

SOCIOLOGY—A CLOSER LOOK

The Theory of Alienation

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Sociology—A Closer Look examines sociological issues in greater detail by examining concepts and historical events more thoroughly. While the sections contain some new concepts, they focus more on the understanding and application of concepts and approaches. Each section has a set of learning goals similar to your chapter objectives. These learning goals will guide your reading to help you prepare for exams.

Learning Goals

At the end of this section, students should be able to:

- Explain the three crucial elements of species being.
- Tie these three elements to the forms of alienation.
- Explain how working for wages is tied to alienation.
- Explain the four forms of alienation.
- Understand downtime and job spill.

To understand how our world operates, whether it is the physical world or the social world, we have to develop frameworks to organize our understanding. These frameworks are rooted in the observation and testing of the world in which we live. Based on these observations and testing, we develop **theory** as a means to document the conclusions we derive from observing and testing our world. Theory may mean something different to scientists than it does to others. You may have heard someone exclaim, “Oh, that’s just a theory!” to indicate that someone’s conclusions are questionable. Theory in its general use is oftentimes confused with an “educated guess.” Scientific theories are subject to change over time as new evi-

dence presents itself, but they are rooted in scientific observation and testing that provide a great deal of certainty about the subject being studied.

To better learn how theories help us understand the world around us, we are going to look at the theory of alienation, which attempts to explain why jobs in our contemporary economic system, capitalism, can be unfulfilling. The theory of alienation is also a great example of how to tie people's daily life to the broader social circumstances, the goal of the sociological imagination. The author of the theory connects the individual worker's experience to the broader social conditions of the economic system.

Before we discuss the theory of alienation, it is necessary to understand how the author of the theory, Karl Marx, viewed work and what it meant to be a fully developed person. Both Marx and Engels (Engels 1940; Marx 1971) contemplated the nature of people in the context of people's evolution and development over time. For both of these authors, the core essence of people, or "species being" as Marx (1971:112-114) called it, developed as people interacted with the environment to meet their needs collectively. As we manipulated the environment with our hands, we also put our minds to use solving problems. Our hands and physical nature evolved with our minds in concert with each other. We did not interact with the environment as individuals, but as a group. In this

way, our ability to speak evolved with our minds and our bodies. As a result of the development of our minds, our physical body and our ability to speak, we developed language and social groups. This evolutionary process is the origin of our core essence, our species being.

For Marx and Engels, the **species being** of people is to produce things with our hands using our creativity in a social context. Thus, there are three elements to species being: when we are making something, we are 1) using our hands, 2) using our minds, 3) and working in a social context. We want to be proud of the things we make, whether they be furniture, poems, or produce from the garden. We want to be creative to solve our own problems and use our mind actively. We also desire social interaction and to meet our needs through other people (Marx 1971:114). Productive, mentally enriching work in a social context is central to what it means to be a fully developed person. In other words, work should be fun, like making a meal for a friend's celebration, restoring a vintage car, or stitching a family quilt. While we may have developed this species being over time, capitalism tends to strip the fun out of work.

According to Marx, within capitalism, there are two broad classes: those that own property and those who work for those that own property. Those that own property make a living by paying other people wages for their work. Property owners are

called **bourgeoisie** and own the means of production. **Means of production** is a fancy phrase that means the buildings, machines, land, and equipment necessary to generate revenue for the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie may own factories, technology companies, restaurants, etc. If you do not own your own business, typically, you have to work for wages. If you must work for wages to survive, you are part of the **proletariat**.

According to Marx, this

Source: Nina Hale



What would be some of the hurdles a member of the proletariat would have to overcome to start, own and run a factory?

arrangement makes it difficult for the proletariat to realize their species being. Because they must rely on others for wages, the proletariat has its species being stripped away under capitalism. Work becomes something onerous and life-draining instead of something enriching that people find valuable to themselves and others. “More and more workers feel that their jobs lack any meaning and value beyond the utilitarian function of providing them with a paycheck” (Gini 2000:49). Because business owners control the process of producing our needs, the creative and social aspect of producing something is separated from workers. Marx refers to this process as alienation or estrangement (Marx 1971). You can think of alienation as separation from our core essence, our species being. Although authors (Mészáros 1970; Stanfield 1979) differ on the number of forms of alienation Marx outlined, this chapter will discuss four: product, process, others, and species being.

Alienation from Product

The first form of alienation is the **alienation from product**. Early in our evolutionary development, we engaged the environment directly, and met our needs from nature’s elements (Marx 1971:112-113). We had a direct connection to nature and to the things we produced because we made them and knew them intimately. We worked stone, wood, and other resources and knew how to shape them to meet our needs.

Under capitalism, we no longer engage the environment directly. First, when we interact with products in a factory, we do not develop a connection to them because they are not ours, but are owned by the factory owners. Second, we do not go into nature to create the things that we need. We purchase them in the market and do not understand how they relate to nature. As Marx states, the worker is alienated from the product of their labor in a two-fold manner. “First in that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to [workers’]...to be [their]...*means of life*; and secondly, in that it more and more ceases to be *means of life* in the immediate sense, means

for the physical subsistence of the worker” (Marx 1971:109 italics in original).

In the first sense, alienation from product is the fact that owners now control the product. We do not develop a sense of connection to the things we make because someone else owns the product. Think of it this way: When you make something for yourself or someone that you know, it usually is more personal and meaningful to the person who gives it and the person who receives it. When we make things in a factory or in a fast food restaurant, we do not develop the same kind of relationship with the product. If you are working at a fast food restaurant making hamburgers, your attitude toward them would be different than if you were making them at home for friends. You may not try to excel in making the hamburger, “Wow, that is the best burger I ever made! Look at the pickle placement! Just the right amount of mustard and ketchup! Perfect! This customer is really going to love it!” More than likely, you will be trying to assemble them as quickly as possible. This is alienation from product. You do not take pride in the product that you produce because you do not identify with it.

In the second sense, what we produce with our work is not necessarily what we need to survive. For example, if you produce shoes in a factory, you do not necessarily need all the shoes you eventually produce. What you need is the wages to purchase the other things you need. Thus, we produce a single product to earn wages to purchase the things that we need. By relying on the market to meet our needs, we view purchased products differently than if we created them ourselves. The products we purchase tend to be less meaningful to us than those that we make ourselves. For example, if you go through the effort of crafting your own shelves to hold the books in your house, you will be more likely to show someone your handy work. If you buy cheap shelving units at the discount store, you are not likely point that out to your friends. Products that we purchase at the store do not have any connection to us. We do not identify with them because we did not make them.

Another issue that arises from alienation from product is when we enter the market to meet our

needs, the products appear magical. Just as the people who make the products are alienated, so are the people who buy them. The products that people buy take on a life of their own and “appear alien” to the purchaser (Marx 1971:108). We do not understand them because they are not our products, but produced by someone else without knowing what our real needs are. “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of [people’s] labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (Marx 1977a:77). What Marx means here is that the work that went into making the product is hidden from view because we do not know the people who made the product (we will discuss this below as alienation from others).

that went into producing it, what components are in it, or how it may affect us. Similarly, we surround ourselves with objects that are supposed to meet our needs, but we do not know if they will be harmful to us. For example, some people cover their lawns with a toxic mixture of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Yet, research suggests agricultural workers have higher rates of cancers due to exposure to these substances and others (National Cancer Institute 2011). Will the quest for a green lawn give the people who use these chemicals, or their neighbors, cancer and, ultimately, shorten their lives? We focus on the “magical” qualities of a green lawn, but do not consider the effect on ourselves and others to achieve this perfect, weed-free, green lawn.

One last point deals with the fact that we tend to be debilitated by the products we produce. Business owners tend not to care about our health in order to produce the maximum profit. As a result, people’s



Source: Andy Piper

When looking over your clothing tags, do you ever think about the people that made the clothes you wear?

Marx (1977a:77) calls the mystical and hidden nature of producing something the “**fetishism of commodities.**” Because we cannot perceive the labor that went into the product, we assume the product contains these qualities naturally, like water is wet or stone is hard. Someone had to work long hours under conditions that can be very difficult to produce many of our products, but the functions of the product appear to us mystically in our local store. When we see a cell phone, we are fascinated by all its features, but we do not know all the work

health tends to be degraded as they work. Think of physical labor, sports teams like football, working with hazardous substances, mining, etc. Marx states, “The worker[s] become all the poorer the more

wealth [they] produce, the more [their] production increases in power and size. The worker[s] become ever cheaper commodit[ies] the more commodities [they] create” (Marx 1971:107). As workers destroy their bodies in the process of making a product, they are producing wealth for the business owner.

As a graphic example of this principle, my brother fell twenty feet when his lift was hit by a crane just days before I wrote this section of the chapter. He suffered bruises and injured ligaments in his leg, but was not killed. Prior to that, he had a

nerve moved in his arm as a result of an injury to his elbow. He also has nerve problems in his neck, most likely due to the repetitive motion used to swing his welding helmet into position. His health problems are the direct result of his job producing roadmaking equipment used to create the nation's highways. The corporation's profit is directly tied to my brother's debilitation as he produced the product sold by the company. He is legally, partially disabled as a result of his job, making him "ever cheaper" as a potential worker.

According to Marx (1971:107), the wealth of corporations is predicated on the debilitation of workers like my brother. Thus, when you drive on roads built with the machines made by my brother and his fellow workers, you do not think of all of the misery, and even death, that is embodied in the creation of that road. Their debilitation is embodied in the products that they make. For Marx, workers put their lives into their products, literally (recently, a man was cooked alive in a pressure oven meant to sterilize tuna (CBS and Associated Press 2015), and alienation from product hides this fact from the people who purchase or use the product.

Alienation from Process

The second form of alienation is **alienation from process**. While the first form of alienation is from nature and the actual commodity itself, the second form deals with *how* the product is produced. The first form deals with the labor aspect, while the second form deals with the mental or creative aspect of producing a product. Alienation from process is the alienation from the ability to be creative in meeting our needs. Someone else has taken control of how we meet our needs, so we are not needed to think or be creative.

Marx and Engels argue that what makes us so unique is our ability to use our mind to solve the problem of meeting our needs. We can think about what we want to do before we actually do it. "At the end of every labor-process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally" (Marx 1977d:284). As Engels states, "In short, the animal

merely *uses* external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by [its] presence; [people] by [their] changes makes it serve [their] ends, *masters* it. This is the final essential distinction between [people] and other animals, and once again it is labor that brings about this distinction" (Engels 1940:291 italics in original).

Unfortunately, this creative process is taken away from us by capitalist wage labor. "This relation is the relation of the worker to [the person's] own activity as an alien activity not belonging to [the person]" (Marx 1971:111). The labor performed under capitalism is not life affirming activity, but "an activity which is turned against [the worker]" (Marx 1971:111). Instead of workers using their own creative powers and acting on the product in a way they govern, workers have no control over meeting their own needs. Under capitalist production, the act of labor is not a "spontaneous" activity belonging to the worker, but an onerous, life draining loss of productive energies to another, the capitalist (Marx 1971:111,116).

There are two issues here. First, we do not use our own creativity to solve the problem of meeting our needs. Instead of being creative ourselves, we drift, unthinking, into the market where we purchase items. Someone else has determined what our needs are, stripping us of the ability to use our own creativity. The film, "The Story of Stuff" makes this connection directly. According to Annie Leonard (Fox 2007), people's happiness has declined as consumption of products has increased. Because people are alienated from the production of goods to meet their needs, they derive little satisfaction from the goods they buy in the market. But, the market is the only means people have to satisfy their needs, so they feel increasingly compelled to try to find happiness in products that do not meet the creative aspect of our species being.

Second, workers tend not to determine how their job is performed in the contemporary capitalist system. We have owners, managers, supervisors, engineers, and technicians that all tell us how to do our job. We become mere unthinking appendages to the machines. We do not use our creativity to carry out our duties. We tend to push buttons, stock

shelves, say the same greeting, etc. and do not come up with solutions or ideas to help produce the product. Much of what people tend to hate about their jobs is the fact that they have little control over their work. Alienation from process includes working in a job where you have little chance for advancement, your superiors do not respect your contributions, and you have little room for creativity. If people are not able to use their creativity because they are in low-skill jobs, they are less satisfied with the work they do (Gini 2000:55). Marx would argue this is because their creativity is alienated from them. They are alienated from process. If you are stuck in dead-end jobs or have no control over your work, it can affect your well-being. “Mental health was poor among those workers who felt that they had no chance to use their abilities” (Gini 2000:55).

If you think of the typical job, workers have a number of managers who tell them what to do and how to do it. Managers will tell workers how much work they expect them to accomplish. With technology like email, some employers now expect workers to answer email and work at home after they have completed a full day at the office (Fraser 2001:18-19). Instead of being able to spend time with family and friends, work creeps into the time typically spent socializing with others. **Job spill** is a term used to describe the fact that work is no longer confined to the office, but follows workers home. Workers answer emails during their commute, finish projects on the weekends, and answer work calls on their cell phones during vacation (Fraser 2001:24-27). Because workers meet their needs by earning wages, they cannot determine when they work and for how long.

Factory workers also face a lack of creativity. Assembly line work is incredibly repetitive and monotonous.

Because workers could be injured by not paying attention to their work, they have to go into **downtime** where they do not think about anything but the job they are doing. They become like robots, performing functions “that must be done but that does not add to who they are” (Gini 2000:50). Downtime is a good example of alienation from process because the mental aspect of working is completely stripped away. Workers on an assembly line must dehumanize themselves by becoming robot-like in their thoughts. Instead of something that brings creative joy and fulfillment, work is a mindless task that must be done.

Alienation from Others

The third form of alienation is alienation from others. In our historical development, we have become social beings, but that tends to be stripped away from us in contemporary society. “[M]y *own* existence *is* social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being” (Marx 1971:137 italics in original). We are first and foremost social beings. We developed over time to meet our needs with other people and to interact



Source: Jenny Downing

Have you ever had a job that issued you a cell phone that they expected you to keep by your person at all times in case they wanted to contact you?

with others. We developed societies, worked cooperatively to carry out tasks such as gathering, raising children, hunting, and socializing.

In our contemporary capitalist system, **alienation from others** means this social nature is stripped away from us in our work. When we work, a lot of our work is as an individual, separated from others in our office, factory, or restaurant. We may work with other people, but we are isolated from each other to focus on individualized tasks. By focusing on individualized tasks, it makes it easier for the owner and managers to control the pace of our labor and their ability to make profit. Just as we do not use our creativity, we do not work together to solve problems. Again, we tend to be mere appendages carrying out our specific tasks without being able to communicate and socialize with others. This, to Marx, takes away part of our essential nature—what it means to be a person. “In fact, the proposition that [people’s] species nature is estranged from [them] means that one [person] is estranged from the other, as each of them is from [people’s] essential nature” (Marx 1971:114).

not know the farmers that grow our food. We do not know the factory workers that produce our clothes and electronics. We earn wages and then go to the store to meet our needs. We tend to minimize our interaction with others when meeting our needs. We do not know the people at the stores where we buy our goods. In some cases, self-checkout lines allow us to buy our goods without ever interacting with another human being.

We are also separated from others in the marketplace and at work in another way. We do not view each other as people, but simply as workers. Marx puts it this way, “Hence within the relationship of estranged labor [people] view the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which [they] finds [themselves] as worker[s]” (Marx 1971:115). In other words, we do not treat each other as people, but treat each other as objects. You can think of how customers treat the servers at restaurants. You can also think of how customers treat people at the customer service desk. If something goes wrong, many people yell condescendingly at the workers in these jobs. We tend to treat them very poorly because we do not know them personally. If they were family, or we knew them well, we would tend to act differently. Because we do not know them personally, we are able to treat them as if they were objects and not people. Since we are very individualized in our tasks, we tend not to see our fellow workers as people, either.



Source: Eric Martinen

In what ways do the use of cubicles contribute to alienation from others?

Under the contemporary economic arrangements, relations between people become relations between people and things (Marx 1977a:78). We no longer directly meet our needs through other people. We do

Alienation from Species Being

All of these forms of alienation combine to form the final alienation—alienation from species being. Marx felt that our core essence was to be social, thinking people who produced things from nature to meet their needs. “The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is [people’s] species character” (Marx 1971:113). We spent the greatest part of our historical development in social groups, interacting with nature to meet our needs by using our creativity to solve problems. We created tools, built shelters, and developed

language. We did all of these things as a social group. As we did these things, we changed our very nature. “Through this movement [people] act upon external nature and change it, and in this way [people] simultaneously change [their] own nature” (Marx 1977d:283).

We are who we are because we interact with nature in a social context to meet our needs. We can see how societies differ from each other based on how they interact with the environment. This process is central to social development. When the species being is constrained by capitalist wage labor, people become alienated from their central essence. People become alienated from their very selves when they suffer **alienation from species being**. What it means to be a person is stripped away. “How could worker[s] come to face the product of [their] activity as stranger[s], were it not that in the very act of production [they were] estranging [themselves] from [themselves]?” (Marx 1971:110). They are no longer interacting with nature, and thus are no longer in control of their own needs. Marx states, “It estranges from [people their] own body” (Marx 1971:114). What he means here is that people are alienated both from nature and from themselves. He referred to nature as people’s inorganic body in that nature is part of them. When we do not engage nature directly, we have alienated ourselves from nature.

Alienation from our species being can become so bad that we are reduced to an animal-like state. “Estranged labor tears from [them their] *species life*, [their] real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms [their] advantage over animals into the disadvantage that [their] inorganic body, nature, is taken away from [them]” (Marx 1971:114 italics in original). We are so debilitated by labor in a capitalist system that we find pleasure in functions we hold in common with animals. Labor can be so mentally and physically debilitating that we cannot function as people anymore. We are exhausted, so we do not want to think, be social, or make anything. The notion that all we want to do is to throw something in microwave, space out, and then go to bed is a perfect example of this level of alienation. If we only find pleasure in things that

animals can do such as sleeping, eating, or having sex, we have become truly alienated from our species being.



Source: Steven Depolo

Do you think most people feel connected with their products and the people around them at work or are they mainly there for the money? What steps could be implemented to decrease workers’ sense of alienation?

Alienation and Jobs

These forms of alienation are not mutually exclusive, and Marx did not try to separate them when he discussed them. I have tried to separate them for you so they are easier to understand. Many times these forms of alienation operate together and reinforce each other. We must also notice that not all jobs are as alienating, and we can find examples where people may have more control over the product, process, and relations with others. For example, people who work as physical trainers may have many of the aspects of species being. Physical trainers work directly with others when they help develop training programs for them. Physical trainers are able to be creative to come up with the best training plans for their customers. They also have a connection to their products because they may be able to see the health gains of the people they are training. For these reasons, they should be more fulfilled in their species being.

However, we can also see how some occupations that may seem less alienated may actually have significant alienation. For example, we can think of

musicians. They are intimately tied to their product, their songs. They also have creative control over the process because they get to write their own music. They have a product that they created themselves and have a great deal of control over the process of writing songs and their content. They interact with their fans and produce their music for others. Now, if we look at the music business, we can see how some of these things may be taken away from them. While they are able to write their own music, record producers shape their songs to fit their idea of what is best for marketing purposes. They may actually have to write particular types of songs if they want to retain their recording contract. Touring may not really allow for much true interaction between musicians and the public. While the process of making music may be less alienating at a certain level, once musicians enter the music business, they must give up a certain degree of control over the product, process, and their connection to others.

Alienation and the Sociological Imagination

The sociological imagination demands that we understand people's biography in the larger social context. The concept of alienation is a perfect example of the use of the sociological imagination. The larger social context is wage labor under capitalism. People's biography is rooted in the broader social context of working for wages. Since capitalism requires one class of people to work for others, individuals often find their lives less fulfilling because their species being is stripped away from them in the process. By examining capitalism in our society, we are able to see why people may not like their jobs. Do they have control over the process of their work? Are they committed to their products? What kind of relationships do they have with others either as customers, clients, or workers? If you are able to understand what makes people feel more fulfilled in their occupations, you may be able to find a job that has less alienation. As a manager, you may be able to increase worker morale and productivity if you are able to give them

more control of the process. By understanding that alienation is a concept that ties people's biography and lived experience to the social context, we can better understand the problems of worker satisfaction in our society.

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| Alienation from Product |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People do not interact with nature to meet their needs.• Business owners own the products workers make.• Products appear magical because we do not create them ourselves (fetishism of commodities).• As people produce products, they are debilitated. |
| Alienation from Process |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People do not use their own creativity to meet their needs.• Workers do not determine how their jobs are carried out. |
| Alienation from Others |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People are separated from others to focus on individual tasks.• Relationships between people become relationships between people and things.• People do not view each other as people, but as workers. |
| Alienation from Species Being |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What it means to be a fully developed person is taken away.• People are reduced to their animal-like functions. |

Key Terms

Alienation from others means the social nature is stripped away from us in our work. We may work with other people, but we are isolated from each other to focus on individualized tasks.

Alienation from process is alienation from the ability to be creative in meeting our needs. Someone else has taken control of how we meet our needs, so we are not needed to think or be creative.

Alienation from product is an alienation when we do not develop a connection to the products we make because they are not ours, but owned by the factory owners. Second, we are alienated from product because we do not interact with nature to create the things that we need.

Alienation from species being occurs when people become alienated from their very selves. What it means to be a person is stripped away.

Bourgeoisie are in Marx's view those who own the means of production, i.e., factories and land, giving these people greater power and influence in society.

Downtime is when workers do not think about anything but the job they are doing. They become like robots, performing functions by focusing only on the job they must do.

Fetishism of commodities is the result of not being able to perceive the labor that went into the product. We think products are magical and assume the product contains these qualities naturally.

Job spill is a term used to describe the fact that work is no longer confined to the office, but follows workers home.

Means of production are the buildings, machines, land, and equipment necessary to generate revenue for the bourgeoisie, i.e. business owners.

Proletariat are those in Marx's view who live by selling their labor in a capitalistic economic system, i.e., anyone who is employed by someone else.

Species being is the core essence people developed over time to produce things with their hands using their creativity in a social context.

Theory is a set of ideas that proposes to explain how certain facts or phenomena are related to each other in an effort to better understand the relationship between those facts and predict additional relationships between similar facts or phenomena.

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