



“Summary of article by Kai Erikson: On Work and Alienation” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 365-368

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The essay on which this summary is based is not a formal inquiry into the relationship between work and alienation, but rather a kind of “aerial reconnaissance,” undertaken for the purpose of gathering ideas in preparation for a research project on telecommunications workers. As such, it does not seek to resolve ongoing debates about the meaning of alienation (although it acknowledges them), but rather to draw out some concepts which might be helpful to a sociologist who is thinking about work.

MARX ON ALIENATION

The concept of alienation, developed in the German philosophical tradition, has become most closely associated with the early writings of Karl Marx. Marx related alienation to a specific transition in the history of work and for Marx work is the defining experience of human existence, inseparable from human nature. Not only are humans made for work, humans are made by work. Through the evolutionary process the human brain and body are shaped by labor. In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt remarked on “the seemingly blasphemous notion of Marx that labor (and not God) created man or that labor (and not reason) distinguishes man from other animals” [21, Arendt 86]

Human beings take up the materials of nature: wood, flint, stone, even a sight or a sound, and make them into objects which, in turn, reveal the true character of humankind. These objects are invested with the energy and skill of the producer who measures him or her self by the things produced. Industrialization and capitalism disturbed this natural order. The worker no longer owned either the means or the objects of production. A complex division of labor broke work into segments, reducing the role of any individual worker in the production process. Workers no longer produced for their own consumption, but for money - “their experience and ability - their very selves, in fact - are sold at market prices in much the same way as a side of beef or a sack of onions, and in that sense they become commodities themselves.” [21]

This separation of workers from the product of their own labor is the source of alienation of human beings from their natural moorings, from each other, even from their own nature as members of the human species. Workers pour themselves into the making of things which are then taken to be sold on someone else’s terms. This raid on their personalities is repeated day in and day out, diminishing the human spirit and its moral, perceptual and intellectual capacities. When labor is but a commodity for sale, laborers are in competition in the marketplace, estranged from each other, too brutalized to experience authentic relationships.

For the modern researcher interested in Marx's views on alienation the question is where in the modern workplace would alienation be most likely to emerge? Four areas are suggested by the Marxist text: 1) where workers are separated from the means of production and from the product; 2) where the worker has no perception of the whole pattern of production or his or her own role in it; 3) where external forces control the labor process; 4) where work is so divided that only a fraction of the worker's ability is engaged. These reduce to two essential categories: division of labor into narrow specialties and loss of control over the conditions of work.

WHERE DOES ALIENATION OCCUR

The transition Marx described was from the world of the artisan - the craftsman with sure skills and control over his shop, his tools and his materials - to the world of the industrial worker chained to the machine and the assembly line. These images are symbolic of a certain shift in manufacturing technology, but they are not representative of most workers, then or now. Most workers in the preindustrial era were not artisans in the towns but peasants scattered over vast rural areas. In more recent times, assembly line workers were only a fraction even of manual workers, and that fraction is diminishing in the face of automation.

Agriculture may involve certain craft-like skills, but its labor wore down the peasant in ways that do not correspond to the idyllic view of the artisan. The current situation is different, as workers leave the "satanic mills" for automated workplaces, some observers, notably Daniel Bell and Robert Blauner, have expressed hope that alienation would be reduced and workers would acquire new skills and regain some autonomy in working with production processes reintegrated by automation.

Several other analysts, however, see no reduction in the alienating qualities of work from automation. Work may be less physically strenuous, but the tedium of repetition has been replaced by the tedium of doing nothing but waiting for something to go wrong. Even complex processes require merely attention and reflex rather than mastery or control. Where the artisan inspected the grain of the wood or felt the texture of the weave to accumulate the knowledge of his craft, the worker in an automated workplace has little sensory experience of the production process. Information comes from computer screens or dials, not actual contact with the product.

Computerized equipment can also store the knowledge of the operator, indeed many operators, replacing the experiential record of problems encountered and solved with programmed instructions. The computer thinks and makes decisions, leaving unengaged the skill and judgment that make the operator human, programming the worker as well as the machine. The computer can be an instrument of control in another way as well, offering an efficient vehicle for surveillance: timing procedures, counting keystrokes, maintaining a continuous record of performance. Close supervision by itself can feel machinelike, regimenting and hemming in the worker with rules, quotas and routines. The computer is capable of intensifying this control and rendering it more precise.

HOW DOES ALIENATION MANIFEST ITSELF?

“That is a tougher question than might appear on the surface, because so many different currents of thought have converged on it from so many different ideological directions.”[29] Joachim Israel defined one helpful distinction, that between “estranging processes” which involve the structure of the workplace, and “states of estrangement” which are the psychological effects.

Harry Braverman takes an extreme structuralist position, posing that objectively alienating conditions produce alienated workers no matter what the worker may think or feel. The opposite pole is occupied by Robert Blauner who used surveys of workers’ self-reported satisfaction as his primary data. From this perspective, workers are alienated if they feel alienated. For sociologists the dilemma is that alienation is only a useful construct if it is registered in a person’s mind and reflected in behavior, but it is naive to think that workers’ self-perception always corresponds perfectly to degrading or enhancing aspects of work. (To further confound the question, Marx maintained that one of the characteristics of alienated labor is that it dulls perception, rendering the worker stupefied and lacking self-awareness.)

For the sociologist, the best results will probably be obtained by qualitative field studies “to understand how the ways of work are impressed on the persons exposed to them.”[31] If alienation is a state of being, it is not confined to the workplace alone. It influences the rest of the workers’ life and, in turn, may be aggravated or compensated for by activities outside the workplace. Work and leisure may be separable in modern life, but the mind is not so easily compartmentalized and the moods of the workplace and the rest of life permeate each other and interact to shape the total pattern of experience.

Even in the confines of the workplace there is room for the play of personality - decorations on a desk, passive resistance on the shop floor, camaraderie. However, alienation can affect personality in insidious ways with classic behavioral manifestations: absenteeism, grievances, quitting, depression, substance abuse. Often the persons who manifest these signs of alienation are not well equipped to understand their meaning, leaving the trained observer “engaged in a haughty business” of knowing more about people than they know about themselves. Marx was blunt about the disastrous impact of capitalist production, leaving the worker a debased and crippled idiot, but the researcher should be a little wary of planning “to walk out onto a shop floor somewhere and ask hulking operatives whether the conditions under which they work have stupefied them or made idiots of them.”[32] However finding the right way to ask the right questions may reveal whether alienation in the Marxist sense contributes to certain kinds of callousness characteristic of our times: passionate support for capital punishment, love of guns and other weapons, ultra-nationalism, xenophobia. “[S]uch questions are important, sympathetic, and in principle answerable.”[33]