinism for the workers...”¹⁰

Here again Marx could be talking about the recent global economic meltdown, brought on by the unscrupulous dealings of the global banking and investment sector; practices that have their root in the deregulatory framework imposed by neo-liberal doctrine. The rich have indeed grown vastly richer, while the rest have seen a precipitous decline in their fortunes.¹¹ Modern day palaces (McMansions) dot the landscape, even as scores lose their homes in the United States to foreclosure. Tent cities sprout from coast to coast to house the newly homeless - the former middleclass.¹² Free market fundamentals visit the middle and lower classes as they sink under the weight of their now untenable debt, while taxpayer funded, indeed socialized, bailouts keep the banks who sold this debt from facing the same market mandated fate. Such unashamed hypocrisy only serves to heighten the privation, alienation, and I would argue, hopelessness, of the middle and bottom strata. The situation is marginally better in Canada where neo-liberalism has taken root, but has yet to flower in such a grotesque manner. Indeed, Canada continues to enjoy social safety nets such as Universal Health Care and a regulatory framework that makes acquiring a mortgage more difficult, but the question must always be asked, how much longer will these differences remain?

When Marx writes “[labour] produces beauty, but deformity for the worker,” it is my contention that he means the product of labour is, often, a matrix of goods and services that make modern life truly incredible. Automobiles, passenger jets, high-speed trains, computers, iPods, all manner of appliances, and medical marvels, result from a globalized network of labour. What of the worker in each case? For Marx it is clear, his life is misshapen in service to, what we now call, the consumer economy, for all the reasons discussed thus far. In particular, because he is not the master of himself, he is beholden to an employer, and to the power inherent to the object of his labour. “The more objects the worker produces the fewer he can possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital.”¹³ When Marx writes “[labour] produces intelligence, but also stupidity and cretinism for the workers...,”¹⁴ he furthers the notion that the worker is profoundly disconnected from the ingenious product of his labour. For

¹⁰ Marx, pp. 154. 155.

¹¹ Since 1977 the top 1% of earners in Canada have seen their income rise by roughly 175%, while growth in average income has collapsed. Armine Yalnizyan, *The Rise of Canada's Richest 1%*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2010. Table 1, p. 14.

¹² Jesse McKinley, *Cities Deal with Surge in Shantytowns*, New York Times, 25 March 2009. Accessed online on 23 November 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/us/26tents.html?_r=1>

¹³ Marx, p. 154.

¹⁴ Marx, p. 155.

example the Chinese factory worker who assembled the computer this paper was written on has tangibly contributed to my ability to learn and communicate. However, it is likely, given the working conditions in China, he did not profit enough from his own labour to benefit similarly. The same can be said of the worker who assembles computed axial tomography (CAT) scanning machines in a country without a socialized (or simply affordable) medical system. He will likely never benefit from the capabilities of the machines he produces. Taken more literally, it could be argued, Marx means the labour of an average worker enriches the capitalist class so greatly they are then able to enjoy the free time required to pursue enlightenment in all its guises, and/or send their children to the best grade schools and universities, while at the same time the workers who enrich them toil for simple survival.

All of this is illustrative of Marx's contention that "the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces and the more his production increases in power and extent."¹⁵ With the advent of technology that allows production to be managed from anywhere at the click of a mouse, and with the loosening of trade barriers, it has become economically sensible for all manner of corporations to either simply shutter, or threaten to shutter, their North American facilities. If the threat of job loss is not enough to cause the workers involved to acquiesce to corporate demands, production is fairly easily shifted to jurisdictions where the labour pool is unorganized and unprotected by unions or government regulations. Is it not fair to conclude that Marx had it right – that the product of working and middle class labour has reached a point where it has so enriched and empowered the corporate class that it may effectively eliminate the North American workforce? In essence, the workforce has literally laboured itself out of its own employment, resulting in the inexorable and painful disappearance of the middleclass. If they are fortunate, these same people now find themselves employed in marginal, low-paid service jobs, unable to even afford the very products they once made. In a grotesque twist of fate, Western nations seem poised to switch positions, thanks to the decimation of a well-paid, regulated workforce, with the formerly have-less nations.

So it is that "the worker puts his life into the object [of his work], and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object,"¹⁶ and to the owner of the object - the capitalist. This, I submit, is a powerful summation of where we stand today in North America. A standing Marx himself would recognize as a better-disguised version of his nineteenth century industrial world. Though it is true twenty-first century North American workers do have better protections than their nineteenth century ancestors, how much longer will this truism hold? Bit by bit hard-won protections and entitlements¹⁷ are eroded as workers reluctantly yield entitlement after entitlement as the neo-liberals

¹⁵ Marx, p. 153.

¹⁶ Marx, p. 154.

¹⁷ It must be noted, the eight-hour workday, the five-day workweek, maternity leave and many other entitlements the modern worker takes for granted were not agreed to by the capitalist class out of a sense of decency or altruism. Indeed, early industrial workers and union members fought and died to secure these rights for themselves and succeeding generations.

demand. Many encroach on the workforce so surreptitiously the worker hardly notices the change. For example, with the advent of instant communication tools many workers, in all manner of industries, have become electronically tied via blackberry, laptop, or other like device, at all hours of the day, to their jobs.¹⁸ This almost always comes with the tacit agreement that one will not be paid past ones regular working hours. In essence this is free overtime, worked in ones own home or private space. The refrain from business in reference to such concessions has become as familiar as it is predictable – “small allowances are needed to make us more competitive; if we do not get the needed efficiencies, we may have to scale back production, or shutter it altogether.” At the same time executive salaries skyrocket, “as the market demands they do to attract the best and brightest.” The best and brightest it seems are not required in the ranks of middle management or unskilled production.

It is my view that the Marxian concept of *alienated labour* is indeed relevant in the contemporary North American economic context. I have argued that neo-liberalism, which I consider a particularly rapacious and destructive form of capitalism, would not be at all unfamiliar to Marx. Indeed it is precisely the sort of socially encompassing, destructive force he warned of. Too often the generalized North American public discounts the work of Marx out of hand. There is a multiplicity of reasons for this, including the brutal legacy of the Marx-inspired Soviet Union, and its like states, as well as the narrowing of public and political discourse that is the unfortunate and lasting product of the Cold War. Despite the political machinations of the twentieth century, the original *works* of Marx, as opposed to the movements *inspired* by him, *do* offer an instructive critique of our own times, as much as they specifically spoke to his. It seems many of us have forgotten, or willfully wish to ignore, the immutable truth that *labour* – the physical process as well as its consumptive twin - enriches and empowers the capitalist class. Indeed labour is the very lifeblood of every corporation. Yet labour works for a fraction of the worth of the goods and services it produces, and in so doing keeps itself both proportionally impoverished and powerless. The hyper-stratification inherent to neo-liberalism, and its ardent dictate that government has no regulatory role to play in the workplace, the marketplace, or society in general, perpetuates and ultimately feeds on, the condition of alienation. It need not be this way. Even if one contends that the solutions put forward by Marx in works such as *Capital*, or the *Communist Manifesto*, are anachronisms of a bygone era, or too utopian to be plausible, an argument I do not support, surely there is value to be found in confronting the myths that sustain North American socioeconomic reality. Marx is relevant to us in the twenty-first century if his words and ideas awaken us to the fact that, most of us, the so-called middle and lower classes, are enslaved to the capitalist class by design. We would do well to realize both the power inherent to each of us, and that no socioeconomic system is immutable. Engaging in an open dialogue about potential alternatives to neo-liberalism is nothing less than our right as citizens of a hard-won democracy. No thinker should be excluded from such a dialogue, least of all Marx.

¹⁸ Antonia Zerbisias, 'Blackberry overtime': *Technology Creating around-the-clock workers*, Toronto Star, 22 August 2010. Accessed on-line on 24 November 2010 <<http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/850947--blackberry-overtime-technology-creating-around-the-clock-workers>>

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