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Q4(b)

Marx's concept of alienation is an essential part of the reality in capitalism. Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- **Marx's** concept of 'alienation' is an essential part of the reality in capitalism. Explain. (15 marks)

Revision summary

- **Marx's alienation is fourfold:** product, activity, **species-being**, and other people.

It describes the structure of wage labour, not a passing emotion.

Capital's **commodity fetishism** is the later objective name of the same split.

Surplus value requires this separation of workers from the means of production.

Welfare and unions can blunt harm; they do not, for **Marx**, abolish the relation.

Introduction

Karl Marx's early writings treat alienation as the lived form of capitalist production, not as a mood. In wage labour the worker is separated from the product, the activity, the species, and other persons. That fourfold split is, for **Marx**, how capitalism actually works.

Body

Four moments

- **Alienation from the product:** the object belongs to the capitalist and confronts the worker as an independent power.
- **Alienation from labouring activity:** work is external, forced, and exhausted in wages, not a free confirmation of life.
- **Alienation from species-being:** humans can create according to a standard of beauty; capitalism reduces them to animal survival after hours.
- **Alienation from other humans:** competition of workers and the cash nexus replace common production.

Why it is essential, not optional

- In **Capital**, **commodity fetishism** restates the same reality: relations among persons appear as relations among things.
- Surplus value is extracted in this alienated form. Without the split of labour from the means of production, capital does not exist.
- **Rawls** can reform distribution inside a well-ordered society. **Marx** says the production relation itself produces unfreedom, so alienation is structural.

- Later factory law, unions, and Indian labour codes can lessen brutality. They do not, on this view, end the sale of **labour-power**.

Capitalist reality today

- Platform work, unpaid care (which **Pateman** and Marxist feminists map), and global value chains still separate the doer from the done.
- Consumer plenty does not cancel fetishism; it can deepen it.
- **Easton's** "allocation of values" in a capitalist system still allocates through this alienated labour market.
- **Explanation:** alienation is essential because capitalism is defined by private command of social labour, not because workers always feel sad.

Flow diagram

Capitalism -> Wage labour
Wage labour -> Alien product
Wage labour -> Alien activity
Wage labour -> Alien species-being
Wage labour -> Alien others
Capitalism -> Commodity fetishism

Conclusion

Marx's alienation is the fourfold separation built into wage labour and commodity production. Fetishism in Capital is the same structure in objective form. It is essential to capitalist reality as a relation of production, even when welfare and growth soften its surface.

Facts & figures

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844

Marx's main early statement of alienated labour.

Commodity fetishism

Capital, volume I: social relations appear as properties of things on the market.

Labour-power

The commodity the worker sells; its use produces more value than its wage, for **Marx**.

Species-being

Marx's term, from Feuerbach, for distinctive human creative life that wage work stunts.