

Alienation & Academia

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March 7th, 2009

“Remember your humanity, and forget the rest.”

Russell-Einstein Manifesto

Introduction

Since World War Two, American academia has had a close relationship with the military, in what has been termed the “Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex” (Leslie, 1993). In a report on the influence of military funding on science the Stanford Workshop on Political and Social Issues found that a number of professors defended their relationship with the military by “[...] declin[ing] to make any connection between their work and the DDC statements of military relevance” (Shapley, 1972). This paper will explicate Marx’s theory of alienation and then apply it to academia in order to illuminate how scientists are distanced from the ethical implications of their work.

Marx’s Alienation

Marx developed his theory of alienation against the backdrop of Hegel’s philosophy of “absolute spirit”. Hegel saw history as the progression and transformation of an abstract human spirit. Marx rejected Hegel’s idealism and instead gave a thoroughly materialist account of history. For Marx, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (1859/1977). Thus, alienation is not a psychological phenomenon but “proceed[s] from an actual economic fact” (Marx 1923/1975). Specifically, it is the result of how labor is organized under the capitalist system.

There are different ways of marshaling human labor – Marx terms these ‘modes of production’. For example, feudalism was the historic mode of production during the Middle Ages. The contemporary mode of production, for both Marx and ourselves, is capitalism. The capitalist mode of production makes labor itself a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. It thus objectifies labor as something external to the worker. It is this objectification that leads the worker to confront what they have produced “as something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (Marx 1923/1975), *i.e.* alienation.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx identified four aspects of alienation:

First, the worker is alienated from the act of production. Under capitalism the worker’s

labor no longer belongs to her, but has been sold and transferred to someone else. Not only does the worker lose ownership of her labor but this also means that the worker relates to production as something external to herself. Furthermore, labor is not undertaken for its own sake – that is, the creation of the product – but has become “a means to satisfy needs external to it” (Marx 1923/1975) namely, acquiring enough money to stay alive. Capitalism also necessarily involves the division of labor, which “reduces [the worker] to a machine” (Marx 1923/1975) by not allowing her the full experience of production but only a small, incomplete, parcel.

Second, the worker is alienated from her fellow workers because “[...] each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as worker” (Marx 1923/1975). Capitalism reduces the worker to nothing more than the labor she has to sell. Therefore, workers come in contact only with each other’s externalized labor, and do not relate to each other directly as humans. The division of labor exacerbates this by separating each worker’s labor (and her humanity) from the others’.

Third, the worker is “related to the product of [her] labor as to an alien object” (Marx 1923/1975). The worker does not produce objects for her own use but for those who own her labor. In fact, she does not produce objects for use at all, but commodities to be bought and sold. Therefore these objects are experienced by the worker, and everyone else, as external from herself, *i.e.* alien. And, because of the division of labor, the worker does not even ever see the final product of her labor, but only bits and pieces, except as an external commodity out on the open market.

Lastly, and perhaps most profoundly, the worker is alienated from her “species-essence”. For Marx, labor is what makes us human. While other animals may engage in labor-like activities, such as building a nest, only humans can consciously conceive a project in their imagination and then realize it through their labor (Marx, 1867/1964). Labor can be seen as the process by which we actualize our humanity by transforming the environment according to our will. Therefore, by alienating us from the labor, capitalism is actually alienating us from that which makes us human (our “species-essence”). Despite the spiritual sounding terminology this process should still be understood as material phenomenon.

What is lost here is our ability to consciously and freely create. Alien labor is “therefore, not

voluntary but forced, it is forced labor” (Marx, 1867/1964) in that it is not engaged in for its own sake (i.e. because we are human) but motivated by external reasons (i.e. the need to survive) and does not produce that which has been imagined by the worker but by the person who owns the labor. Thus, alienation, and specifically alienation from our humanity, entails a loss of freedom.

Alienation in Academia

Academia is an institution consisting of scientists who engage in research, the purpose and end result of which is knowledge – in the form of research results, scholarly papers, *et cetera*. It is in this sense that the “scientific method”, and more precisely the workings of academia surrounding it, can be understood as producing knowledge and scientists as the workers who produce that knowledge¹. While academia is often seen as an “ivory tower” isolated from society, a close inspection of the mode of knowledge production in academia will show that it bears many of the characteristics of capitalism, and specifically those that result in alienation, namely labor (*i.e.* research) as a commodity and the division of labor. This was already recognized by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers. (1888/1848)

Each of the four facets of alienation identified in the previous section can be applied to academia.

Academia alienates the scientist from the research process. In the same way that capitalism reduces the worker to nothing more than the labor she has to sell academia reduces the scientist to her research. The ability to pursue research is contingent on the scientist’s ability to acquire the tools (funding from grants and material resources from the university) to do research. This is encapsulated in the oft heard phrase “publish or perish”, the logical converse of which is “exist by publishing”. Publication is traded away for the ability to continue undertaking research in that “[...] publications provides one with greater access to the resources necessary to pursue further research [...]” (Harvie, 2000) in the form

¹ Production here merely means that knowledge is the end result of a process. This paper remains agnostic with regard to the epistemic standing of such knowledge vis a vis the positivist / postmodernist debate.

of grants and university resources. Research is, thus, first sold in exchange for the tools of research and then reacquired as an externality in exchange for the results of that research. Research is dealt with in this exchange solely on the basis of its value – a value which is set by external forces and not by the intrinsic nature of the research. This is seen in the numerous metrics that have been devised to determine a scientist's worth based on her publications and the number of times those have been cited. The direction of research is not determined by the intellectual creativity of the scientist but rather depends on the vision and the priorities of the funding agencies, for example: funding of specific biochemical research by pharmaceutical companies, the ban on stem cell research by the Bush administration, or funding priorities set by the Department of Defense. The scientist is thus reduced to nothing but his labor and confronts the research process as wholly external and alien.

Academia also alienates scientists from their colleagues and their fellow humans. The pressures involved in “publish or perish” as outlined above also lead to pervasive competition. This means that scientists relate to each other as competitors. That is they relate to each other primarily through each other's labor, which at its most extreme takes the form of seeing other scientists as nothing but a citation, or even just the trailing *et al.* thereof. Furthermore, the division of labor is a salient force in the academic mode of production as is seen in the fact that “academic disciplines (and sub-disciplines) are becoming more specialized and there is an exponential growth in new specialisms” (Harvey, 2000). In fact, this was remarked on even by Weber in a speech he gave in 1918. This is caused, first, by the increasing complexity of the subject matter. Contributions are only possible through specialization in narrow fields. Second, this trend is reinforced by the incessant need to publish which demands that the scientist constantly work on something new and unique. Thus, even within their narrow fields scientists are driven to differentiate themselves as much as possible from their colleagues in their choice of research subject. As with the worker, this division of labor increases the already existing alienation that results from scientists coming into contact with each other only through their externalized and alienated research.

Academia even alienates the scientist from the fruits of her own research, *i.e.* the knowledge she produces. As delineated above, ownership of the results of research is not

retained by the scientist but essentially given up to her employers – the university and the funders – because they make her work possible, *i.e.* they own the means of production. Therefore, the scientist comes to relate to her own results primarily in their external form as publications on the open market of ideas. The division of labor further alienates the scientists from the knowledge produced by science in general. Because of extreme specialization it becomes “more difficult for a single researcher [...] to step back and view their work in a broader perspective” (Harvey, 2000). Specialization also means that the scientist’s work is likely only ever a partial answer to the questions posed by her field. This can even be true within a single project. In fields, such as high energy physics and the human genome project, one sees publications with hundreds of authors, many of whom will only understand their small contribution and not the overall results. Taken together this means that the scientist is no longer in a position to comprehend the knowledge produced by the academic community she is a part of, except as distant and external. Her work has been separated from its larger context.

Finally, the scientist is alienated from her own humanity. Just as the worker does not undertake the act of production as a human (*i.e.* creating that which he has raised first in his imagination) but as a tool for another, knowledge is not primarily produced for the scientist’s own enjoyment and understanding but for the purposes of another. As with the worker, this alienation from humanity entails a loss of freedom. The scientist has been reduced to a paid technician and does not maintain complete control over her research and the knowledge that results from it.

Academia, Society & Ethics

Alienation in academia does not just affect the scientists but has important ethical consequences.

And as researchers become alienated from societal knowledge, this leaves others with more political and economic power free to interpret and therefore appropriate this knowledge for their own ends. (Harvey, 2000)

Science is not pursued in a vacuum but exists within a social context. Alienation separates the scientist and her work from that context in two ways. First, Alienation distances the scientist from that social context by mediating all relations through decontextualized labor.

Specifically, it distances the scientist from the consequences of their research. Second, as we have seen, alienation also entails a loss of control over both the research process and the outcomes of the research. Since the scientist is not in control of the knowledge she has produced she is even less in control of what is done with that research. It is this separation that allows scientists to dodge responsibility for the ethical implications of their work.

This alienation should worry us because scientific work often has important consequences for society. One, admittedly extreme, example is the Manhattan Project in which science produced the knowledge that allowed for the creation of the atomic bomb. However, alienation is also at play with the geneticist whose work is tied to genetically altered crops or performance enhancing drugs and the social scientist trying to understand group dynamics.

In 1955 Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein wrote “Remember your humanity, and forget the rest” as part of a manifesto calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, and specifically for the scientists of the world to speak up on the issue. This paper has shown that it may not be that scientists have forgotten their humanity so much as that they have been alienated from it by academia’s capitalist mode of production.

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