

**Classical Sociological Theory**  
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**Lecture 22**  
**Karl Marx and Alienation**

Welcome back to the class. In the previous sessions we concluded some discussions on Marxian critic on capitalism which is a very important theory and considered to be the central contribution of Karl Marx. And today we are going to discuss yet another very important and influential intervention of Karl Marx through his analysis of alienation.

This concept has really attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of scholars starting from political scientist, philosophers, sociologists and the host of other people. This is very important intervention of Karl Marx as his attempt to understand the human condition in the modern times.

This term alienation is still important because even in the contemporary era of late modernity, discussions about human beings feeling, and how they feel kind of estranged from their own society and feels worthless in this particular society is very important.

Human beings are not able to find meanings in their existence. These concerns are discussed and debated heavily even in the contemporary times. Of course this is not a term invented or discovered by Karl Marx, it is not his original contribution rather he improvised upon the Hegelian understanding of alienation. But the kind of a material take that Karl Marx provided to this particular understanding is quite interesting.

We will see that how Marx borrowed this particular idea. He was heavily influenced by Hegel especially during his youthful period and most of his writings of especially on alienation with its philosophical moorings are appear in the early career of Karl Marx. So it is a very fascinating theme.

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- Marx derived the concept from Hegel, transforming it from an essentially idealist to a materialist and critical concept.
- For Marx alienation is described as a process by which man is progressively turned into a stranger in the world his labour has created, a theme central to Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It is also the theme of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1838), which exercised a profound impact on Marx's early work, helping him to translate Hegel's idealist structures into materialist ones.



Marx derived the concept from Hegel transforming it from an essentially idealist to a materialist and critical concept. So this is one of the most important points that we need to keep in mind. This is not an original concern developed by Karl Marx in his youthful period. There were quite a lot of discussions and debates about this concept of alienation. But most of these discussions and debates were philosophical in its character, especially influenced by the arguments of Hegel, George Hegel whom we have discussed earlier.

Hegel understood alienation basically as an idealist concept, typically as what we have seen in the previous class, Marx was heavily influenced by Hegel but Marx provides a completely materialistic interpretation to that this particular term. So this kind of a subversion from an idealist understanding, Marx provides a very strong materialist explanation to this particular concept.

For Marx alienation is described as a process by which man is progressively turned into a stranger in the world that his labor has created, a theme similar to Hegel's phenomenology. Hegel explains it in his work phenomenology but for Marx what is the crucial aspect the life of human being is that human being is progressively turned into a stranger in the world in which he himself has created.

You must be by now familiar that Marx gives profound importance to human labor. He understands that the uniqueness of human beings lies in their ability to engage in labor. The world that we have seen today is the product of human life. But ironically in this world which is a creation of their own labor, human beings have become stranger.

Human beings do not feel comfortable in that. Human beings are not able to identify themselves with their own product and this according to Marx is a very difficult situation. So it is also the theme of Feuerbach's essence of Christianity which exercised a profound impact on Marx's earlier works, helping him to translate Hegel's idealist structures into materialist ones.

These two are the major influences on Marx. We will discuss Feuerbach's work on Christianity when we discuss Marxian critique of religion and of course the Hegelian understanding of alienation as elaborated in his work phenomenology.

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- For Hegel, alienation is the manifestation of 'unhappy consciousness'.



It refers to the finite individual self-consciousness, which mistakenly conceives of its own spiritual essence as being outside it and opposed to it. It regards itself as 'inessential', 'empty, worthless, devoid of true reality or significance.'



For Hegel, alienation is a manifestation of unhappy consciousness. This is a very important argument as in the case of any idealist. Hegel understood that lot of people human beings in this contemporary society feel estranged and feel distanced from their own world. But Hegel found the root cause as something lies in the consciousness of human being like that lies in the realm of ideas. So he understood alienation as a manifestation of an unhappy consciousness.

It refers to the finite individual's self-consciousness which mistakenly consists of its own spiritual essence as being outside it and opposed to it. It regards itself as inessential, empty, worthless devoid of true reality or significance. So here Hegel understands that the human beings are experiencing alienation because of the incapacity of the human being itself in order to understand the true essence.

So attaining this true essence is what Hegel understands as the epitome of human problems because for him the understanding human progress lies in the ability of human beings to reach some of the highest forms of consciousness. So it refers to the finite individual's self-consciousness which mistakenly consists of its own spiritual essence as being outside it understands it wrongly.

It is not able to realize its actual essence is a part of this finite's individual self-consciousness itself. It regards itself as inessential, empty, worthless, devoid of true reality or significance. So Hegel understands alienation as resulting from some kind of a faulty and incomplete understanding.

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- For Hegel, the unhappy consciousness is an important step in human history because for the first time the unhappy consciousness, 'spirit's particularity, in the form of individual human person first becomes an object of awareness.
- The alienation of the unhappy consciousness is just a matter of finite spirit's imperfect knowledge of its own infinite essence.



For Hegel unhappy consciousness is an important step in human history because for the first time in the unhappy consciousness, spirit's particularity in the form of an individual human person first becomes an object of awareness. So as we discussed in the previous class human, Hegel

understands this transformations of human society as a transformation realized through the advancements in the ability of human beings to think the kind of the better the development of various ideas that human beings are able to understand and then nurture it.

So Hegel understands this kind of development is an essential development. It is a necessary development because this is for the first time that the unhappy consciousness that is the spirit's particularity in the form of an individual proven person first becomes an object of awareness. So human beings try to reflect about this whole situation and then it becomes an object of awareness.

The alienation of the unhappy consciousness is just a matter of finite spirits imperfect knowledge of its own infinite essence. So ideally Hegel would argue that human beings is a part of the infinite essence or the higher spirit that he understands but the human beings are not able to really understand that. They are in kind of a false consciousness, as they are really not able to understand the true situation as per Hegelian understanding.

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- The only remedy for alienation is the attainment of a higher stage of self-knowledge, where God and humanity are seen to be fundamentally in harmony.



The only remedy for alienation is the attainment of a highest stage of self-knowledge where god and humanity are seen to be fundamentally in harmony. We discussed in the previous session that Hegel was a believer and his Hegel philosophy was heavily influenced by Christianity. So

for Hegel, a person will be able to come out of alienation only when he or she realizes the oneness of human being with that of the god.

The only remedy for alienation is attainment of a highest state of self-knowledge where god and humanity are seen to be fundamentally in harmony. So it is again that human beings are suffering and feeling a deep sense of entrenchment because they are not able to understand that in reality they and the god are essentially in harmony and they share the similar kind of spirit. So Hegel understands the root cause of alienation as residing in the inability of human beings to understand certain things again at the realm of ideas.

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- Hegelian idea that human beings are unable to realise their 'self actualisation' due to a series of negations in their existence.

- The idea was original of Hegel

- Feuerbach' theory of religious alienation

His critique of Hegel's notion of abstract spiritual world as it is similar to religion.

Established the anthropological explanation of religion.



Hegelian idea is that human beings are unable to realize their self-actualization due to a series of negations in their existence as in the case of his dialectical idealism. So this self-actualization is not yet realized and it is basically due to a series of negations in their existence. And of course this idea was original to Hegel and at the same time Marx also has a very interesting engagement with the Feuerbach, who was a very important scholar whom we mentioned when we discussed intellectual influences in Marxian life. So Feuerbach theory of religious alienation also heavily influenced by Hegel but Feuerbach also was not a believer he was critical of religion but there is a very interesting difference between Feuerbach's critique of religion and Marxian critique of religion which we will discuss in the coming session.

So Feuerbach criticizes Hegel's notion of an abstract spiritual world as it is similar to religion, and he established the anthropological explanation of religion. So Feuerbach did not believe in anything divine about the religion rather he used some kind of anthropological explanation on understanding why religion is a universal institution.

Why that every society you will find some or the other sort of religions. So he tried to provide an anthropological explanation of religion and did not agree with that of Hegelian understanding of religion.

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- Humans unwittingly project human essence to God, assign non-human qualities, makes human beings look imperfect in comparison, and lead a life in accordance to the regulations imposed by the God.
- ' Religion is thus the disuniting of human beings from themselves'.
- Marx's criticism of Feuerbach



According to Feuerbach, humans unwittingly project essence to god, assign non-human qualities that makes human beings look imperfect in comparison and lead a life in accordance to the regulations imposed by the god.

It is a very interesting explanation. So Feuerbach argues that human beings unwittingly project human essence to god. Assign non-human qualities, makes human beings look imperfect in comparison and live a life in accordance to the regulations imposed by the god. so Feuerbach argues that the human beings project human essence to both and also assign non-human qualities and all set of qualities that are beyond the purview of human beings are attributed to god.

God is omnipresent and he can decide people's life, he can completely define and then decide the destiny of each and every individual, he can control the nature. So a host of non-human qualities

and abilities are attributed to the God and then in comparison with the god you realize that you are very insignificant.

This idea make human beings look imperfect in comparison and lead a life in accordance to the regulations imposed by the world. In essence, this is a kind of an anthropological explanation on why that human beings require the figure of a god. Essentially Feuerbach is arguing that the human beings attribute these kind of non-human or super human abilities to god and then look down upon themselves and then lead a more regulated life imposed by the god.

Religion is the disuniting of human beings from themselves. So Feuerbach also is critical of religion, but the explanation is quite different. While Marx agrees with Feuerbach to a large extent because Marx does not agree with Hegelian's idealist argument and argues that religion does not have anything divine about it. Marx agrees with Feuerbach that it is a social phenomenon. But Marx also has his fair bit of criticism against Feuerbach.



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- Marx agrees with Hegel and Feuerbach that alienation is closely associated with certain kind of false consciousness about one's essence.
- Alienated consciousness laments that natural human life is alienated and it can be overcome if we place on it the right super natural interpretation.
- For Marx, unhappy consciousness tells the truth it laments, not in its consolations.



Marx agrees with Hegel and Feuerbach that alienation is closely associated with certain kinds of false consciousness about one's essence. Both Hegel and Feuerbach argues that people do not really understand the true reality. For Hegel, it is because they are not able to realize that they share the essence with the supreme spirit.

Whereas in the case of Feuerbach, human beings do not realize that the God is a creation of themselves. So Marx criticizes Feuerbach for not looking at the development of religion in a historical sense. Of course, this kind of what Feuerbach provides also is a kind of materialistic it is an anthropological explanation but it is not really rooted in a historicity.

So alienated consciousness laments that natural human life is alienated and it can be overcome if we place on the right supernatural interpretation. For Marx unhappy consciousness tells the truth and laments it, not in its consolations. It is a very interesting argument. Marx argues that alienated consciousness laments, which means it cries that the natural human life is alienated and it can be overcome only if we place it in the right supernatural interpretation.

We know that many human beings lead a very miserable life and especially the alienated people do not find any meaning or happiness in their life. They all the time lament about the lack of importance, lack of being able to find certain higher meanings in their life. So this alienated

consciousness lament that natural human life is alienated and it can be overcome if you place on it the right supernatural elaboration.

But for Marx, this unhappy consciousness which laments of about its own elimination, about its own sense of estrangement, its own sense of not being important, its own sense of not being able to identify with the world. So Marx argues that there is a truth and the feel of alienation is not a false consciousness or an illusion, rather real.

But the consolation that it tries to look for or the kind of consolation that it tries to achieve by falling in the feet of a god or its consolation by trying to appeal to the religion is not what is correct or that is a fundamentally wrong step as per Marx.

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- The Economic and Philosophic Manuscript-1844


Criticises Hegel for locating the 'oppositions' and 'negations' that causes the estrangement of man in abstract philosophical concepts and argued that they be located in the material world, especially the economic realities.



And in this work 'The economic and philosophical of manuscripts' of 1844, Marx criticizes Hegel for locating the oppositions and negations that cause the estrangement of man in abstract philosophical concepts and argues that they be located in the material world especially the economic realities.

Marx brings forth the his sharp materialistic argument that if a society in general are experiencing a sense of estrangement, if they experience a sense of not being worthy, then its root cause has to be analyzed in the in the material world especially in the economic realities and not in certain kind of realms of ideas or in beliefs.

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**Marxian notion of human nature**

Define themselves through their labouring activity.

Helps to exert control over nature

Source of human existence

Human self definition



Marx strongly argues that the reason for this sense of alienation must be sought in the material world, especially the economic realm and as we know that this goes along with the larger Marxian argument that the economic base is the one which actually provides the fundamental basis on which all other aspects of human society.

Now here Marx resorts to a kind of a larger philosophical explanation about human nature. So one of the most important aspects that Marx argues here is a discussion about what he understands as very essential nature of human beings. I have mentioned it several times what is that something demarcates human beings from other animals or other species what is something so unique about human beings.

And as per Marxian explanation it is their ability to labor, it is their ability their laboring activity that actually distinguishes human beings from other animals or other species in the world. Because human beings are not the fastest, they are not the strongest, and in terms of physical ability human beings are absolutely vulnerable.

There are hosts of other animals in the world who are much faster, much stronger but why that human beings are able to control the whole world? It is because their laboring activity and their ability to combine their intellect with that of the tools and ability to produce. So it helps to exert control over nature.

It is a source of human existence and it is also a very important source of human self-definition. So this laboring activity or the ability of human beings to produce certain things, according to Marx is something so fundamental to their self-definition. How a human being defines himself of herself is something so closely connected with the way in which he or she engage in this engages in this kind of a laboring act.

A typical Marxian explanation of the way in which the human beings work ,human beings engage in productive activities is something so central not only for meeting their basic requirements, but even to have a definitive sense of themselves definitely definition of themselves.

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- Marx defined alienation as a process whereby exchange values come to dominate use values, in which the worker increasingly defines historically specific capitalist social relations as natural and inescapable.



So Marx defines alienation as a process whereby exchange value comes to dominate use value in which the worker increasingly defines historically specific capitalist social relations as natural and inescapable. I hope you remember the discussion we had about exchange value and use value and he discusses that in the pre-capitalist economic transaction it was the use value which had more prominence whereas in the in the capitalist era it is the exchange value which continues to be the dominant one.

So Marx argues that if exchange value comes to dominate use value this is where he also develops his theory about the fetishism of commodities in which the worker increasingly defines historically specific capital social relations as natural and inescapable. So Marx argues that human beings define this particular period of capitalistic one as per Marxian argument that it is only a transient and temporary one.

It is not a permanent situation because Marx believed that capitalism will crumble under its own weight or due to its own contradictions and a new classless society will emerge, but the workers or the ordinary human beings do not consider it in that way. They consider it as natural and inescapable.

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## Alienation from Product



- Lack of ownership of means of production
- Product enters into a system of exchange, create no use value



Marx delineates couple of more specific ways in which human beings experience this alienation. Marx talks about alienation from the product. So one of the important points that we discuss so far is about especially about a capitalist system is that workers do not own the means of production. The means of production are owned completely by the bourgeoisie and workers are forced to sell their labor.

So in a capitalist system the workers do not own the means of production and the product enters into a system of exchange creates no use value. So you know this is something quite familiar to us and Marx gives example of a potter who owns the soil, who owns the potter's wheel, who is involved in the in the production of a pot by himself and he sells it to somebody and he is able to see how his product is being made use of the person.

That provides a deep sense of gratification, deep sense of satisfaction with the person who created it whereas in a capitalist era, a worker does not even know what he is producing because most of the time the worker must be producing a very a small fraction of a large product and his individual contribution in a large assembly right could be very minuscule. It will be extremely limited. So human beings are not able to identify themselves with the kind of product that they are producing.

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## Alienation from productive activity



- Lose control over the capacity of labouring activity to affirm their being and define their self-existence.
- Alienation with respect to the social relation of the worker to himself in the form of material satisfaction and to the outer world; to the history and society.



The other is the alienation from the productive activity. Marx argues that human beings lose control over the capacity of laboring activity to affirm their being and define their self-existence. This activity of producing certain thing is so central to Marxian argument. It is not a mechanical thing that you do just to get some money but Marx argues that human beings really identify themselves with the product of their labour. Human beings really discover themselves, define themselves in the process of this production.

But in a capitalist era human beings lose control over the capacity of laboring activity to affirm their being and define their self-experience. They are always their working condition is always decided by somebody else and alienation with respect to the social relations of the worker to himself in the form of material satisfaction and to the outer world but to the history and society. So there is an alienation with respect to the social relation of the worker to himself in the form of a material satisfaction and the outer world to the history and society.

Therefore, worker is not even able to do justice to himself. He is not able to do justice to his fellow society and to the history at large.

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• 'workers feel at home when they are not working and when they are working they are not at home'



'reversal of human and animal functions because the activities which human beings share with animals appeal more human than those activities which mark them off as human beings'



'Workers feel at home when they are not working and when they are working they are not at home'. It is a very interesting very powerful statement. Workers feel at home when they are not working. We know that this is true for quite a lot of people around. They do not really enjoy the work the work becomes a burden on them.

They really are frightened about the scenery of having to go to the work, spending a moment in the work is considered to be kind of punishment. So Marx says that this is the tragedy of human beings. Human beings should not be facing this great tragedy because by definition human being must be able to find a lot of enjoyment during their work.

If it is not happening there is something fundamentally wrong about our system. Workers feel at home when they are not working and when they are working they are not at home, the reversal of human and animal functions because the activities which human beings share with animals appeal more human than those activities which mark them off as human beings, again the extension of this argument he makes a comparison between human beings and animals.

When human beings do the kind of animal activities like sleeping or having food then human beings feel happier while human beings do certainly human acting such as productive activities they no longer feel human.



That is why there is a reversal of human and animal functions because the activities which human beings share with animals appeal more human than those activities which mark them off as human beings.

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## Alienation from species activity



- The species being- to indicate individual human being and the common essence of human kind.
- Humans not only belong to the same species, but being aware of it is distinctly unique to this species. 'we make our species our objects and behaves towards, is conscious of, or relates to himself as to the present living species'.



Then Marx also brings in a very interesting discussion about alienation from the species saturation. This is a very interesting take. Marx brings in this idea of the species being to indicate the individual human being and the common essence of humankind. Here Marx develops a kind of a philosophical argument that human beings as a species with a certain kind of an essence that demarcates human beings from other animals. So a species being, to indicate individual human being and the common essence of humankind. Humans not only belong to the same species but being aware of it is distinctly unique to the species.

We make our species of objects and behave towards is conscious of or relate to himself as to the present living species okay. So our existence in this world is not something mechanical. He argues that we identify ourselves as a member of the society and because of our unique ability. we are able to object this human society in a very objective manner and we make our species our objects and behave towards it because but we are being aware of its distinctly unique but being aware of it.

So it is not that we simply exist as human beings but we understand that we belong to this particular species and this particular species has a particular destiny. Destiny is not something given by the God but as per the Marxian argument that they are supposed to reach a much more better state of affairs, a state where there is nobody experience alienation, a state where there is no exploitation.

So we are able to identify ourselves and also able to look at the species as if they are the objects of our understanding.

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### Species consciousness and alienation

- Species consciousness as individual consciousness as well as humanity as a whole.
- Marx argues that human need to affirm, confirm and actualise one's human species-essence. This is based on an individual's satisfaction of a 'natural vocation'. It is the 'extent to which the human being as species being has become himself and grasped himself.'
- Alienation is thus the separation and estrangement of individuals from their *human essence*.



Now, the argument about species consciousness and alienation. So species consciousness means that so every human being has a consciousness about himself or herself and also about the consciousness as a humanity as a whole. So Marx argues that human beings needs to confirm and actualize one's human species essence. This is based on an individual satisfaction of a natural vocation. It is the extent to which the human beings as species being has become himself and grasped himself. Alienation is thus the separation and estrangement of individuals from the human essence.

So if human beings feel estranged from the product, from the for the activity and here Marx argues that human beings are even estranged from their species consciousness because of this very abject and miserable condition. Human being is not able even to realize their species

consciousness that he is able to identify himself with the larger society and then understand its historical role.

This is based on individual satisfaction of a natural location and this natural location is very hard to come by in a capitalist society. It is the extent to which the human being as a species being has become himself and grasp himself.

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- Alienation as the failure or inability to actualize one's human essential powers and this essential powers as being seen as the power of labour.
- The alienation of the working class is the alienation of the whole society :the exploitative relation between capital and labour seeps through the entire social structure and 'an inhuman power' rules everything.
- The promise of revolution and the end of alienation



Alienation is the failure or inability to actualize one's human essential powers and this essential power has been seen as the power of labor. So every laboring activity becomes a painful activity. The workers do not enjoy their work, rather they are exploited miserably and that prevents them from developing this kind of a species consciousness. The alienation of the working class is the alienation of the whole society. The exploitative relations between capital and labor seeps through their social structure and an inhuman power rules everywhere. So this alienation of the working class is the alienation of the poor society.

That is what Marx argues repeatedly. You cannot understand the plight of workers as their own problem because, as per Marx, workers, really represent the essence of humanity. And the alienation of working class is the alienation of the whole society. The exploitative relation between capital and labor seeps through the entire social structure and civil society

Marx imagines a time when a worker works for eight hours, sleeps for eight hours and then the other remaining eight hours he spends in very important intellectual activity activities, he reads, he goes for fishing and so on. In such a state of affairs, he is able to develop as a full human being and not somebody who feels estranged and exploited.

The promise of the revolution is for Marx is a promise of escape from the perpetual situation of alienation. So this particular take of Marx towards alienation has been extremely influential. And you know when capitalism assumes different character we understand that the working condition, the situation of the workers it no longer better when you look at the way in which people work in some of the some of the late capitalist societies.

The work has been seen as highly alienating. You work only because you need to feel yourself and need to take care of some of your very basic activities. You no longer enjoy it. You do not even know what you are doing, even this all examples calls in the workplace is often seen as an extreme example of that.

Take the call centre employees as an example, they have to work in the night schedules and they have to pretend a couple of different accents and to speak to people whom they do not even see. So these are our highly alienating experience as per the Marxian argument. So this materialist turn that Marx provided has been extremely influential in the whole concept of alienation, something developed by Hegel and then further developed by Feuerbach. So we will conclude this session and then we will continue next. Thank you.