

KARL MARX'S CONCEPT OF ALIENATION

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The much discussed concept "alienation" has different meanings in different contexts. In ordinary everyday discourse, the word means "turning away" or "keeping away" from former friends or associates". In law, it usually refers to the transfer of property from one person to another, either by sale or as a gift. In psychiatry, it means deviation from normality. In modern psychology and sociology, it is often used to mean man's feeling of alienness towards society, nature, other people, or himself. All these and other meanings of the term "alienation" may be regarded as different versions of one broad meaning which is suggested by the etymology and morphology of the word—the meaning in which alienation (or estrangement) is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes (or has become) alien, (or strange) to something, or somebody, else.¹

Historically speaking, the concept of alienation is as old as Plato's Idealism. Plato held that Ideas exist independently of mind in a world of their own which is beyond space and time. That world is the world of absolute reality. The things and individuals at the sphere of mundane existence are dim shadows of the eternal Ideas. Every thing is partly real and partly unreal. A thing owes its reality to its relative Idea which is its origin. Similarly a man is the imperfect copy of the Idea of man. In this sense, the world of Becoming may be regarded as alienated world—and an individual man as an alienated man. His theory of reminiscence further elaborates the point.

Plotinus is the second Greek thinker who regarded man as alienated being from the One. The one is so perfect that His perfection "Overflows". Thus the Universe and various beings emanate from the indivisible unity of God. Plotinus' theory of emanation is the same as the process of alienation. The further you go from the One, the more alienation. As you draw nearer the One, alienation keeps on diminishing, till you shade off into the unity of the One.

Some thinkers have traced the genesis of the concept back to the Old Testament concept of idolatry. Many sociologists and philosophers liken the term "alienation" to "reification," i.e., the act of transforming

human properties into the properties of things which are independent of human beings and govern their life. In this sense, nearly all sculptures in the ancient ages, represent man's tendency to idealize and transform human properties into the *stereotyped* and anthropomorphic Gods and spiritual beings. Greek sculptures represent beauty, power, wisdom and dignity of men and women. "Then look at the multitudes of Buddhas found all over the East in which man's intellectual power, his spiritual depth and profundity, his patience and power to endure, is etched out in the face of Buddha."²

Still some other writers hold that the Christian doctrine of original sin and redemption is the source of the concept of alienation and dealienation.³

In Islam, we may say that man's alienation started from the "Fall of Adam". Man disobeyed God and, consequently, was expelled from "Jannat"—a place where there is neither hunger, nor thirst, neither heat, nor darkness." His earthly existence is a period of trial and who-soever comes out of this trial successfully, will be once again allowed to enter his eternal abode — Jannat. Jannat may be regarded as a place absolutely free from alienation.

On further investigation perhaps more sources of the concept of alienation may be discovered.

Whatever the origin of the concept of alienation be, the fact is beyond the shadow of doubt that Hegel was the first thinker who took up this problem seriously and discussed it philosophically. The central idea of Hegel's philosophy is that the totality of existence is an expression of the, Absolute Spirit or Absolute Mind or, in common language, God. The whole universe, in the last analysis, is a rational system. The dust particles of this earth are related to the starry heaven as the nails of your feet are related to the hair of your head. Nothing is unrelated and independent in the universe. Every thing occupies its particular place in the scheme of the Absolute. The Absolute is not an aggregate of motionless things or properties. The Absolute or the Cosmic Self is not static; it is perpetually moving in a circular process of alienation and dealienation. Man is local or partial manifestation of this dynamic Self. Nature is the alienated Absolute. At the level of man, the Absolute "returns" to himself from his alienation in Nature. "The whole of human history is man's knowledge of the Absolute and, at the same time, the development of self-knowledge of the Absolute, who through finite mind, becomes self-aware—"⁴

For Kant the categories of Sensibility (space and time) and those of Understanding (12 Schematized categories of Logic) were inherent in the very constitution of human mind, i.e., were subjective. Hegel, on the other hand, maintains that the laws and categories of thought are objective and are at work in the universe at large. In Hegel's philosophy Kantian categories constitute the essential nature of the Cosmic Self or the Absolute. The Absolute expressed itself in Nature and consequently, became alienated. But at the level of man, it dealienated itself and became self-conscious.

Not only the Absolute mind alienates, but man, finite mind, also alienates. The concept of alienation has been discussed in detail by Hegel in the "Phenomenology of Mind". Man expresses himself in objects produced. Man made things eg., machines, laws, customs, social institutions and culture take the form of those forces which have become the master of human beings. The gulf between the object and subject, the produced and the producer, is responsible for the alienation of man. In the state of alienation, Hegel maintains, "there is no living union between the individual and his world; the object, severed from the subject, is dead; and the only love possible is a sort of relationship between the living subject and the dead objects by which he is surrounded".⁵ For Hegel, the troubles of alienated man stem from the separation of subject and object. Life is a unity and it should not be demaged. Therefore, he stressed the need of bringing about reconciliation between the subjective realm of thought and the objective realm of things and culture.

After Hegel, Feuerbach interpreted the concept of alienation on different lines. He does not accept Hegelian view that in Nature God has alienated from Himself and that He returns to Himself (dealienates) in finite human mind. Feuerbach holds that "man is not self-alienated God. On the contrary, God is self-alienated man; He is man's essence absolutized and estranged from man".⁶

Feuerbach maintained that traditional religion arose as a result of man's endeavour to "objectify" his nature. Such properties as wisdom, power, dignity, beauty etc., are to be found in human beings. But man has idealized these properties and ascribed to the gods (or to God). The Divine attributes are nothing but a fantastic projection of human nature. "The more empty life becomes, the richer and fuller becomes God. The impoverishing of the real world and enriching of the Deity is one and the same act. Only an impoverished humanity has a rich God."(7) This

indicates that man, according to Feuerbach, worships his own ideal nature. Man alienates from himself when he bows before his own essence regarding it as an alien and higher Being. Man can get rid of alienation only if he recognized that his own estranged nature has become his master.

The concept of alienation gets supreme importance in Marx. Although, he owed much to Hegel and Feuerbach, yet he differed from them in important respects. He subscribes to Hegel's view that the self-creation of man is a process of alienation and dealienation. But, in Marx's view, the excessive abstractness of Hegel's philosophy is unjustified. For Hegel, mere reason constitutes the essential nature of man, while Marx is not prepared to neglect its emotional and sensuous aspects. By virtue of his peculiar conception of human nature in all of its dimensions, Marx departs from Idealistic tradition and comes closer to Feuerbach. But he did not like Feuerbach's religion of love and his emphasis on philosophical anthropology. Here, like Hegel, he stresses the importance of history. For Marx, economic causes and circumstances are the most important in the process of alienation.

According to Marx, there are four forms of alienation :

- (i) Objectification (alienation from the thing)
- (ii) Self-alienation —(alienation from one's own activity)
- (iii) Species alienation—(alienation from mankind.)
- (iv) Alienation of man from other men.

The first form of alienation expresses the relation of the producer to the object produced. This relation is at the same time producer's relation to the world of objects that surrounds him. Marx defines man as labouring animal (*animal labourans*). "Labour", for Marx, is the differentia of man. Man has attained his present form as human being only through labouring activity, 'Production is a permanent condition for the existence of man, an eternal, natural need. Without production, metabolism between man and nature would be impossible and so would be human life too.'⁸

Production is an essential and permanent feature of human nature. But, when man produces an object by labour, that object stands in conflict with him. The producer ceases to own, recognize and control the thing of his own making.

Marx says :

“The worker is related to the product of his labour as an alien object. . . . The object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer, the product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material : it is the objectification of labour. Labour’s realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and object bondage; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation”⁹

Man cannot help expressing his essential nature. He goes on producing objects. But the world of produced objects surrounds him as an alien and hostile world.

“The more the worker expends himself in the 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. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to himself but to the object. Hence the greater this activity, the greater is the workers’s lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater his product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.”¹⁰

The “alienation of the thing” becomes greater and stronger when we regard the economic commodities as having intrinsic and objective worth. A commodity is intrinsically and objectively valuable not because of its market value, but because of its “human content” i.e., that “life” or “labour” which has been “congealed” in it. According to Marx’s “labour theory of value”, a diamond will be less precious than a coal if it requires less labour to obtain it. Consequently, “human content” of exchange values becomes depersonalized. Thus, the impersonal mechanism of the market comes into being and prices take the form of substantial and independent realities. The worth of a thing is not determined on the basis of its fitness to meet the needs of somebody but on the basis of its price. The variations of prices are “independent of the will, foresight and the action of the producers.” This depersonalization of “human content” gives rise to a money economy where concrete use values are reduced

to abstract exchange values. You will evaluate a thing in accordance with its price. All prices are expressed in terms of money. So by money you will determine the worth and value of a thing irrespective of its "human content".

Not only things, but human qualities can also be exchanged in a money economy. Money can get me those human qualities which I do not deserve. I am an ugly man, and do not deserve to have a beautiful wife. "But I can buy the most beautiful woman for myself. Consequently I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness, its power to repel, is annulled by money I am a detestable, dishonourable, unscrupulous and stupid man, but money is honoured and so also its possessor. Money is the highest good and so is the possessor good."¹¹ Money has become an independent power which determines the actions of human beings.

Modern man is not alienated in the manner in which primitive man was alienated. The alienation of primitive man was because of hostile Nature. But the alienation of civilized man is caused by the hostile environment created by himself. Nuclear weapons, economic circumstances, industrial and technological development etc., have become those impersonal forces that threaten human beings at every moment. Civilized man has become a helpless puppet in the hands of the environment of his own making.

The second form of alienation is that in which man alienates from his own self and activity. The producer sells his labour as a commodity to the employer. Marx throws light on this process :

" the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the act of production—within the producing activity itself. How would the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very activity of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity of production. If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labour is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labour itself. What then constitutes the alienation of labour? First the fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy

but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore, only feels himself out-side his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he is not at home. His labour is not therefore voluntary, but coerced, it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a Labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly the external character of Labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual—that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—in the same way, the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self."¹²

The alienation from the activity takes place when labour is thrust upon the worker. The labourer usually works under compulsion. In a routinized and mechanized industrial system, he performs his duty as a screw function in a machine. “. . . . the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities”.¹³ The worker, therefore, remains unaware of his essential being and, consequently, the society is deprived of his actual usefulness and talents. This form of alienation is to be found most prominently under capitalism.

Self-alienation is further increased when the importance of man was minimized by the introduction of machines of various kinds. In agriculture, industry and other fields of life, machines have cast human beings aside.

Marx thinks that not only the workers are self-alienated but the rich are also self-alienated by their obsessive interest in money making. The mind of a wealthy man is continually busy thinking and planning to become richer and richer. The monied man, according to Marx hates art, history and other intellectual subjects; and this hate is his virtue. The self-alienation of the worker is manifest and he consciously struggles against it. But the self-alienation of the monied people is hidden, “or if half recognized, it is excused and rationalized. The proletarian is in the system

but not of it, whereas, the bourgeois is possessed by the system body and soul."¹⁴

According to Marx, division of labour also adds to the self-alienation of the worker. In a modern industry, the worker confines his toil to a limited operation for years together. This dull routine snatches away all charm and creativity from his labouring activity and "degrades him to the level of an appendage to a machine" (Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, I p. 708).

The third form of alienation, species alienation, means man's estrangement from his species being or essential nature. In order to understand this type of alienation, one should have a clear understanding of Marx's conception of man.

According to Marx man is a free and social being. Any manifestation of his life, however much private it may appear, is a manifestation and affirmation of his social life. Man can't realize his individuality in isolation from social life. The individual and social life of a person are not different. Their forms of expression may be different, but both sides of man's nature are inseparably connected. Not only man's consciousness, but his very minor perceptions are social. "The human eye appreciates things in a way different from the crude, non-human eye, the human ear differently from the non-human ear."¹⁵ Any conception of society over and above, or in contradiction to, the individual is false. Similarly the claim of the individual as a unique and non-social being is false. What the individual calls his own private and inner life, is, in fact, shaped by all previous history. Man's appreciation of beauty, his sensitivity to music and his other traits have developed during the social and historical progress of mankind.

Hegel followed the Socratic tradition and regarded reason or logic as the essence of man. But Marx holds that reason alone does not constitute the essential nature of man. He takes man as a whole, "in all the plenitude of his being". He, however, agrees with Hegel in regarding man as a universal being :

"What is this essential difference between man and brute?—Consciousness— —but consciousness, in the strict sense; for the consciousness implied in the feeling of the self as an individual, in discrimination by the senses, in the perception and even judgement of outward things according to definite sensible signs, cannot be denied to the brutes. Consciousness

in the strict sense is present in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought. The brute is indeed conscious of himself as an individual—and he has accordingly the feeling of self as the common centre of successive sensations—but not as a species—In practical life, we have to do with individuals; in science, with species—But only a being to whom his own species, his own nature, is an object of thought, can make the essential nature of other things or beings as an object of thought—The brute has only a simple, man a two fold life; in the brute—the inner life is one with the outer. Man has both an inner and an outer life. The inner life of man is the life which has relation to his species—to his general, as distinguished from his individual nature—The brute can exercise no function which has relation to species without another individual external to itself; but man can perform the functions of thought and speech, which strictly imply such a relation, apart from another individual—Man is, in fact, at once I and Thought; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him, his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought—An object to which a subject essentially, necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject's own, but objective nature.—

“The relation of the sun to the earth is, therefore, at the same time the relation of the earth to itself, or to its own nature, for the measure of the size and the intensity of light which the sun possesses as the object of the earth, is the measure of the distance, which determines the peculiar nature of the earth In the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself—The power of the object over him is therefore the power of his own nature.”¹⁵

Marx agrees with Hegel and Feuerbach that man is a universal being. But he did not agree with Hegel that man can realize his being only in the ethical state. He, on the other hand, maintains that man can develop as a social, creative and free being only in the classless society of advanced communism. Similarly he links the humanism of Feuerbach with communism.

It has already been pointed out that, according to Marx, labour is what distinguishes man from lower animals. Animals also labour. “Birds build nests” and “the bees gather honey”. But the labouring activity of animals is “strictly under compulsion”. Man, on the other hand, can only produce “when he is free” and his production “is in accordance with the laws of beauty”.¹⁶ To produce freely is the expression

of the essential nature of man. He becomes alienated from his species being when his labouring activity is degraded to animal or mechanical function.

The fourth form of alienation is a corollary of species-alienation. "An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life-activity, from his species being, is the estrangement of man from man. If a man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by the other man. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labour and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labour . . . and object of labour"

"In fact the proposition that man's species nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature."¹⁷

Marx concludes that estranged labour gives rise to private property. If labour, the result of labour, i.e., production, confronts the worker as an alien, hostile and independent power, in whose service is this labour done? Obviously, in the service of the non-worker! "If the worker's activity is torment to him, to another it must be delight and his life's joy . . . Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man."¹⁸

The estranged labour, in the beginning, is the cause of private property. But, later on, this becomes the effect of private property. "True, it is a result of the movement of private property that we have obtained the concept of alienated labour (of alienated life) from political economy. But on analysis of this concept, it becomes clear that though private property appears to be the source, the cause of alienated labour, it is really, its consequence, just as the gods in the beginning are not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal."¹⁹

Marx thus shows that because of alienation, society splits up into two opposing classes, the toiling masses and the non-workers, the owners of private property, the capitalists or whatever you may call them.

All the forms of alienation which Marx has enumerated are, in the last analysis, one; they are different aspects of man's self-alienation or his estrangement from his own "essential nature". This alienation is, ultimately, responsible for the growth of all social evils and antagonistic relations between the individual and society. The self-alienated worker

remains unaware of his historically created possibilities. Consequently, the society cannot benefit from the immense talent and unlimited potentialities of its individuals. Marx, therefore, thinks that the classless society of advanced communism is the only means to get rid of the ills created by self-alienation. In such a classless society, the individual will stand in harmonious relation with the collective existence. "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

(Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of Communist Party*).

(To Continue)

NOTES

1. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy "Alienation".
2. Prof. Eric Syprian, "Alienation of Man in the fiction of the West" Papers on Imperialism, published by the department of Administrative Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, "Love," in Early theological Writings, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1948. (p.303).
4. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy—Hegel.
5. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Feurbach.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts 1844 in Marx, Early writings, Translated and edited by T.B. Bottomore, London, C.A. Watts and Co., Ltd., 1963—pp. 120-121 cited as EPM henceforth).
9. EPM.—pp 122.
10. Marx Capital, Chicago Charles H. Kerr & Co. 1906—1909—p. 86.
11. EPM.—p. 191.
12. EPM.—pp.193—194.
13. EPM.—p.194.
14. Malvin Rader, Ethics and human community, Rivehart and Winston, New York, 1964—(See Chapter "Social Ideals—Communist Ideal).
15. This passage has been quoted from the "Essence of Christianity", (Feurbach) by the translator of the Economic and philosophical Manuscripts in order to explain Marx's point of view.
16. EPM. p. 195.
17. EPM. pp. 72—73.
18. EPM. pp. 74—75.
19. EPM. p. 76.

