UNIT 9: KARL MARX: THEORY OF ALIENATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to–

- understand the meaning of alienation
- explain the nature of alienation
- identify Karl Marx's four aspects of alienation.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx's theory of alienation appeared in his early writing "*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*" (1844) also known as "*Paris Manuscripts*". However, the work remained unpublished during his lifetime and was published for the first time in 1932. The theory of alienation is discussed in the section entitled "*Estranged Labour*". "*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts"* was a series of notes where Marx was trying to provide a critical analysis on newly emerging economic system i.e. capitalism. He came up with the theory of alienation, particularly alienation of workers, which according to him is an objective condition inherent in the capitalist economic system. According to Marx, alienation can be found in four aspects: workers alienation from the products they produce, alienation from the productive

activity, alienation from "species being" or "human potential" and finally alienation from fellow workers. In the previous unit we have learnt about Marx's theory of Surplus Value. In this unit we shall discuss his theory of Alienation.

9.3 MEANING OF ALIENATION

Generally, alienation refers to phenomenon such as isolation, detachment, distance, separation, division, cutting off etc. However, it is a multidisciplinary concept and widely used in different social sciences-sociology, political science, philosophy, and psychology and so on. The term alienation has diverse meaning and is being used in different contexts. Therefore, while discussing alienation, contextualisation is important. Gajor Petrovic in "*A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*" edited by Tom Bottomore, stated that the term has been used in various forms, for instance, "in everyday life, in the sense of turning or keeping away from former friends or associates; in economy and law, as a term for the transfer of property from one person to another (buying and selling, stealing, making a gift); in medicine and psychiatry, as a name for deviation from normality, insanity". Likewise, Clarence Y.H. Lo. stated, "alienation can also refer to the isolation of individuals from a community– a detachment from the activities, identifications, and ties that a community can provide".

In *UNESCO Dictionary of Social Sciences*, alienation is defined as "an estrangement or separation between parts or the whole of the personality and significant aspects of the world of experience. (1) Within this general denotation the term may refer to– (a) an objective state of estrangement or separation; (b) the state of feeling of the estranged personality; (c) a motivational state tending towards estrangement. (2) The separation denoted by the term may be between– (a) the self and the objective world; (b) the self and aspects of the self that have become separated and placed against the self, e.g. alienated labour; (c) the self and the self. However, although, the definition provide overall understanding of the concept, it appeared to be more on personality; therefore the definition, what Igor S. Kon called as "far

from all-embracing"; interpretation of alienation does not stick to individual level, focus also need to be towards "collectiveness".

Gajo Petrovic defined, Karl Marx's notion of alienation, as, "an action through which (or a state in which) a person, a group, an institution, or a society becomes (or remains) alien (1) to the results or products of its own activity (and to the activity itself), and/or (2) to the nature in which it lives, and/or (3) to other human beings, and- in addition and through any or all of (1) to (3)- also (4) to itself (to its own historically created human possibilities)".

Because of phenomenal complexities associated with the concept of alienation, Eldon L. Wegner, in his article "*The Concept of Alienation: A Critique and Some Suggestions for a Context Specific Approach"* (1975) suggested for a contextual approach. According to him while analysing alienation one must take into account four vital issues:

1) the nature of man underlying the concept of alienation.
2) whether alienation is a general orientation toward the social order or a set of context specific attitudes,
3) whether there are a set of general conditions which cause alienation, and
4) whether alienation is a unidimensional or a multidimensional phenomenon, meaning whether there are different kinds of alienated persons.

9.4 NATURE OF ALIENATION

As already mentioned, that in order to discuss the concept of alienation, it is important to contextualise in which the term is being used. Igor S. Kon in "*The Concept of Alienation in Modern Sociology*" (1967) provided some of the important nature of alienation, as summarized below:

Firstly, alienation as a phenomenon is associated to human problem. However, it is vital to make a distinction between individual and collectiveness. Some authors hold alienation as individual phenomena, while others try to provide a "holistic" approach. Thus, while the Marx's concept of alienation is concerned, it does not limit to a single individual or a single worker. It is associated with the whole social class (particularly the working class) those

who are alienated in the capitalist economic system. Subsequently, like Marx's analysis, one or another social group can be presented in form of alienation for instance, alienation of "ethnic minorities" from rest of the society. "However", Kon stated, "the discussion of the problems of a separate individual that stem from the specific features of his personal private existence is far from being the same thing as discussion of the problems of a specific social group, problems which derive from the group's social status, or, finally, discussion of the problems of human life generally".

Secondly, since alienation is a multidimensional phenomenon, thus the individuals may alienate from various different aspects. Thus, the answers to question– from what individuals are alienated? becomes complicated. Therefore, contextualization becomes important. In Marx's alienation of labour, it incorporates alienation from products the labourer produce, alienation from the productive activity, from "species being" or human potential and from fellow workers. Likewise, Marvin Scott provided alienation from four aspects from values, norms, roles and facilities. Those, who regard alienation as socio-psychological phenomena, denotes it as inner conflict in the individual mind who feels incapable of realizing aims set.

Thirdly, the manifestation of alienation, like the other natures, is so broad that it is difficult to come with a specific conclusion. Kon stated "The concrete answers to this question are so varied that it is altogether impossible to reduce them to a system." However, the main point Kon wanted to make was, whether alienation is "objective" or "subjective" in nature. Many scholars believe that alienation is purely psychological and subjective state of mind i.e. feeling. Ericand Mary Josephson view alienation as "an individual feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others, and from the world at large". Likewise, Melivin Seeman from socio-psychological standpoint explained alienation as the expression of individual feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness and so on. Contrary to this, others believe that, alienation is not only a subjective feeling, rather an objective fact. Marx, for instance, did not see alienation merely as an attitude or subjective feeling; for him alienation of labour is an objective expression and activity experienced in the capitalist economic system.

Fourthly, depending upon the situations under which alienation is expressed, the causes of alienation also vary. Some maintain individual psychological factor, like "neurosis", as causes for individual alienation, while some others, view certain socio-economic aspects– division of labour, private property, etc. as causes of alienation.

Fifthly, alienation usually refers to an undesirable condition, which needs to overcomed or "de-alienation". Depending upon the types and causes, different means or ways have been suggested to overcome alienation. Those who regard alienation as the result of personal internal conflict or individual psychological disturbance, suggest for individual's moral effort or to alter the appropriate personal attitudes. However, those who regard alienation as product of social causes, suggest for changing the social conditions under which alienation has emerged. In Marx's analysis the soul cause of alienation is the private property, thus it can be overcomed only through abolition of private property.

Kon sums up that "when speaking of man's alienation and describing its symptoms, different authors mean totally different things. They differ not only in the answers, but even in the very approach to the problem".

9.5 CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Karl Marx developed the theory of alienation in his early writing "Economic and Philosophical Manuscript", in response to newly emergent economic system i.e. capitalism. Marx was very much concerned about the working condition present in the capitalist economic system. Marx asserted that human being in order to survive and meet their needs must engage in productive activities. According to Marx, human beings who engage in conscious and free life activity, has an innate potential to appropriate the nature and recreate in accordance with their needs. They produce goods, with their will and consciousness, which is the "objectification" of their labour; therefore, 'labour" is the vital component of human being; it is the essence of human nature- "species being". It is through the labour or the productive potential human express as "species being".

However, under capitalism, the essence of human nature is perverted, what Marx would call "alienation". Marx sought to analyse the causes and consequences of alienation, which he sees as one of the vital problem existing within the capitalist economic system. Under capitalism, the labour is no longer seen as true expression of "species being" or "human potential". Instead, labour is seen as a mere tool for the capitalists, whom the capitalists use for their own benefit. Karl Marx sees alienation as an objective phenomenon inherent in the social and economic relations of capitalist production. Therefore, the aspects associated with capitalism- class division, private property, division of labour, money economy etc, would be crucial analytical concern for alienation, which are also major causes for alienation:

Firstly, private property is the prime characteristic of capitalism, under capitalism, broadly, two classes presents– a minority owners class (capitalists) who possess the means of productions and a majority non-owner class (wage labourers) who possess nothing but their labour. Since, the working class possess no means of production, they have to depend on the capitalists for their survival; in doing so they sell their labour power and time to the capitalist for wage. Thus, the capitalists are owner of the "labour" that the workers have i.e. alienating workers from their own labour.

Secondly, since the means of production are privately owned, the capitalists also arrange and manage the production activities. The workers have to work according to the terms and conditions of the management. They don't have the choice to freely use their own creative potentials. Thus, the management itself is an important factor for the alienation of the workers from productive activities.

Thirdly, division of labour, which is an important characteristic of capitalist economic system, is also regarded as a cause of alienation. Division of labour fragments the individuals and allott them different specific tasks; as a result, the work often becomes repetitive and thus the workers are left out from many other potential of human nature. Moreover, in an assembly line system, no workers would have absolute claim over a final product. Since, in assembly line method, workers are engaged in different specific tasks, combination of which provides the final product; thus individual workers cannot claim the final product as his individual creation.

Lastly, but not the least, in capitalist economy, money is the predominant power; money is not only a medium of exchange, but also essence of alienation. "Money", Marx asserted, "is the alienated essence of man's work and existence; this essence dominates him and he worships it". Money becomes the medium through which "qualitative" aspects of labour are measured in terms of "quantities" i.e. "how much?". Under capitalism labour, no more expresses the essence of human creative nature, "species beings" of "human potential", it merely becomes an instrument of earning money for physical existence. In other words, workers work not for creative potential but for money.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: What do you understand by Alienation?

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Q.2: In which of his work did Marx discuss his theory of Alienation?

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9.6 FOUR ASPECTS OF ALIENATION

Karl Marx identified four aspects of alienation under capitalism, they are:

- **Alienation from the Products:** The first aspect of alienation according to Marx is the worker's alienation from the products they produce. In the capitalists economic system, the workers sell their labour power to the capitalists for which they are paid with wage. As the workers are paid, they have to work for the capitalists; in doing so the workers produce commodities. The commodities or the objects which the workers produce is the "objectification" of their labour power. However, although the workers produce the

commodities it does not belong to the workers, it belongs to someone else i.e. the capitalist. The workers lose control over their own products. “If workers wish to own the product of their own labour”, as Ritzer mentioned, “they must buy it like anyone else”. Since the worker has no control over his own products– it becomes something alien as a power, independent of the producer. The very object, which the workers produce, becomes instrument for their own oppression. That is, the products are taken away from the workers and sold for profit, in doing so the capitalists enhance their capital. In short, more the workers produce, more richer becomes the capitalists; and more the capitalists become richer, more power they have over the workers.

- **Alienation from Productive Activity:** The second type of alienation is present in the production activity itself. Marx argued, “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”. Human as creative being has potential to produce goods with their labour power. However, under capitalist system, the production process is controlled by the capitalists; the capitalists manage and dictate what to produce, how to produce, when to produce and where to produce. While on the other hand, the workers sell their labour power and part of their time, to the capitalists. Thus, the workers have to engage in the working situations provided by the capitalists. They are not free to choose what to work, when to work or where to work. It is the employers or the capitalists who decide what to produce and what not to produce, when to work and when not to work, how to work and how not to work so and so forth. In other words, the capitalists or the employers will be the masters over workers productive activities.

  Under such condition the workers merely use their talents, they do not produce objects from their own ideas, rather follow the instructions provided by the capitalists. Since the work is commanded

by the capitalist, the workers cannot fully utilise their potentials. Therefore, the products, which the workers produce, are not true expression of worker's creative power. Thus, the work itself is external and alien to the workers and does not represent human creative nature. Therefore, it is not voluntary rather "forced labour"; the workers do not produce for their own satisfaction, but to satisfy others i.e. the capitalists. The work for the labourer only becomes means to earn money for food and other necessities. Therefore, the work does not bring joy to the workers, rather brings unhappiness, thus, they feel their ''self" only during the leisure or free time and during working time they do not feel their ''self" (alienated from himself).

- **Alienation from "Species Being":** The third aspect of alienation, in Marx's analysis, is the alienation from "species-being". By "species being" Marx meant the essential potential or quality of human beings. Here, Marx first tries to make a distinction between human and non-human animals; he asserted that like animals, man also depends on nature for livelihood; however, what makes man different from animals, is man's "free and conscious life activity". According to Marx "free and conscious life-activity" immediately distinguishes, man from animal's life-activity. Marx asserts that the animals engage in life activity and produces, but only for immediate physical needs. While on the other hand, unlike animals, human as creative and conscious being make their own life activity, they even produce when free from physical needs; they appropriate the nature according to their will and consciousness. Marx emphasised labour or productive activity to be essential characteristic for human as "species being". Human through their labour can produce goods, which is the "objectification" of their labour, which is also the "objectification" of their potential or "species-being". As Marx stated "the object of labour is, therefore, the *objectification of man's species life*". However, under capitalist system, the workers are alienated from their own capabilities or "species being". Since, the workers, in capitalist economic system, have no control over productive activities and work in accordance to

the instructions of the capitalists; therefore, the products which the workers produce and the work in which the workers engage in, does not belong to the will and consciousness of the workers. The worker's labour is no longer an expression of free and conscious activity and thus does not express the true human potential or "species being". Under capitalist system, workers perform, as Ritzer stated, "less and less like human beings as they reduced in their work to functioning like machines". The consciousness which the workers have as a "species being", merely becomes a means to earn money for physical existence.

- **Alienation from the Fellow Workers:** Lastly, the workers are also subject to alienation from their fellow workers. Such alienation arises due to competition among the workers for job or wages and also due to management in the workplace. Humans as a social being needs and wants to work in cooperation, so that they can appropriate the nature and recreate for the betterment of whole society. However, under capitalism workers are separated and compelled to work side by side for the capitalist and this disrupts cooperation among them. Moreover, under capitalism, the workers also see each other as "competitor"; they compete among themselves for jobs and high wages. Ritzer stated. "Workers often are forced into outright competition, and sometimes conflict, with one another. To extract maximum productivity and to prevent the development of cooperative relationships, the capitalist pits one worker against another to see who can produce more, work more quickly, or please the boss more. The workers who succeed are given a few extra rewards; those who fail are discarded. In either case, considerable hostility is generated among the workers toward their peers. The isolation and the interpersonal hostility tend to alienate workers in capitalism from their fellow workers".

Therefore, alienation is a consequence of the socio-economic structure i.e. capitalism, which oppress, control and deny essential human nature. Thus, it can be overcome only through changing the whole socio-economic structure.



9.7 LET US SUM UP

- Karl Marx's theory of alienation is discussed in the *"Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts"* (1844).
- Alienation is a multidisciplinary concept discussed in different social sciences and in different context; therefore contextualization is important in which the term is being used.
- Alienation is a human phenomena; however, it is important to make distinction between individual and collectiveness.
- Alienation may result from various aspects: from self, from environment, from products, from community etc.
- Manifestation of alienation can be both subjective and objective.
- Causes of alienation vary from situation to situation.
- Depending upon the types and causes, the means to overcome alienation also vary.
- Major causes in Karl Marx's notion of alienation are the private property, division of labour and money.
- Four aspects of alienation are:
    1) Worker's alienation from the products, which they produce. The workers lose control over their own products; it is the capitalists who own and control the products.
    2) Worker's alienation from the productive activities; the workers are not free to choose what to produce and how to produce, they have merely o follow the instruction provided by the capitalists.
    3) Worker's alienation from "species being" or human potential. Under capitalism the labour no more express the human potentials, rather become the instrument to earn money for physical existence.
    4) Alienation from the fellow workers; the workers see each other as competitor for jobs and wage, thus alienated from each other.



9.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abraham, Francis (2011); *Sociological Thought*; India: Macmillan Publishers.
2) Bottomore, Tom (1991); *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2nd ed.); Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
3) Ritzer, George (2011); *Sociological Theory* (8th ed.); New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.



9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: In simple words Alienation can be defined as Isolation or Detachment; which can be from things; self or others and for varied reasons.

Ans. to Q. No. 2: Karl Marx discussed his theory of alienation in one of his early writings the *"Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts"* (1844).



9.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What is the definition of alienation provided in UNESCO Dictionary of Social Sciences?

Q.2: What is "species being"?

Q.3: Explain workers' alienation from their own products.

Q.4: Discuss alienation from production process.

Q.5: Discuss alienation from "species being".

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Discuss the nature of alienation.

Q.2: Discuss Karl Marx's four aspects of Alienation.

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