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Q3(c)

Critically explain the salient features of 'alienation' as propounded by Karl Marx

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- State **Marx's** alienation in the 1844 manuscripts: from product, process, **species-being** and other people
- Explain the features as rooted in private property and wage labour, not in a vague mood
- Add a critical note: later **Marx**, industrial change, gender and caste
- Keep the salient features first

Revision summary

Marx's 1844 manuscripts describe alienation as a social relation of wage labour.

The worker is estranged from the product that capital owns.

The process of work is external, forced and controlled.

Species-being as creative production is reduced to survival.

People are divided from one another by class and competition.

Critique should not dilute the concept into mood, but may add gender, caste and informal labour.

Introduction

Karl Marx's idea of alienation, set out most clearly in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, describes what happens to the worker under private property and wage labour. The worker becomes a stranger to the product, to the act of work, to human species powers, and to other people. Alienation is a social relation, not a passing sadness. A critical explanation must state these features and then note what later debate has added or questioned.

Body

Salient features

First, the worker is alienated from the product. The object that labour creates belongs to the capitalist. The more the worker produces, the richer the alien world of commodities becomes. Second, the worker is alienated from the process of work. Labour is external, forced and controlled. It is not a free expression of skill. The working day is sold, and the method of work

is dictated. Third, the worker is alienated from **species-being**. **Marx**, drawing on Ludwig Feuerbach and then turning him around, held that human beings are distinguished by conscious, creative production. Under capitalism this becomes a means of mere survival. Fourth, people are alienated from one another. Class antagonism and competition replace cooperative production. The capitalist is also caught in the logic of capital, though the worker bears the heavier loss.

- **These features rest on a definite structure:** labour power is a commodity, surplus value is extracted, and the means of production are privately owned. Alienation is therefore not a complaint about machines as such. A craft worker under a master could be unfree, but **Marx's** type is the wage worker in a system of commodity production. In later writings the language of exploitation, surplus value and **commodity fetishism** carries much of the same insight in a more economic form. **Commodity fetishism** says that relations between people appear as relations between things.

Critical explanation

Critics say the 1844 texts are philosophical and that the later **Marx** dropped the word. Louis Althusser drew a sharp line between early and late **Marx**. Others, including Istvan Meszaros and many labour sociologists, see continuity. Harry Braverman's deskilling thesis extended alienation into twentieth-century scientific management. Feminist writers argued that unpaid domestic labour is also alienated and that **Marx's** worker is silently male. In India, bonded labour, caste-based occupation and informal work complicate a factory-only picture. A. R. Desai and later Marxist studies of Indian capitalism still find the core: people do not control the conditions of their labour.

The idea can be stretched into a vague cultural mood. That stretch is a weakness. The strength of the concept is its link to property and wage labour. Automation and gig contracts change the form. They do not automatically restore the worker's control over product and process.

Flow diagram

Wage labour and private property -> Alienation

Alienation -> From product

Alienation -> From process

Alienation -> From species-being

Alienation -> From other people

Conclusion

- **Marx's alienation has four salient features:** estrangement from product, from work, from species powers and from other people. They follow from wage labour and private property. A critical view keeps that structure, notes later debates on gender and informal work, and refuses to reduce the idea to a private feeling.

Facts & figures

Species-being

Marx's term for the human capacity for conscious, collective, creative production, which wage labour distorts.

Commodity fetishism

Later Marxist term for social relations appearing as relations among things on the market.

Braverman on deskilling

A later extension of alienated labour into Taylorist control of the labour process.

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