



KARL MARX'S CONCEPT OF ALIENATION; A STUDY OF ITS IMPACT ON NIGERIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we attempted to show the significance of Karl Marx's theory and concept of Alienation. We established that Alienation was one of the cardinal points of Karl Marx's political philosophy and that it was based on capitalists' quest to overly exploit labour directly and indirectly. Efforts were also geared towards exploring the various forms of alienation as posited by Karl Marx. This study acknowledged the fact that there are indeed two classes constantly in conflict with each other in the process of production. The concept of alienation according to Karl Marx therefore posits that Labour which produces the social goods is consistently and persistently alienated from the products of their Labour. In arriving at this conclusion, the paper shows that the concept of alienation is a central but controversial aspect of Marxism and that Karl Marx's concept of Alienation can be seized upon to explain the miseries of modern life in Nigeria, and the 'lonely crowd', 'those aggregations of atomized city dwellers who feel crushed and benumbed by the weight of a social system in which they have neither significant purpose nor decision-making power'.

Keywords: Alienation, Labour, Social Classes, Capitalism, Feudalism

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx considered capitalism to be a dynamic chronicled stage that would in the end stagnate because of disagreements, tensions and misunderstandings existing between the Laborers and capitalists in the society. Marxists characterize capital as "a social, financial connection" between individuals (instead of amongst individuals and things). In this sense, the relationship between labor and its products are eliminated, thus breeding alienation. In Karl Marx's view, the element of capital would in the end devastate the common laborers and along these lines make the social conditions ready for revolution.

Studies in Alienation reveal that Marx was not the first to develop an analysis of human alienation. Marx's philosophical predecessor, Hegel, saw alienation as part of the development of the human mind. Ludwig Feuerbach also in His analysis had put forward a materialist analysis of alienation, pointing out how men transfer the power to change the world to imaginary gods, although he tend to believe that religious alienation could only be eliminated through rational argument alone. *Alienation therefore, under the context of this paper* is the transformation of people's own labour into a power which rules them as if by a kind of natural or supra-human law. In other words, it describes a situation whereby Man is reprieved from enjoying the products of His labour. This brings into question the issue of Surplus Value which is man's sweat (Labour), appropriated by another (Capital). In Marx's view, the origin of alienation is to be traced to *commodity fetishism* – the belief that inanimate things (commodities) have human powers (i.e., value) able to govern the activity of human beings. Alienation is an idea that was developed by Marx in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and later developed in his critique of political economy in *Capital*.

The Issues and Socio-economic Conditions of His Time:

The 19th century Europe in which Karl Marx lived and died was a century of great hope, of dream of the perfectibility of man, of new religions of science and humanity, when men were eager to reform the world in order to solve the problem of poverty. But it was also a violent and volatile century, characterized by strong feelings of nationalism and revolutions in Germany, Italy, France and England. It was a period when capitalism had emerged as the dominant mode of production and prevailing economic order, following the breakdown of Feudalism and its Absolutist Monarchy; and thus had created new wealth and power all over Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution, (Amadi & Inyikalum, 2016).

Capitalism itself is simply a system of economic organization which recognized private ownership of the major means of production and propelled by profit motive, competition, self-interest and in a word, individualism. While emphasizing the negative socio-economic conditions of the society at that time especially as it affected the common workers, (Inyikalum & Amadi, 2016), noted that in the 19th century capitalist Europe, the socio-economic conditions were such that there was social differentiation among the people in terms of social inequalities in status, wealth, power, privileges and opportunities, and more importantly, in the control of economic, political and social resources. It was a time when the European

Society had already been bifurcated into two classes namely – the working class and the capitalist class. The working class served basically as elements of manipulation and exploitation in the process of capital accumulation while the emergent middle class (i.e. the capitalist class) enjoyed its glorious moments in wealth and power, and thus, wanted to consolidate its position in both economic and political scheme of things, by rationalizing with some principles and ideas be it that of liberty, reason or material progress (Rodee et al, 1972).

Already, there was in existence, an ideology called liberalism and its economic correlate capitalism which had developed in the 17th and 18th century by the efforts of the enlightenment thinkers and classical economists of that Age – respectively. Liberalism and by extension capitalism identified the individual rather than the society as a whole as the unit of analysis upon which social justice, virtues and capabilities could be judged. Social justice was determined by the extent to which freedom was allowed the individual in order to demonstrate his own virtues and capabilities. This invariably, made life very difficult for the poor laborers who were at the mercy of the capitalists.

It is pertinent to state at this point that, the term alienation cannot be found in the later writings of Marx, but modern commentators are in error when they contend that Marx abandoned the idea. It informs his later writings, more particularly *Das Kapital*. In the notion of the "fetishism of commodities," which is central to his economic analysis, Marx repeatedly applies the concept of alienation. Commodities are alienated products of the labor of man, crystallized manifestations, which in Frankenstein fashion now dominate their creators. "The commodity form," writes Marx in *Das Kapital*,

Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights.

Marx's Conception of Alienation:

However we decide to look at it, the concept of alienation was the central notion of Marx's teachings and analysis. For instance, he rightly noted that "The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them". Therefore, explicitly stated or tacitly assumed, the notion of alienation remained central to Marx's social and economic analysis. In an alienated society, the whole mind-set of men, their consciousness, is to a large extent only the reflection of the conditions in which they find themselves and of the position in the process of production in which they are variously placed. Marx famously noted while describing the state of constant war between labour and capital;

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word,

oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, that each time ended, either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

From the above, it is obvious that Karl Marx acknowledged the fact that there are indeed two classes constantly in conflict with each other. But due to the disadvantaged position of the working class, will always be dominated by the owners of the means and factors of production. 'Alienation', then, is used by Marx to refer to any state of human existence which is 'away from' or 'less than' unalienation. It is in this sense and on this scale, however, that Marx refers to alienation as 'a mistake, a defect, which ought not to be'. Both the individual and his way of life can be spoken of as 'alienated', and in the latter case the tag 'realm of estrangement' is applied to the most infected areas.

Marx further declares:

What requires explanation is not the unity of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolism, with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature; nor is this the result of a historical process. What we must explain is the separation of these inorganic conditions of human existence from this active existence, a separation which is only fully completed in the relation between wage-labor and capital.

Judging from the above, one can rightly conclude that for Marx, the history of mankind had a double aspect: It was a history of increasing control of man over nature at the same time as it was a history of the increasing alienation of man. From the foregoing, Alienation may also be described as a condition in which men are dominated by forces of their own creation, which confront them as alien powers. Karl Marx's concept of Alienation further reveal that alienated man is an abstraction because he has lost touch with all human specificity. This is because, He has been reduced to performing undifferentiated work on humanly indistinguishable objects among people deprived of their human variety and compassion. There is little that remains of his relations to his activity, product and fellows which enables us to grasp the peculiar qualities of his species. Consequently, Marx feels he can speak of this life as 'the abstract existence of man as a mere workman who may therefore fall from his filled void into the absolute void'. Though Marx clearly overstates his case in calling alienated man a hole in the air, it is in such an extreme notion that the term 'abstraction' is rooted.

At the same time that the individual is degenerating into an abstraction, those parts of his being which have been split off (which are no longer under his control) are undergoing their own transformation. Three end products of this development are property, industry and religion, which Marx calls man's 'alienated life elements'. Eventually, it attains an independent life, that is, takes on 'needs' which the

individual is then forced to satisfy, and the original connection is all but obliterated. It is this process which largely accounts for the power that money has in capitalist societies, the buying of objects which could never have been sold had they remained integral components of their producer. What occurs in the real world is reflected in people's minds: essential elements of what it means to be a man are grasped as independent and, in some cases, all powerful entities, whose links with him appear other than what they really are. The ideas which encompass this reality share all its shortcomings. The whole has broken up into numerous parts whose interrelation in whole can no longer be ascertained. This is the essence of alienation, whether the part under examination is man, his activity, his product or his ideas. The same separation and distortion is evident in each.

To Marx, all major institutional spheres in capitalist society, such as religion, the State, and Political Economy, were marked by a condition of alienation. Moreover, these various aspects of alienation were interdependent.

Objectification is the practice of alienation. Just as man, so long as he is engrossed in religion, can only objectify his essence by an alien and fantastic being; so under the sway of egoistic need, he can only affirm himself and produce objects in practice by subordinating his products and his own activity to the domination of an alien entity, and by attributing to them the significance of an alien entity, namely money.

Karl Marx further notes that "Money is the alienated essence of man's work and existence; the essence dominates him and he worships it."

The State is the intermediary between men and human liberty. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his own divinity and all his religious bonds, so the state is the intermediary to which man confides all his non-divinity and all his human freedom.

Alienation hence confronts man in the whole world of institutions in which he is enmeshed. But alienation in the workplace assumes for Marx an overriding importance, because to him man was above all Homo Faber, Man the Maker. Marx while speaking about Hegel's position viz the alienated man notes that;

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's Phenomenology . . . is that Hegel grasps the self-creation of man as a process . . . and that he, therefore, grasps the nature of labor and conceives objective man. . . as the result of his own labor.

Economic alienation under capitalism is involved in men's daily activities and not only in their minds, as other forms of alienation might be. "Religious alienation as such occurs only in the sphere of consciousness, in

the inner life of man, but economic alienation is that of real life. . . . It therefore affects both aspects."Karl Marx notes that Alienation in the domain of work has a fourfold aspect: Man is alienated from the object he produces, from the process of production, from himself, and from the community of his fellows.

The object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer. . . .The more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself.

Interestingly, Karl Marx in his analysis on the different dimensions of Alienation further explains that;

However, alienation appears not merely in the result but also in the process of production, within productive activity itself. . . . If the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation. . . . The alienation of the object of labor merely summarizes the alienation in the work activity itself.

Being alienated from the objects of his labor and from the process of production, man is also alienated from himself. This act of alienation ensures that he cannot fully develop the many sides of his personality. "Work is external to the worker. . . . It is not part of his nature; consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself. . . . The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless." "In work [the worker] does not belong to himself but to another person." "This is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something alien, not belonging to him activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation, and the personal physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life. . . . as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him."

Analysis of Alienation in Ancient Feudal Society as against capitalist societies:

In ancient feudal societies, humans had not yet developed the means to control the natural world, or to produce enough to be free from famine, or to cure diseases. All social relationships were 'conditioned by a low stage of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly limited relations between men within the process of creating and reproducing their material life, hence also limited relations between man and nature'. Land was the source of production, and it so dominated the feudal-manorial system that men saw themselves not as individuals but in relation to the land. Marx described this in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts:

In feudal landownership we already find the domination of the earth as of an alien power over men. The serf is an appurtenance of the land. Similarly the heir through primogeniture, the first born son, belongs to the land. It inherits him. The rule of private property begins with property in land which is its basis.

Ownership of land was dependent on inheritance and blood lines: your 'birth' determined your destiny. In an early work Marx described how 'the aristocracy's pride in their blood, their descent, in short the genealogy of the body...has its appropriate science in heraldry. The secret of the aristocracy is zoology'. It was this zoology which determined your life and your relationships with others. On the one hand, the low level of the productive forces meant constant labour for the peasants, while on the other, the feudal lords and the church officials took what they wanted from the peasants by force.

Thus alienation arose from the low level of the productive forces, from human subordination to the land and from the domination of the feudal ruling class. However, there were limits to these forms of alienation. The peasants worked their own land and produced most of the things they needed in their own independent family units. 'If a person was tied to the land, then the land was also tied to the people... The peasant, and even the serf of the middle ages, remained in possession of at least 50 percent, sometimes 60 and 70 percent, of the output of their labour'. The social relationships in feudal society were relationships of domination and subordination, but they were obviously social relationships between individuals. In Capital Marx described how

the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own mutual personal relations, and are not disguised under the shape of social relations between the products of labour.

However, the constraints of feudalism were very different from the dynamic of capitalism. The bourgeoisie wanted a society in which everything could be bought and sold for money: 'Selling in this case is the practice or function of alienation'. The creation of such a society depended on the brutal enclosures of the common land. This meant that, for the first time, the majority in society were denied direct access to the means of production and subsistence, thus creating a class of landless labourers who had to submit to a new form of exploitation, wage labour, in order to survive. Capitalism in such a case therefore involved 'a fundamental change in the relations between men, instruments of production and the materials of production'. These fundamental changes meant that every aspect of life was transformed. Even the concept of time was radically altered so that watches, which were toys in the 17th century, became a measure of labour time or a means of quantifying idleness, because of the 'importance of an abstract measure of minutes and hours to the work ethic and to the habit of punctuality required by industrial discipline'. Men no longer enjoyed the right to dispose of what they produced how they chose: they became separated from the product

of their labour. Peter Linebaugh in his history of 18th century London, *The London Hanged*, explained that workers considered themselves masters of what they produced.

It took great repression, a 'judicial onslaught', in the late 18th century to convince them that what they produced belonged exclusively to the capitalists who owned the factories. During the 18th century most workers were not paid exclusively in money.

The above was true of Russian serf labour, American slave labour, Irish agricultural labour and the metropolitan labour in London trades'. By the 19th century, however, wage labour had replaced all other forms of payment. This meant labour was now a commodity, sold on the market. Capitalists and workers were formally independent of each other, but in reality inextricably connected. Production no longer took place in the home, but in factories where new systems of discipline operated. The mechanization of labour in the factories transformed people's relationship with machines, 'those remarkable products of human ingenuity became a source of tyranny against the worker'. In *Kapital* Marx compared the work of craftsmen and artisans to that of the factory worker:

In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory; the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machines that he must follow. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes a mere living appendage.

One of the most important, and devastating, features of factory production was the division of labour. Prior to capitalism there had been a social division of labour, with different people involved in different branches of production or crafts. With capitalism there arose the detailed division of labour within each branch of production. This division of labour meant that workers had to specialize in particular tasks, a series of atomised activities, which realised only one or two aspects of their human powers at the expense of all the others. Harry Braverman pointed out the consequences of this division:

While the social division of labour subdivides society, the detailed division of labour subdivides humans, and while the subdivision of society may enhance the individual and the species, the subdivision of the individual, when carried on without regard to human capabilities and needs, is a crime against the person and humanity.

John Ruskin, the 19th century critic of industrialization, made a similar point when he wrote that the division of labour is a false term because it is the men who are divided. In this system workers become increasingly dependent on the capitalists who own the means of production. Just as the worker 'is depressed,

therefore, both intellectually and physically, to the level of a machine, and from being a man becomes an abstract activity and a stomach, so he also becomes more and dependent on every fluctuation in the market price, in the investment of capital and on the whims of the wealthy'. It became impossible for workers to live independently of capitalism: to work meant to be reduced to a human machine; to be deprived of work meant living death. Without work, if capital ceases to exist for him, Marx argued the worker might as well bury himself alive: 'The existence of capital is his existence, his life, for it determines the content of his life in a manner indifferent to him'. There is no choice involved - work is a matter of survival. Therefore labour became forced labour; you could not choose not to work, you could not choose what you made, and you could not choose how you made it. Marx noted:

The fact that labour is external to the worker, does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is therefore not voluntary but forced, it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need, but a mere means to satisfy need outside itself. Its alien character is clearly demonstrated by the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists it is shunned like the plague.

Evaluating Karl Marx's different Dimensions of alienation:

The development of capitalism proved irresistible and it brought alienation on a scale previously unimaginable. In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (also known as the 1844, or Paris Manuscripts) Marx identified four specific ways in which alienation pervades capitalist society.

The product of labour: The worker is alienated from the object he produces because it is owned and disposed of by another, the capitalist. In all societies people use their creative abilities to produce objects which they use, exchange or sell. Under capitalism, however, this becomes an alienated activity because

The worker cannot use the things he produces to keep alive or to engage in further productive activity... The worker's needs, no matter how desperate, do not give him a license to lay hands on what these same hands have produced, for all his products are the property of another.

Thus workers produce cash crops for the market when they are malnourished, build houses in which they will never live, make cars they can never buy, produce shoes they cannot afford to wear, and so on. Marx

argued that the alienation of the worker from what he produces is intensified because the products of labour actually begin to dominate the labourer. Interestingly, this domination of dead labour over living labour lies behind Marx's assertion in the Manuscripts that

The alienation of the worker means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.

For Marx this state of affairs was unique to capitalism. In previous societies those who work harder could usually be expected to have more to consume. Under capitalism, those who work harder increase the power of a hostile system over them. They themselves, and their inner worlds, become poorer. 'The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more goods he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things'.

The labour process: The second element of alienation Marx identified is a lack of control over the process of production. We have no say over the conditions in which we work and how our work is organized, and how it affects us physically and mentally. This lack of control over the work process transforms our capacity to work creatively into its opposite, so the worker experiences 'activity as passivity, power as impotence, procreation as emasculation. The resulting rigidly repetitive process buries the individual talents or skills of the worker, as Marx described:

Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity... The special skill of each individual insignificant factory operative vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity before the science, the gigantic physical forces, and mass of labours that are embodied in the factory mechanism and, together, with that mechanism, constitute the power of the master.

Modern methods of production have increased the fragmentation of the labour process since Marx's day. The organization of modern production is still based on the methods of the assembly line. Scientific research is used to break the production process down into its component parts. This has led, firstly, to the deskilling of white collar jobs and to a situation where managers have a monopoly of control over the production process: 'The unity of thought and action, conception and execution, hand and mind, which capitalism threatened from its beginnings, is now attacked by a systematic dissolution employing all the resources of science and the various engineering disciplines based upon it'. Conditions of work, from the

length of the working day to the space we occupy, are predetermined:

The entire work operation, down to its smallest motion, is conceptualized by the management and engineering staff, laid out, measured, fitted with training and performance standards - all entirely in advance.

Workers are treated as machines, with the aim of transforming the subjective element of labour into objective, measurable, controlled processes. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not.

Our fellow human beings: Thirdly, we are alienated from our fellow human beings. This alienation arises in part because of the antagonisms which inevitably arise from the class structure of society. We are alienated from those who exploit our labour and control the things we produce. As Marx put it:

If his activity is a torment for him, it must provide pleasure and enjoyment for someone else... If therefore he regards the product of his labour, his objectified labour, as an alien, hostile and powerful object which is independent of him, then his relationship to that object is such that another man - alien, hostile, powerful and independent of him - is its master. If he relates to his own activity an unfree activity, then he relates to it as activity in the service, under the rule, coercion and yoke of another man.

In addition, studies reveal that we are connected to others through the buying and selling of the commodities we produce. Our lives are touched by thousands of people every day, people whose labour has made our clothes, food, home, etc. The commodities of each individual producer appear in depersonalized form, regardless of who produced them, where, or in what specific conditions. Commodity production means that everyone 'appropriates the produce of others, by alienating that of their own labour'. Marx described how mass commodity production continually seeks to create new needs, not to develop our human powers but to exploit them for profit:

Each attempts to establish over the other an alien power, in the hope of thereby achieving satisfaction of his own selfish needs...becomes the inventive and ever calculating slave of inhuman, refined, unnatural and imaginary appetites. He places himself at the disposal of his neighbour's most depraved fancies, panders to his needs, excites unhealthy appetites in him, and pounces on every weakness, so that he can then demand the money for his labour of love. We see other people through the lens of profit and loss. Our abilities and needs are converted into means of making money and so we consider other human beings as competitors, as inferiors or superiors.

Our human nature: The fourth element is our alienation from what Marx called our species being. What makes us human is our ability to consciously shape the world around us. However, under capitalism our labour is coerced, forced labour. Work bears no relationship to our personal inclinations or our collective interests. The capitalist division of labour massively increased our ability to produce, but those who create the wealth are deprived of its benefits. Marx's descriptions of this process in the Manuscripts are extremely powerful indictments of the system:

It is true that labour produces marvels for the rich, but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It procures beauty, but deformity for the worker. It replaces labour by machines, but it casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labour and turns others into machines. It produces intelligence, but it produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker.

Human beings are social beings. We have the ability to act collectively to further our interests. However, under capitalism that ability is submerged under private ownership and the class divisions it produces. We have the ability to consciously plan our production, to match what we produce with the developing needs of society. But under capitalism that ability is reversed by the anarchic drive for profits. Thus, rather than consciously shaping nature, we cannot control, or even foresee, the consequences of our actions. For example, new, cheaper techniques of production may, when repeated across industry, produce acid rain or gases which destroy the ozone layer. Similarly, when one capitalist improves production in his factory, he is unwittingly contributing to the slowing up of the rate of profits for his class as a whole by lowering the rate of profit.

CONCLUSION

From this study, we understood that alienation can equally be conceived of as state of mind, and not just an understanding of how social organization affected human beings. It is however important to state at this point that, Marx's writings on alienation, from the Manuscripts and Capital, demonstrates that for him alienation was not merely a state of mind, but also viz the material life of the individual. As one Marxist described it,

The life activity of the alienated individual is qualitatively of a kind. His actions in religion, family affairs, and politics and so on, are as distorted and brutalised as his productive activity... There is no sphere of human activity that lies outside these prison walls.

It therefore beholds that Marx's theory offers us an indispensable method of understanding how the

production process shapes the entire society. Our studies in Marx's concept of Alienation further depicts that Labour itself is a commodity and its value is determined by the labour time which went into its creation. It is therefore this value which the capitalist places on Labour time and by extension products of labour that encourages him to alienate the worker, thus, appropriating the surplus value to himself.

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