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ALIENATION AND INDUSTRY

An Australian poet who works on the waterfront in Western Australia discusses the effects of the alienation of the worker in capitalist industry on mental health and attitudes.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS documents state (p. 18) 'marxism has revealed the alienation of man in capitalism', and call for more study of this aspect of socialist theory. Marx and Engels in The German Ideology forecast that the communist regulation of production would remove the 'alien relationship between men and what they themselves produce'. An article in Soviet Literature No. 12, 1966, examines the task under socialism of liquidating the economic causes and the ideological consequences of alienation and its influence on literature, and the role of literature in helping to overcome them.

The economic effects under capitalism of the alienation of man from what he produces have been examined in Capital and other works. But in Capital Marx also wrote: "It is not the place here to go on to show how the division of labor seizes upon not only the economical, but every other sphere of society." It is our loss that he did not go on, there or elsewhere.

But the social and psychological effects of the alienation of man from what he produces are wide and varied. They influence man's response to work, to life and sport, to literature and art. William Morris, one of the pioneer socialists in England, employer of more than a hundred men in his factory, saw one of the social results of alienation, the loss of creative satisfaction in work.

I could not do anything to give this pleasure (in creative initiative) to the workmen, because I should have had to change their method of work so utterly that I would have disqualified them from earning their living elsewhere. You see I have got to understand thoroughly the manner of work under which the art of the Middle Ages was done, and that that is the only manner of work that can turn out popular art, only to discover that it is impossible to work in that manner in this profit-grinding society.

The lack of creative satisfaction in work for wages comes from several causes. The loss of economic right in the product
cannot be overlooked although the worker has been conditioned and educated and brainwashed into accepting it. Division of labor is also an important factor in loss of satisfaction. Marx in *Capital* wrote:

> It is not only the labor that is divided, subdivided and portioned out between divers men: it is the man himself that is cut up, and metamorphosed into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation.

The knowledge, the judgment and the will which, though in ever so small a degree, are practised by the independent peasant or handicraftsman . . . these faculties are now required only for the workshop as a whole.

The social and psychological effects of alienation under capitalism have not yet been studied as a whole, nor their effects traced in the affluent society of Australia today.

Industrial psychology in USA since the war has been concerned with part of the problem, as it has affected production, labor turnover and strikes. But the sorest point, the economic alienation of man from what he produces, is avoided. The lack of creative satisfaction in work is not courageously handled, but there is a facing up to much of the realities inside modern industry. T. Wise, in *Human Relations in Modern Industry*, sums up:

> It is a terrible thought to realise that much of present-day work is inherently incapable of satisfying the man who does it—and it is getting worse with the increase of machines.

Figures given by other psychologists endorse this. Henry Clay Smith in *Psychology of Industrial Behavior* gives figures for some English factories. When there was only one operation of work only 33% were fairly interested. 92% of executives found the job interesting, but only 54% of factory workers.

In six firms in Michigan 11% of executives were dissatisfied, 48% highly satisfied. Of the unskilled workers 27% were dissatisfied, only 18% highly satisfied. Gilmer in *Industrial Psychology* found job dissatisfaction round 12%, very high among young workers, going down to the lowest at about 30 and rising steadily to a middle aged revolt. He found 25% of unskilled workers dissatisfied.

In *Human Behavior in Industry*, Finlay, Sartain and Tate considered some of the non-economic satisfaction people need to get from their jobs. The man with craft skill gets much satisfaction from a tool or gauge he has made, even though he may never know the end point the tool is for. Production workers find it very difficult to get personal satisfaction of accomplishment from jobs where they have no choice of method, and all the brain and skill are built into tools and machines. Gilmer found that security
rated as top factor in job satisfaction, interest in the job rated next, even ahead of possibilities of advancement.

He found in 14 out of 26 studies that workers with positive attitudes to the job showed higher productivity than those with negative attitudes. Nine studies showed no reaction. Only three of the studies showed that workers with a negative attitude to work produced more.

But apart from its effect on production, there are at least two other effects of job dissatisfaction. One very interesting one is touched on by Ross Stagner in *Psychology of Industrial Conflict*. It is the possible causal factor in neurosis of occupational origin. He said (1956) that the study of the problem had scarcely begun. He quoted figures from Frazer in 1947, which showed that where there was a liking for the job, 24% suffered from neurotic illness, 46% from physical illnesses. Where the job was boring, the neurotically ill rose to 43%, the physically ill to 55%, a much smaller rise in proportion.

The workers in jobs with above average wages were 29% neurotically ill, workers in jobs with low wages 23%, no significant difference. But workers in jobs with above average wages had 42% physically ill, and with low wages 58%, a considerable rise that could possibly be related to the effect of food, accommodation and immediate medical care that would go with the different wage levels.

The very high figure of 43% neurotically ill in boring jobs surely must be one of the grave and increasing danger signs of modern life.

But workers don't only go slow or go mad because of job dissatisfaction; they go on strike. Industrial psychologists, Finlay, Sartain and Tate, found that where men had no opportunity of self-expression or creativeness in their work, there was a willingness of many union members to contribute time and energy to union affairs as officers and committee men, strong evidence of the urge to be recognised as individuals and people of importance. Ross Stagner digs deeper in his *Psychology of Industrial Conflict*. He does not believe men go into picket lines and endanger their lives in bloody violence for the mere wage increase or shorter hours. Behind every blow in a strike, days, months, years of hurt feelings, resentment bitter and strong because it expresses the very will to live.

Within industry is the watershed of the world. There are those who are numbed and defeated and become neurotic, who sink back into the swamps. There are those, growing in numbers and organisation, whose energies, expressed in collective actions,
flow in a radically different direction, fighting the destructive influences, expressing the very will to live. The directions of this fight under capitalism are extremely wide and varied—from the almost irrepressible working class humor that flourishes on many jobs, to massive strikes and insurrections where the workers take over the factories.

The same watershed exists outside industry. There are those self-employed and those whose work is creative, where they use to the full their capabilities of hand and brain, who have creative satisfaction in work. Those who have been or are still pioneering, surgeons, research workers, teachers, are possibly among such lucky ones. They do not feel the tensions that are becoming so unbearable for many moderns. Those whose creative urges have not been blunted or destroyed by education and work, but have little satisfaction in their work, turn to other outlets after the eight-hour desert. They continue old hobbies, or take up new ones, from hunting to gardening, from gemstones to surfboard riding; they turn to making or repairing engines or boats, to an infinite variety of constructive, healthy, creative activities.

But there are also those who have lost the pleasure in most activities, who are bored with work and bored with life. The energy that drives them, potentially their creativeness, demands some outlet, but the outlets they seek are too often destructive, and regressions to earlier reactions. They range from the bored and savage critic, to the vandal, the alcoholic, to the suicide and the murderer. They all in different degrees seek revenge on themselves or on the society that has robbed them of something, but they do not know what it is. Racial intolerance, fascism, war-mindedness feed on this blocked and distorted creativeness that is continually growing under the conditions of capitalism and imperialism.

These creative and destructive streams flow into every aspect of life. The analysis of modern Australian literature and art, from the viewpoint of the social results of alienation, of lack of creative satisfaction in work, could be very useful. Much work needs to be done to fill in, correct and apply this outline of the social effects of alienation of man from what he produces.