**Life in a Purse – On the Alienation of Labour and Fetishism**

One – The Cause and Symptoms of the Alienation of Labour

Before the essay itself begins, I would like to acknowledge the fact that this issue has been discussed for centuries, starting well before Marxists even existed and continuing to be debated by scholars and experts in economics and philosophy who are far more qualified than I am. As such, whatever is discussed in the following (and, if possible, in succeeding essays on the same topic) is mostly my own opinion and viewpoint, supported by various examples, statistics, and official arguments. At the bare minimum, I hope, the argument that will be posed is logically sound. However, the reader is strongly encouraged to continue doing further research individually and, if possible, contact and correct me for any mistakes that I will inevitably make in my essay(s).

If money was not a problem, that is, suppose whenever you wished, you could make the balance in your bank account go higher without ever worrying about causing a financial crisis, what would you do? Such a question is probably not uncommon in conversations. Some would answer something along the lines of “pursuing their dreams”, for instance, playing the guitar, travelling the world, reading as many books as they can, going into drawing or singing, etc. Others would pursue more materialistic goals, such as buying an island in the Pacific Ocean, purchasing a giant mansion in Paris, building holiday condos all over the world, and so on. In short, despite living in the same society, a drastic difference in the answers provided by members of our society is observed. Such a difference is caused by alienation, specifically, the alienation of labour, and its best friend, fetishism. As globalized capitalism becomes not only an inevitable trend but also an integral part of the life of every single human living on this planet, its aforementioned byproducts, that is, alienation and fetishism, also integrate themselves into our lives. Thus, it is critical that at this point, perhaps more than ever before in human history, a comprehensive analysis be performed on the cause and effects of these byproducts of capitalism, as our means of production evolve rapidly to soon eliminate the needs of repetitive, physical labourers and as our people struggle to understand the root cause of many social issues. An attempt at analyzing the issue of alienation will be seen in this paper, and if possible, further attempts will be pursued in future papers to analyze fetishism, as well as ways to combat its harmful effects on our society.

There are two pillars to the construction of the concept of alienation: first, the psychological idea that subjective efforts could be “alienated” by objective means, and second, the philosophical notion that humans have an innate desire for self-realization and performing useful work. Since the first is far less complicated and easier to prove compared to the second, it will be discussed first. Extensive psychological research already proved conclusively that giving irrelevant rewards to subjective efforts would alienate said efforts, erasing the intrinsic motivation and making further work dependent only on the extrinsic stimulation, that is, the rewards. Stanford’s professor, Mark Lepper, [finds in 2003](https://bingschool.stanford.edu/news/mark-lepper-intrinsic-motivation-extrinsic-motivation-and-process-learning) that once children who previously voluntarily took part in good behaviour, for instance, sitting up straight at the dinner table, refused to continue such behaviour once they were provided extrinsic rewards and then have such rewards taken away. [Lepper repeated the experiments](https://www.spring.org.uk/2023/01/intrinsic-motivation.php) on children who were interested in drawing and found again that should the children be expecting external rewards, their intrinsic interest in drawing fails to provide enough motivation for them to continue drawing. However, the children who do not expect external reward operate merely on interests and shows greater enthusiasm when drawing. In fact, the children who did not expect rewards spent twice as much time drawing compared to those expecting rewards, even when the latter is provided their promised rewards. Further, [an experiment performed by Kathryn Loveland from the University of Massachusetts in 1977](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2873&context=theses&fbclid=IwAR0aHIChBIIsNbpK675yu-6L5DcPy2D2ogiU0gTEE67mQo1hpGZ9YW8e8aw) shows that external rewards have negative effects on the quality of task performance, as children who did not receive rewards showed a significant improvement in the quality of their drawing over eight weeks, whereas that of rewarded children did not change over the same period. All such experiments and more point to the principle psychological pattern that external rewards erase intrinsic motivation, decrease the interest in the work done, decrease the amount of time spent on the work, and decrease the quality of products produced from the work. Such fundamental facts are indisputable, as they are commonsensical in modern psychology.

The obvious connection made with the aforementioned conclusion by the average individual is education, as said conclusion quite clearly explains why many kids, who are previously curious and passionate about learning, fail to maintain their passion when they are introduced to the grading system, a form of external reward. It also explains why many who fare exceptionally well in school and receive extremely high grades do not care too much about their grades but about their self-improvement and the value their classes provide to their lives. However, another, perhaps more critical indication is often overlooked (intentionally or unintentionally) by psychologists: is it possible that we have an intrinsic motivation to labour? Specifically, if we never expected wages and other forms of rewards, would it be possible that we still perform labour just to satisfy our intrinsic desires? Such questions lead us to the second pillar of alienation: the tendency of humans to perform useful work voluntarily.

To comprehensively explore this supposition, it would be necessary to phase in gradually in complexity. First, it is important to recognize the established psychological theory, that is, the hierarchy of needs. Specifically, at the top of the hierarchy, once all other needs are satisfied, humans tend to seek self-actualization, or, to put it simply, a meaning and a purpose in life. It is also important to realize that, since self-actualization is defined, by Maslow himself, as to “become more and more of what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming”, hedonism and simplistic pleasures derived from the fulfillment of materialistic desires does not fulfill the definition of self-actualization. Pray recall and rephrase the question posed at the beginning of this paper according to the hierarchy of needs, it is effectively asking: suppose you have the material means to satisfy all your lower-order necessities, would you voluntarily pursue self-actualization? If Maslow’s widely accepted theory is correct, then the answer of every mentally-capable human should be simply “yes”, since, at this stage, humans are no longer content with self-preservation and selfish actions. Recall that as Maslow pointed out, self-actualization stresses the exploration of one’s “true self” and “intrinsic growth”, it, therefore, cannot be satisfied with external rewards, such as monetary gains. As such, to satisfy their needs, humans would not work for materialistic purposes; instead, they must perform labour for the sole purpose of self-improvement and actualization. Further notice that such efforts would only be performed by those who have satisfied all their lower demands, which constitutes a small portion of our society, as most are still working for wages that allow them to pursue materialistic hedonism. However, in another society, in which the lower demands of the people are fulfilled unconditionally, they should then still work to achieve self-actualization. In other words, the only reason that we are not performing useful work voluntarily is that our intrinsic desire to perform work, that is, our desire to self-actualize, has been alienated and replaced by our desire for monetary gains and external rewards.

It is critical to understand that such is not justification for unpaid labour in a capitalist society. As previously stressed, times and again, the necessary prerequisite for self-actualization is the fulfillment of all lower needs. Unpaid labour, therefore, fails to satisfy self-actualize on two grounds: one, that unpaid labour is always coupled with horrible conditions, squalid living quarters, and the overall inability to satisfy the individual’s lower needs; two, that unpaid labour is nearly always repetitive, laborious jobs that the individual would prefer not to do, and as such it obviously cannot achieve self-actualization. In other words, under the capitalist framework, alienation is the certain and, ironically, most preferable outcome and self-actualization cannot be attained.

So, at the end of the day, why is it that we still work for wages? If this question was posed to an economist, he would scorn you and tell you that it is the only thing incentivizing us to work, but we know now that is blatantly false. The only ideology that questions the wage system is Marxism, which proposes that for a capitalist society to achieve its goal, that is, to garner as much wealth as possible for the capitalists with the least amount of efforts, it must take parts of the value created by the workers, referred to as surplus value. Realize that the sum of all costs put in to maintain a production unit, including the cost of raw material, the cost of maintaining the means of production, the salary of the workers, etc., is always smaller than the amount of total value produced by said unit. A standard example is a factory, suppose a capitalist invests 1000 dollars into the production of this factory, then the value the factory produce must be greater than 1000 dollars, or else the capitalist cannot earn money. Further realize that the factory does not just print the money. For instance, suppose the factory makes 1200 dollars, those profits exist because the products produced by the factory is sold on the market and exchanged for money. Finally, realize that the people buying these products on the market are none other than the workers. As such, if the workers don’t work for wages, the capitalist cannot profit and earn money without working, as their products cannot be sold on the market due to the lack of customers; in fact, they cannot even survive if they do not use the wage system to exploit the workers. Whether or not the system itself is justified is a completely separate debate,[[1]](#footnote-1) but even the most adamant defender of capitalism cannot deny that capitalism is the only obstacle stopping humanity from removing the wage system, and as a result, removing alienation. Even more tragically, as capitalism is designed to further the Matthew Effect, when, after the workers spent their entire lives toiling and working, they do not see any improvement in their own lives, but only in the lives of the capitalists, they will feel as if the products of their labour, and even their labour itself, does not belong to them. As a result, the alienation will be furthered, and their intrinsic incentive to perform labour will be almost completely removed.

Alienation is not just an unfounded theory, but a phenomenon observed globally with plenty of examples. In China, employees at all levels, from workers to farmers, from programmers to managers, have started movements to “lay down” (tang ping), or an extreme form of quite quitting, due to their low pay. In Europe, labour disputes surrounding wages have occurred more often than ever in human history. In the United States, despite their unquestionable ability to automate the production process, companies such as Amazon still chooses to use underpaid, malnourished, and sometimes underaged workers. Around the globe, it is not uncommon for scientists and professor to commit plagiarism or even force their students to produce essays for them in order to satisfy their material gains. The film, tv, video game, and music industry, in developing and developed countries alike, have been, as commented by Cole, growing increasingly similar and non-innovative. A 2015 study of more than 500,000 albums found that companies prefer to use similar or even same producers, songwriters, instruments, artists, rhythms, melodies, etc., of previously successful songs to keep up profit. Realize that whatever great innovations made in these industries are almost always by young, affluent, passionate individual producers who engage in the industry not to make money but to *self-actualize*. Then realize that these producers often fall to monetary gains anyways and sell their popular, innovative products to big corporations, who repeat the aforementioned method. Alienation has changed our world to one in which profit is all that matters, to one in which we cease to be humans, but only tagged sources of cash.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Notice that we live in a society of automation, a society where the means of production are advanced enough that it could take over most if not all repetitive and labour-based work. We live in a society of plenty, a society where the basic needs of the people, that is, the need for food, water, shelter and other necessities, can be fulfilled unconditionally. We produce enough food to feed over 10 billion people, despite only having a population of 8 billion, in fact, developed countries dump 40% of the food they purchase; we have more vacant houses than there are homeless people, for instance, in the U.S. alone, there are 17 million vacant homes and only 600,000 homeless people; we have more than enough clothes, enough water, and certainly enough energy for everyone. We can fulfill the pre-requisites of self-actualization, to allow everyone living on this planet to no longer work painfully for wages, but work to self-actualize; not to be alienated by monetary gains, but to live one’s life to the fullest. We can remove the old and exploitative capitalist system and create a new one, in which the day-to-day life of the average human is not filled with pain and anguish, but with happiness and contentment; in which the production and the passion to produce is boosted many folds; in which poverty and hunger no longer troubles us, as we are not concerned about gaining more money for ourselves and acting selfishly,[[2]](#footnote-2) but about pursuing the maximization of the utility of ourselves; in which war and arms race becomes nothing but historical fables; in which alienation, along with greed, wickedness, and evil, are removed from the surface of our planet. We can catch a glimpse of that society in our lives: in the people who fight for what they believe in, no matter the cost; in the soldiers who die defending their country or their organization; in the artists, video game designers, music producers, and film directors who refuse to satisfy the “trend” and continues to make content so as to satisfy their own dreams and aspirations; and in the millions of people who devote their lives to helping those less fortunate than them, speaking for those with no voice, and fighting for those who can’t defend themselves. These people prove the capitalists wrong; they prove to us that it is possible for humans to work purely for the sake of self-actualization. The society without alienation shall be a society filled with precisely these people.

Centuries ago, slave owners believed that without whips, nobody would work voluntarily; decades ago, capitalists believed that without harsh conditions and propaganda, nobody would work voluntarily; now, they argue that without wages, nobody would work. We ask these capitalists, are revolutionaries, who give their lives for the cause they believe in, paid excessively and lavishly? Are they sacrificing themselves because there is a whip torturing them every minute? Historical examples, along with psychological facts and established theories, prove the apologists of capitalism wrong times and again. Humans never needed external incentives, be it whips, working conditions, or wages, to force us to work; all people are born with a passion prone to labour. The time is ripe for us to free ourselves from this exploitative system, rip through their lies, and gain true freedom. Struggle, then, for the actualization of ourselves and of a better world.

We have nothing to lose but our chains!

-2023.8.7, Beijing China, Tony Su

1. For the arguments against capitalism itself, refer to *Das Kapital* by Marx or my other essays [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regarding the argument of selfish vs. selfless human nature, see my other essay *Defying Human Nature* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)