

Human Nature and Alienation (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Human Nature and Alienation

One of the main problems of capitalism is the alienation it causes to people. To understand this alienation and why it is a problem, we need to examine what is a human being (human nature), what is good for him, and under what conditions he finds himself today in the capitalist process of production.

I. Human Nature and Production

Following Marx, we believe that the way people think and behave, that is, so-called human nature, is a historical product of humans themselves. This position goes against the traditional notion that human nature is a biological fact independent of us. The traditional conception holds that our nature is predetermined, independent of human activity, and therefore transhistorical and unchanging, something we reject. For us, as for Marx, binaries such as man versus nature or culture versus biological existence make no sense; man is part of nature and is defined by nature, while nature is part of man and is defined by man.

We proceed to explain. On the one hand, humans have physical/biological needs that they need to meet. They achieve this through the collective production of their means of subsistence. Humans began to live and work together in order to produce the necessities of life easier and faster: the production of means of subsistence is the basis of all societies in human history. The way we organize to produce our means of subsistence is the way we produce. This collective production process transforms the material world or conditions in which we live, giving it a social and historical dimension. On the other hand, our natural living conditions (climate, geography, etc.) and their changes directly affect how and to what extent we meet our biological needs. So we can say that through our mode of production we produce the environment in which we live, changing it from natural to partly social, and this comes and affects us back in turn, transforming us. We do not live according to a fixed and unchanging nature, but on the contrary, we produce our nature, always in accordance with and under the constraints of the material conditions in which we find ourselves. The relationship between man and nature is, therefore, an ever-changing relationship of interdependence, interaction, and mutual determination. Any analysis that places man outside or above nature, or vice versa, is unfounded and misguided.

We therefore conclude that productive activity is a determining factor for human nature and human life more generally. It is basically the driving force of human history and reality. We humans are what we do, that is, our activities and our way of life express and define our nature, and our way of production is at the core of our way of life. So, the way we produce is at the core of who we are. Since our mode of production is something that changes and evolves historically, it follows that what we are

is changing and evolving historically. Human history and reality is the process of change and evolution of human beings through their own productive activity in dynamic interaction with the natural conditions in which they live. It is the history of our collective self-production or self-creation, of the creation and constant transformation of our human nature.

At this point the following reasonable question arises: If a fixed human nature does not exist, how can we judge what is good for man? If man is a being who transforms himself historically, does that not mean that what is good for him also changes historically?

Our response is that some things may be good for us only under certain historical circumstances, but this is not true for everything. Following Marx, we believe that productive activity is not simply a means of satisfying our natural needs, but our human vocation, that is, the activity that differentiates us from the rest of nature and makes us the human beings we are. The special element that characterizes us is precisely our ability to realize, define and produce the terms and conditions of our life, and by extension, of our own nature. It is this ability of conscious self-determination and self-development that elevates us beyond our biology and makes us free beings: here lies our freedom. And this has been true throughout history. So we can say that although our nature is changeable, it also contains an unchangeable element, which is none other than this possibility of conscious self-determination or freedom. This unchanging element provides us with an unchanging criterion of what is good for us.

In particular, as we described in the previous chapter, what is good and necessary for people is to be able to self-determine and develop any and all of their capabilities and abilities, that is, to be free. Following Marx, we consider production to be the necessary expression or externalization of our individual and collective potentialities as human beings. And we explain. As we have seen, humanity develops and evolves through its externalization onto objects, onto the products of production. These products are the objectification of who we are and of our potentialities (meaning our individual and collective needs, abilities, pleasures, productive forces, etc.). We develop and satisfy new needs, we cultivate and enjoy new abilities and productive forces, we create new environments etc. This is more obvious when we consider works of art as the mode of expression of the artist, but it also applies to the rest of our products. Our potentialities acquire substance and develop only with their objectification, otherwise, they remain unfulfilled and in some way unreal. In other words, we manifest and prove ourselves in practice, through our productive activity. This perception remains prevalent today, considering that we live in a society where our value is measured by the achievements we state in our CVs. Or, if we consider the need we have for recognition by others and the fact that in order to be recognized we need to express ourselves in words but especially in deeds.

The wealth of products we produce is therefore the ultimate development of all the potentialities of humanity. To the extent that this production is something we choose to do as a way of self-expression and self-realization, it is a necessary condition for us to be happy. For us, as for Marx, the development of our potentialities is an end in itself. It is the purpose of our existence.

II. Production and alienation

Let us now see what production is in the capitalist society in which we live. In the ancient world, production was aimed towards satisfying human needs, that is, the goal of production was man himself. In the modern capitalist world, the opposite is true: the goal of people is production, whose aim in turn is to produce surplus value/profit. Consequently, the purpose of society, and by extension, the purpose of human life today at the social level, is not the development of our potential and the satisfaction of our physical and spiritual needs, but profit.

The subordination of production to profit is the main problem we face and are tasked with

solving today. The problem lies in the fact that production and development for the sake of profit go against our nature which demands instead our development through production as an end in itself. Within the capitalist system, the development of human potential is neither free nor an end in itself but instead done out of compulsion and for profit. Instead of production being our way of expression and self-realization, and therefore something that satisfies us, it is imposed on us for the purpose of capitalist profiteering. Profiteering is imposed upon and dominates man and the rest of the natural world.

The movement of the labor process away from the meaning of our existence, that is, from what is a human being, renders it estranged or alienated from us. The production for profit that dominates the creative activity of humanity leads to the people themselves becoming alienated, that is, to their inhumanity. This alienation takes four distinct but interdependent and interconnected forms:

1. *Alienation from the product of labor.* Qua commodity producers, we wage workers are alienated from the product that is the result of our work. That is, we perceive the product we produced as something foreign or alien to us. This is due to the fact that we did not ourselves freely decide what to produce, how and why, and that at the end of the day this product does not belong to us, but to our capitalist employer. The more we work and produce, the more the world around us consists of products that do not belong to us, that is, the more alien to us becomes the world we ourselves create.[1] In many cases in fact, having produced only a part of the final product (e.g. the buttons of a computer but not the whole computer), we never get to see before us the final product of our work. In addition, the fact that we are forced to work for a wage that will allow us to survive by buying some of these products means that the products we have produced appear to have power and authority over us.
2. *Alienation from the work process itself.* Since our purpose qua workers in capitalism is not to produce products but to receive a wage, the creative process we call work is for us simply our means of survival. Moreover, it is a means that we do not define and organize ourselves. For-profit capitalist production determines the form of labor independently of us, setting limits and conditions in its organization, operation and management. Under these conditions we neither express nor develop ourselves through our work, but on the contrary, work requires us to renounce ourselves and our desires and to submit to its own – foreign to us – terms. While we work we are just another means of generating capital, and work can even harm our physical and mental health (monotony, dangerous working conditions, overtime, etc). The result: we are alienated from our very own creative process, that is, we perceive it as something foreign and hostile, as a chore that we seek to avoid or limit to a minimum. It is no coincidence that most people today want to work as little as possible.
3. *Alienation from our nature.* As we have seen, productive activity or labor is the way through which humanity creates and develops its nature. Through our productive creative activity we discover and develop known and unknown talents, possibilities, interests, abilities, etc., creating or realizing our aforementioned nature as a human species (what Marx calls “species being”). But when production is presented as a coercive means of simple survival for us and of profit for the capitalist, we are alienated or estranged from the self-creating possibility offered by labor. Instead of being the free self-determining beings we deserve to be, our lives revolve around the animal purpose of individual survival. Work is transformed from an expression of our life and nature into the sacrifice of this life and nature in the name of survival. It becomes a means of survival instead of an end in itself.
4. *Alienation from other people.* How we perceive ourselves is interrelated with how we perceive those around us. As we are alienated from ourselves, our nature, the productive process and its results, we cannot help but perceive and treat those around us in the same way. We see other people and our environment in general in alienated terms, that is, as something foreign and

possibly hostile. Because we see ourselves and our work as tools, we likewise perceive those around us as tools for our individual purposes. Since we are already sacrificing the expression and development of our own lives in the name of survival, we have no problem sacrificing our fellow human beings and our natural environment for the same purpose.

The alienation of a social animal like man obviously has a huge impact on his well-being, his quality of life and his psychology, as it is a process of dehumanization (retreat from whatever makes him human). It is there we must look for the root of the feelings of social alienation and “lack of purpose” that characterize our time. All the human-made wealth, the individual property of the capitalist and the ‘individual property’ (wage) of the worker, are the result of the above alienated production process. The depth and extent of alienation can only be recognized as a whole if we realize that it is not limited to working hours, but governs our entire daily life. The various issues we face in our work preoccupy us throughout the day, and the interpersonal relationships that develop within it are an important part of our relationships. We live in a state of constant competition with those around us, in conditions of increasingly intense psychological and physical isolation. The often violent alienation from more and more aspects of our existence prevents us from leading a life in harmony with our nature, from freely determining how we want to live.

The alienation of people from their labor process, its products and those around them entails their alienation from their ability to control and direct society collectively. The result of our collective productive activity is the totality of the material and spiritual life of people, that is, society. The fact that we are alienated from this collective productive activity means that we are also alienated from its result, the society in which we live. Our cooperation in production is not something we have consciously chosen to do, but the unconscious result of our competition for the satisfaction of our immediate individual interests such as our personal survival. This blind competition leads to the spontaneous division of labor, spontaneous in the sense that it happens without any plan and direction from people. The sum total of the productive activity of the workers constitutes an unconsciously collective and interdependent whole that is regulated by the spontaneous division of labor in capitalism. The consequence: we do not realize that society is our own power and collective creation, but instead we consider it a foreign power with its own laws (e.g., the naturalized ‘laws’ of the market), independent of our productive activity. As we naturalize these laws, we believe that we can do nothing about them and we become their slaves, that is, the slaves of our own social relations and production. We accept the social domination of capital as a natural and inevitable fact. This needs to change.

The current conditions that have us sacrificing our vital activities and freedoms in the name of capitalist development make it necessary that we seek to change the system. The change needed is to transform the (re)production and self-production of humanity from a profiteering tool that alienates us to the end in itself of our free expression and development. The realization of this prospect presupposes overthrowing the present capitalist relations of production, that is, overcoming our dependence on the alienated wage labor we perform for the capitalists. We need to understand the required radical change of the present in terms of production and not in terms of (re)distribution of wealth which prevail in the current left. Even when our working conditions seem good, for example in situations of workers’ self-management or in the case of a good and democratic employer/boss, the limits set by the profiteering nature of production remain. Wage labour without alienation is inconceivable. Some jobs may offer meaning and satisfaction to the worker, but even these are at least partially alienated as they remain within the instrumental profiteering framework and their products belong to the capitalists.

We envision a society where we will produce freely as human beings for each other. In this society, work would cease to be a compulsory means of earning a living and would become a free manifestation of life. It would become an enjoyable expression and development of the individuality of

each individual. At the same time, we would also experience great satisfaction in seeing the pleasure that our fellow human beings will receive from the use of the products we have created, in the awareness that we have met a real need. The social relations that we would develop in this new productive framework would be characterized by the awareness and consciousness that we are part of each other and that we act as mediators between the individual and the social whole. Finally, we would enjoy the fact that with our work, that is, our own free manifestation of our life, we assist and make possible the free manifestation of the life of others, thus realizing and confirming our common human essence.

From the collection of "Our Position on Capitalism: What It Is, and Why We Should Be Against It".

[1] We get paid a wage as a reward for our work, which we then use to buy some of the products we have produced, but the wage is not enough to buy most of these products, and so we view them as foreign objects.

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