

THE SOCIOLOGY OF WORK and ALIENATION: SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

ARYA PRIYA

Assistant Professor

Post Graduate Department of Sociology, Nitishwar College.

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University

Muzaffarpur, Bihar.

ABSTRACT:

Work as a socio-economic entity constitutes one of the most discussed and debated topics in sociology. Economic sociologists have deliberated upon different dimensions of work and their impact on human society right since the onset of industrial revolution to the current post-industrial late-modern society. This paper is an attempt to discuss and review the studies of various scholars on the sociological aspects of work including the contributions of classical sociologists Marx, Weber and Durkheim. The paper also navigates the changes work as a phenomenon has underwent over the years especially under the impact of rapid advances in science and technology. The paper also looks into the feminists' take on the sociology of work and highlights their contributions in exposing the inherent biasness in the andocentric study of work as a socio-economic enterprise.

Keywords: alienation; division of labor; fordism; post-industrial society; rationalization;

Introduction:

Work, whether paid or unpaid, may be defined as being carrying out the tasks requiring the expenditure of mental and physical efforts, which has as its objective the production of goods and services that cater to human needs (Giddens 2009: 886). In all societies, work is the basis of the economy. Generally, work is seen in terms of an occupation or job in which some labor is performed in exchange for a regular wage or salary. But there are several other types of work as well such as non-paid work (e.g. housework), voluntary work (e.g. for charities) or work in the informal sector (which generally involves transactions outside the sphere of formal and regular employment). Over the years, the nature of work has undergone phenomenal changes, especially since the unprecedented development in science and technology in recent years and the massive mechanization of the production process.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of economic system of modern societies is the existence of a highly complex division of labor. Work has been divided into an enormous number of different occupations in which people specialize. In traditional societies, agriculture was the main occupation. Non-agricultural work (which accounted for a miniscule percentage of work) generally involved the mastery of a craft and the worker normally carried out all aspects of the craft production process from the beginning to the end.

Modern society has also witnessed a shift in the location of work. Before industrialization, most work took place at home and all productions were carried out collectively by all the members of the household. Advances in industrial technology and the emergence of factory-based production have led to the separation of work-place from home. Production is now being carried out in factories owned by entrepreneurs. Workers are trained to perform specialized task and they receive a wage for their work. High division of labor and use of sophisticated machinery in factories are now used for mass production of goods and this has eclipsed the home based small-scale artisanship of traditional societies.

Giddens (2009:892) says “the contrast in the division of labor between traditional and modern societies is really extraordinary. Even in the largest traditional societies, there existed no more than 20-30 major craft trades. In modern industrial system, there are literally thousands of distinct occupations. In traditional societies most of the population worked on farms and were economically self- sufficient. They produced their own food, clothes and other necessities of life. One of the main features of modern societies, by contrast, is the high division of labor and the enormous expansion of economic interdependence. We are all dependent on an immense number of other workers for the products and services that sustain our lives”.

Classical thinkers on work - Marx, Weber, Durkheim:

According to Karl Marx (1844/1995), the production of goods and services holds the key to human happiness and fulfillment. Work is the most important, the primary human activity. Work enables a man to fulfill his basic needs, his individuality and his humanity. By expressing his personality in the creation of the product, the worker experiences deep satisfaction. Since the growth and accumulation of private property reaching its culmination in the capitalist society, the worker is reduced merely to a commodity who only sells his labor-power to earn wages. He is completely detached from the fruits of his labor which is completely appropriated by the capitalists and the worker feels completely estranged and alienated.

Alienation is a socio-psychological condition which denotes the estrangement of workers from themselves and from others. It is a condition where a man gets completely divorced from his own creations. The man-made products obtain a life of their own, go out of the worker's control and become alien to him. In capitalist society, alienation reaches its acute form (Giddens: 2009).

A capitalist mode of production involves transformation of human creativity into material objects or "objectification" of human creative power. The forces of production in capitalism are completely owned by the capitalists. Marx (1844) considers two important characteristics of capitalist society that are primarily responsible for alienation – 1) specialized division of labor and 2) mechanization of production. High division of labor reduces a man's work to a small and monotonous task. Mechanization reduces the need for skill and intelligence from work, reduces a worker to a mere appendage to the machines and reduces from work all individual character and creativity.

Further all products are appropriated by the capitalists. Also, in a capitalist society, the products (or wealth) are created only by the workers. But the wages they are paid is much less than the value of the products. This difference between the wages and the value of products is called surplus value and is completely appropriated by the capitalists in the form of profits. The worker has no control over the products. Mechanized objectification completely destroys a workers skill and creativity. The laborer is reduced to a commodity (commodification of labor) who only sells his labor-power to earn wages. Work for him is no longer a means of personal satisfaction which fulfills his creative urge. It is only a means to earn his living.

As a consequence, the worker suffers from complete alienation which is manifested in four ways – 1) alienation from product, 2) alienation from the act of production, 3) self-alienation (as a man's creativity is completely destroyed and gets alienated from his real human nature) and 4) social alienation (because social relations become contractual market relations in which a worker is judged by his position in the market rather than by human qualities). Marx considers alienation to have a de-humanizing effect that completely impairs a man's physical and mental activities. End of alienation requires a change from a capitalist to a communist mode of production. In a classless communist society, the products of labor would not be appropriated by some at the expense of others. Communism would enable man to return to his self i.e. as a social being and as a creative human being. (Swedberg: 2003).

“In what does alienation of labor consists? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature, that he does not fulfill in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery and his physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker feels at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor. It is only a means of satisfying other needs. Its alien character is shown by the fact that as soon as there is no compulsion, it is avoided like a plague. Finally, the alienated character of the work appears in the fact that it is not the worker’s work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to someone else. Further, the product of his labor takes on its own existence, is alien to him and stands opposed to him as an alien power”.

Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844).

Unlike Marx, Durkheim had a more optimistic view about division of labor in modern societies. According to Durkheim (1893/1947), division of labor and specialization of roles strengthen social solidarity in modern societies. Traditional society is characterized by mechanical solidarity where there is little specialized role and people live as isolated self-sufficient units. Modern societies are marked by individualism and high division of labor. There is decreased likeness among members and collective conscience declines. Under these circumstances, stability in modern society is brought about by ‘organic solidarity’ – a solidarity based on inter-dependence and mutual needs.

Division of labor brings greater inter-dependence among the members of the society for their various functions and needs. Each person does only a small task and for other works, he is dependent on others. Co-operation and complementarily are the watch-words of this society. It is this heightened sense of interdependence among people in modern societies that result into organic solidarity. Thus, for Durkheim, division of labor is quite functional for the society. Durkheim says “if the division of labor produces solidarity, it is not only because it makes each individual an ‘exchangist’, as the economists say; it is because it creates between men a whole system of rights and duties which bind them together in an enduring way.” [Durkheim 1893/ 1947:57]. But Durkheim was also aware that social solidarity could be disrupted if social changes occurred too rapidly, resulting into anomie or normlessness. If the division of labor does not produce solidarity, it is because between the organs are not regulated, they are in a state of anomie (Durkheim 1893/1947:56)

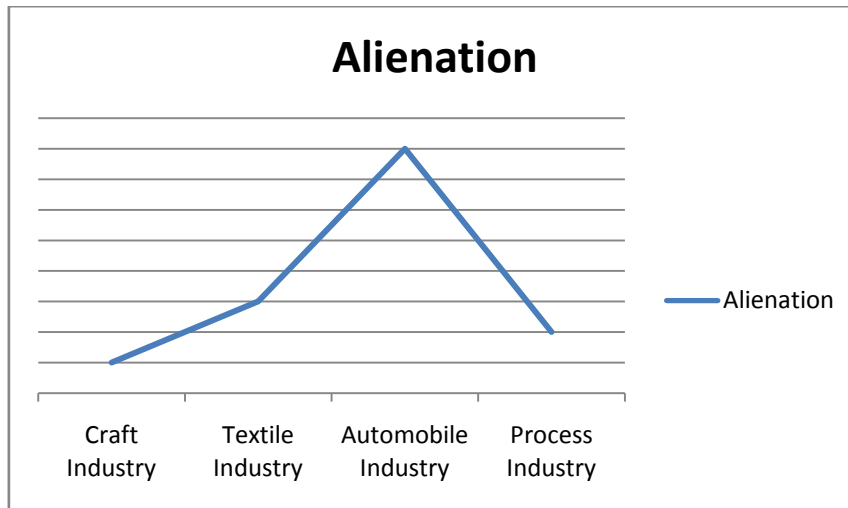
Max Weber (1968) believed that modern society is increasingly grounded in the symbolic and material advances of rationality. The physical manifestation of rationality takes three primary forms: capitalism, rational jurisprudence and bureaucracy. However the essence of

the concept consists of three facets: secularization, calculability and growth of ethics where 'traditional' and 'affective' actions are replaced by 'rational action' (where optimal and most appropriate decisions are taken after careful weighing of both the means and the ends). Weber also disagreed with Marx regarding factors leading to alienation of workers. He believed that alienation is an inevitable feature of modern industrial society – whether capitalist or socialist. Alienation is due to increasing rationalization of social life and predominance of formal bureaucratic organizations in modern industrial societies. Compulsory conformity to impersonal rules in a bureaucracy destroys a man's creative ability.

Weber believed that modern industrial society is increasingly based on the process of rationalization and on rational action. This is best manifested in the overwhelming presence of bureaucracy in all areas: state administration, business, education etc. Most of the industrial organizations are based on bureaucratic lines. It is based on rational-legal authority, it enjoys technical superiority over other forms of organizations, there is strict hierarchy and clear-cut division of labor, employees are chosen and promoted on merit, business is carried according to calculable rules and in a spirit of formalistic impersonality. This enhances the efficiency and productivity of organizations.

Further developments and researches in the sociology of work:

Many sociologists have tried to study and discuss Marx's alienation in actual work situations. Robert Blauner (1964) in a path-breaking work studies the relationship between alienation and technology. He finds alienation to show a curvilinear relationship with the level of technology. In craft industries like printing, where low-level technology is used and workers have considerable freedom in his work, alienation is found to be lowest. It becomes higher in textile industry characterized by higher level of technology and higher division of labor. In automobile industries, marked by high level technology, scientific management, fordism and assembly-line production, alienation was found to be highest. But in modern process chemical industries where high degree of 'automation' is used, alienation tends to decline. Blauner believes that automation reverses the historic trend of alienation in manufacturing industry. Although the product is manufactured automatically, the worker has considerable control and responsibility for production. It restores a workers meaning and involvement in the work and provides him with a sense of self-fulfillment.



Blauner's curvilinear relationship between alienation and technology (industry)

Herbert Marcuse (1964) finds alienation to be acute in both industrialized capitalist and communist societies. Work, here, is exhausting, stupefying and dehumanizing. Leisure only soothes and prolongs the stupefaction. It is based on false-needs and does not result in self-fulfillment. Workers no longer find satisfaction in themselves and in relations to others. Instead, they recognize themselves in their commodities – automobiles, television sets and electronic sets. As such, industrial man is completely alienated from every sphere of life.

In early 20th century, F.W Taylor (1911) through his “Scientific Management” principle tried to transform the administration and work-structure of industries so as to increase profitability. It is based on four main principles: a) greater division of labor – production process is broken to their component parts, so that each working job is simplified and reduced to single, simple task b) full managerial control of the workplace to be established c) rigorous and effective cost-accounting method to be adopted and d) it is financial consideration that determines employees’ motivation. If employees feel that they are sharing fairly in the increased profitability of the industry, they would willingly co-operate with the management.

Scientific management practices were extensively adopted by Henry Ford in his car-manufacturing industry – a process came to be known as ‘Fordism’. Fordism refers to highly mechanized, assembly-line mass production manufacturing methods. Complex tasks are divided into simple operations and the design of the product is standardized to eliminate all variations. Labor cost decreases as work simplification substitutes cheaper unskilled workers for experienced skilled workers. At the same time, production increases manifold (Giddens: 2009).

By 1970's, with the intensification in the process of globalization, scientific management and fordism gradually lost its relevance. Anthony Giddens (2009:894) gives two primary reasons for this. 1) fordism had inherent limitations. It could be applied only to industries that produced standardized products for large markets. It involved large expenditure and also had rigidity in production mechanism. In a globalized world where the industries have to cater to the varied demands of the consumers, fordism proves quite ineffective. 2) Taylorism and fordism are low-trust systems. Continuous supervision of workers by the management eroded the morale and confidence of the workers as they had little say in the production process. Low level of work satisfaction often led to industrial conflicts. In fact, fordism accentuated alienation.

Taylorism also came under intense criticism by the Human Relations School which was established as a consequence of Elton Mayo's investigation at the Howthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Chicago between 1927-32. He found no conclusive positive relationship between increased productivity and scientific management principle. In fact, rigidity at workplace reduced work efficiency and increased alienation. As a consequence of the failure of the management to take care of the "social needs" of the workers such as friendship, group support, recognition and full expression of individual creativity, the workers suffered psychologically and the efficiency of the organization got reduced (Tonkiss: 2006).

Marxist scholar Harry Braverman (1974) makes a telling critique of Taylorism and Fordism. Scientific management has led to the "de-skilling" of non-manual workers and their consequent proletarianization. Fragmentation of work-process has obviated the need to have skilled labor and has led to a surge in de-skilled jobs and unskilled workers. "Scientific management starts not from the human point of view but from the capitalist point of view, from the point of view of the management of a refractory work-force in a setting of antagonistic social relations. It investigates not labor in general, but the adaptation of labor to the needs of the capital. It enters the workplace not as the representative of science, but as the representative of management masquerading in the trappings of science" (Braverman 1974: 59). Braverman says that Taylor fails to see the exploitative nature of capitalist production. Braverman sees scientific management as simply a further weapon in the armory of oppression by the capitalist class. De-skilling has further objectified the labour and alienated them.

There is another important observation on work-structure as pointed out by Daniel Bell (1973). Bell says that since late 20th century, we have entered into a post-industrial phase.

In today's world, theoretical knowledge forms the "axial principle" of society and is the main source of innovation and policy formulation. In the economy, this is reflected in the decline in manufacturing sector as the main form of economic activity and its replacement by service sector. The new axial principle fosters the supremacy of professional and technical occupations which constitute a new class. In all spheres – economic, political and social – decision making is crucially influenced by this new intellectual class.

In the present era of globalization, the organization of work in industries has taken up a new form, what we call 'Post-fordism' (Giddens: 2009).. In recent decades of intense globalization, flexible practices have been introduced into a number of industrial activities such as product development, production techniques, management style, employee involvement and working environment. Post-fordism tries to incorporate all these elements under the premise of flexible specialization. Flexible specialization involves the production of a wide and changing variety of products in small volumes for specialized markets, using general-purpose machinery and skilled and adaptable labor. Post-fordism, upto some extent, has brought down alienation among workers (Tonkiss; 2006).

Another important dimension of sociology of work involves the issue of trade unions and the collective bargaining power of the workers. In the early development of modern industries, workers in most industries had no political rights and had little influence over their conditions of work. Unions developed as a means of redressing the imbalance of power between workers and employees. Unions enabled workers to go in for collective bargaining with the management over the issues of wages, conditions of work, social security and for redressal of other grievances.

However, since 1980's, with the process of globalization taking place at a faster rate, the influence of trade unions have declined. Giddens (2009: 900-901) gives four primary reasons for this: 1) perhaps the most common factor is the decline of the older manufacturing industries and the rise of service sector in recent years. Traditionally, manufacturing sectors has been the stronghold of unions whereas jobs in service sectors are more resistant to unionization. 2) Post-fordism and the flexibility in production process have also diminished the power of unions. 3) Collective bargaining power of workers in western countries has also declined recently due to increased international competition especially from Asian countries such as China, Japan or India where wages are very low. 4) Business cycles in capitalist production where recession and unemployment often looms large have also reduced the bargaining power of the unions. For instance, the recent

financial downturn and consequent mass employment in western countries since 2008 have greatly diminished the power of the trade unions.

Another important dimension of sociology of work is the international division of labor that has taken place in recent years. The concept suggests the specialization of particular countries in distinct branches of production, whether this be in certain products or in select parts of the production processes. Due to increased globalization, the spread of markets and production process has created a growing differentiation of economic activity.

That brings us to the most debated issues of the new international division of labor i.e. the outsourcing or off-shoring of jobs from developed to developing nations. Low labor cost, less regulated working conditions, tax incentives, low cost infrastructure and rising skills of the labor force has led many MNC's to establish their centers in Asian countries especially India and China as they enjoy economies of scale in these countries. While China has become the main outsourcing hub of manufacturing industries, India has become the main off-shoring center of service sector jobs. Though outsourcing is creating many job opportunities in developing countries, it has become a highly emotive and debated issue in developed world where many workers are losing jobs due to off-shoring. Also, in developing countries there are now raging debates that the government must intervene to regulate the working conditions in outsourced industries so that workers are paid decent wages and are provided with adequate social security measures and the exploitative character of these MNC's are reined in.

There is another major debate and that is as to whether globalization is really leading to flexible specialization in industries as the advocates of post-fordism argue. Many contend that globalization has, in fact, reinforced fordism leading to what is now called neo-fordism. This involves only certain refinements to the traditional fordist production techniques. Neo-fordist production systems use computer-controlled programmable automation to introduce some flexibility in the production process but they retain the basic principle of fordism and moving assembly-line structure. Managerial control and supervision over workers continue and semi-skilled workers continue to be the norm. One of the most persuasive arguments in favor of continued standardization of production process comes from George Ritzer (1993). Ritzer says that the standardized ways in which fast-food restaurants prepare their food are now being replicated in all the industries across the world. All the companies now use methods of scientific management and fordism to guarantee predictability, efficiency and calculability to customers.

Another important area of immense interest to sociologists is the role of women in paid employment in modern industrial settings. Anthony Giddens (2009:902) says that several of the new jobs that are being created in offices and service centers such as supermarkets, call centers and airports are mostly being filled by women. This “feminization of workforce” is not only a major historical shift in employment pattern but is also transforming gender relations in every area of society including the domestic sphere.

However, several feminists are not much upbeat about this “feminization of workforce”. They hold that women are mainly concentrated in lower-level jobs like nursing, primary school teaching, secretarial and lower-level clerical jobs. Ann Oakley (1974) argues that a major reason for the subordination of women in the labor-market is the institutionalization of the “*mother-housewife*” role as the primary role of all women. This emphasis makes paid employment a secondary consideration for them. In addition, a strong commitment to and involvement in work is largely incompatible with the successful performance of the mother-housewife role.

However, it cannot be denied that women, indeed, are entering in large numbers into the paid employment. Many women are also now occupying the highest managerial positions in industries. An important question that crops up is that how a woman’s economic independence is affecting the domestic division of labor. Young and Willmott (1973) say that in modern societies, conjugal roles have become more even and balanced, especially among the middle-class. Power is now increasingly balanced between husbands and wives. Husbands help their wives in domestic chores and activities and domestic decisions are mostly taken jointly and are based on mutual consultations. However, some feminists dispute this. They say that women’s employment has imposed “double-burden” of work on them. They still carry out most of the domestic work and look after the children. Added to this, they also now work outside in the labor market.

Probably the most debated dimension of sociology of work is the issue of social stratification in modern capitalist societies, solidarity among workers and the issue of class-conflict. Karl Marx believed that capitalist societies are basically divided into two contending classes having contradictory interests – the bourgeoisie or the capitalist and the proletariat or the working-class. As capitalism would intensify, the working class would undergo further “proletarianization” and “pauperization”. With the passage of time, they would get conscious of their exploitation, would unite together and rise in revolt against the bourgeoisie. The proletarian revolution would bring an end to capitalism and replace it with classless communism (Swedberg: 2003).

This contention of Marx has been challenged by many later sociologists. Max Weber (1947) says that class is not the only basis of social stratification. Status and Party are other dimensions of stratification and class, status and party often criss-cross each other. Weber is also not much upbeat about class polarization and proletarian revolution. Modern industrial society has, in fact, witnessed the proliferation and diversification of classes and many new classes have come upon. Weber, especially, points out to the expanding “white-collar” middle class who acts as the cushion between the capitalists and the proletariats. Weber also sees no reason as to why all workers who share similar market situations should unite together. Modern industrial society provides several avenues of individual upward social mobility and a worker might resort to these avenues rather than go for collective action.

Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) says that we have moved into a post-capitalist society where class conflict as predicted by Marx has little probability. Firstly, Marx glosses over the fact that it is the authority structure and not the economic base that is the main cause of superordination and subordination in modern societies and is the basis of conflict. Secondly, modern society is witnessing the “decomposition of capital” due to the emergence of joint stock companies and managerial revolution (where trained highly paid managers are in the fore-front of all important corporate decisions). Thirdly, there is “decomposition of labor”. In modern societies, workers have become highly heterogeneous and can be divided into skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled categories. There is no evidence of any similarity or cohesion among these categories of workers.

Further, there is no sign that the communist or socialist societies have become classless societies. Djilas (1957) argues that those in positions of authority in communist societies use power to further their own interests. The bourgeoisie of the West is replaced by the political bureaucrats (high communist party officials) in the East. They control all the means of production and monopolize decisions about the distribution of wealth and income. Wide income differential exist between them and the general working class and the rest of the society. Djilas holds that in communist societies, the “new class” is more exploitative because they control both economic and political power. However, some scholars like Westergaard and Ressler (1976) stick to Marxian view. They hold that Marxian theory is still applicable. The emergence of middle class and their differences with the manual workers is insignificant compared to the wide gulf that separates the capitalists from the working class.

Pierre Bourdieu (1998) is highly critical of the *neo-liberal economic policies* being adopted the world over. Flexible labor laws, reduced social spending by the government, decline of trade unions and casualization has led to constant fear of unemployment among all the workers including the employed workers. Bourdieu says “Short-term, part-time and temporary workers of every category, in industry, commerce, education, entertainment, even if there are immense differences among them.....all live in fear of unemployment and, very often, under the threat of the blackmail that can be used against them. Instability of employment opens up new strategies of domination and exploitation through the threat of redundancy.....which subjects the whole world of work to a crushing censorship that forbids mobilization and takes away bargaining power” (1998:89-90).

Conclusion – Ideology and sociology of work:

Every sociological explanation bears the imprint of some ideology. The range of views presented in this paper owes much to the values and ideologies of different scholars and sociologists. This is patently obvious in Marx’s and Braverman’s passionate condemnation of work in capitalist society and Blauner’s relatively restrained critique of work in modern industries. While Marxian view on work is based on an alternative utopian ideology, Blauner’s view is an expression of American liberalism. Despite these apparently contradictory viewpoints, each analysis has its own merit. They enlighten us on various dimensions of work in modern industries. Such varied viewpoints have also enriched our sociological knowledge and have also opened up new and exciting areas for further research with regards to sociology of work.

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