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## **Alienating Students: Marxist Theory in Action**

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**Title:** Alienating Students: Marxist Theory in Action

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## **Abstract**

Karl Marx is one of the most controversial and important sociologists. Although he is largely credited for his macro perspectives, he made important contributions by detailing the micro experiences of the worker in a capitalist system. This piece details a hands-on learning activity that allows students to experience both alienation and non-alienation in the classroom. By offering a kinesthetic activity to pair with readings on the topic, students will be better able to grasp this fundamental, yet often difficult to understand, core concept of Marxist theory.

## *Introduction*

Karl Marx was a prolific writer and thinker and is one of the most discussed sociologists, both within and outside of the discipline. Although widely credited for his writings attached to the macro political economy, Marx is given less recognition for other pieces of his work. His insight into other macro processes, such as environmental and urban degradation, and micro processes, such as alienation, are arguably under utilized (Foster 1999). Unpacking and exploring these fundamental components of Marxist theory are seminal to understanding the current plight of workers in today's society.

Marx's continued relevancy is due to the timelessness of his core concepts. As predicted by Marx, alienation remains a current feature under capitalism. Although alienation is pervasive, it remains a difficult concept to grasp, perhaps because it is pervasive. This activity attempts to turn the mundane into a teaching moment. Particularly within the space of the postsecondary classroom, where many students are preparing themselves for a full-time commitment to the labor market, understanding the concept of alienation is invaluable.

## *Alienation*

Alienation, according to Marx, occurs as a separation: a fractured, improper, distanced or estranged relationship and is a crucial component of capitalism (Woodfin and Zarate 2009). Although Marx wrote in a different country and in an earlier time period, when the majority of the workforce was employed in a factory with fewer workers' rights than today, his writings are still germane. The majority of the workforce in America today comprises low skill and low paid jobs (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000), coupled with a shift from manufacturing jobs to service sector jobs (Henderson

2012). And, alarmingly Americans are working more hours, but receiving less compensation. For the majority of workers, autonomy and creativity are increasingly rendered obsolete (Bartik and Houseman 2007). Large corporations, which employ a large part of the workforce, want the production and service process to be standardized. McDonaldization, including the increasing uniformity of the production process, combines with Taylorism, or the scientific management of the workplace, for example, an increased reliance on output quotas, to produce alienating forces within the sphere of labor (Ritzer 2004; Buroway 1979; Edwards 1979).

Alienation can take several forms, including alienation from one's labor product and alienation from the production process, both of which will be demonstrated in this activity. As an example of the former, imagine a worker putting time and effort into crafting a product and then having the product taken and sold in order to primarily benefit another. In considering the latter, imagine routine, mindless tasks where human workers are increasingly taking on characteristics of a machine. Repetitiveness, uniformity and consistency become paramount and with this personality and unique human tributes are lost, sometimes all together. These aspects of the work experience objectify workers.

When humans are involved in the production process, often their responsibilities require that they increasingly invoke the functionality of a machine. So, telemarketers, food service workers and salespersons are given a script and have quotas to make. Rooms-keepers have time standards to make. Ideas for improvement are external to the daily, lived experience of working, with the result that many people occupying the

lower rungs of labor experience frustration that their daily work lives are being governed, monitored and controlled by those with little “on the job” experience.

Social reproduction theorists argue that our schooling system plays an integral part in the alienation of the labor force. Beginning in elementary school, students are prepared for their future work lives. In working-class classrooms, students are prepared for subordinate positions as white-collar workers, where their job performance will be reviewed based on getting the task done correctly. These students are more likely to be given mechanical and routine tasks than tasks that require creativity or independence. Children at affluent schools are given tasks that develop a high degree of autonomy, which will allow them to negotiate the various terrains of industrial society, and the confidence that will be necessary for their future as leaders (Anyon 1980). The school system trains working class students to be complacent and passive receptors, rather than creators. In this way, the educational system reproduces a divide between dominant and subordinate classes and that schooling processes perpetuate the class divisions of socio-economic society (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

And we know that the aptitude of publicly schooled students is increasingly tied to objective measures. This focus on test scores may have alienating side effects. For how can one-size-fits-all accountability, teaching to the test *and* student differentiation all be realized (Brimijoin 2005; Meier and Wood 2004)? Regardless of students past educational experiences, alienation is an important concept to unpack in an undergraduate classroom, where the majority of students are preparing for full-time participation in the workforce. Teachers want students to be able to connect course concepts, like alienation, to their past, present and future situations.

While students may soon forget rote knowledge, such as the definitions of vocabulary words, if students can experience a concept firsthand, the memory may outlast the lesson and students report increased learning for non-traditional learning activities (Pedersen 2010). After all, knowledge is not only accrued through accumulation of words and symbols, but can be attained through experience (Samudra 2008). Further, students may have felt alienated in their lives already and because much learning occurs when people link new material to their existing knowledge, this is an effective strategy for teaching the concept of alienation (Piaget 1985). This activity captures alienation in the moment, and this may enable students to recall this concept and the connected memories if it reappears in their lives beyond the classroom.

#### *Uses for this Activity*

I have used this activity in ten different classrooms at a public, research university in the state of California. I have used this activity seven times in *Introduction to Sociology* discussion sections. I had such success with the activity that I decided to try it out on upper division *Social Stratification* students. I have used it three times total for this class. Beyond these two courses, I think this activity is particularly appropriate for *Sociological Theory*, *Social Problems* and *Sociology of Work*. In addition to the five courses listed above, this activity is suitable in any setting where the concept of alienation is discussed, including public and private universities and community colleges.

This activity works well when paired both with Marx's "Alienation" and a more contemporary reading on the state of jobs in America today such as "On the Job: Work, Workers, and the Changing Nature of Labor" (Dolgon and Baker 2011). One of the

main arguments students articulate after this activity aligns with the functional perspective. For example, a common statement from a student is: “But, someone has to do these jobs and I’m in college because I don’t want that person to be me!” For this reason it is good strategically to pair this activity with a reading like *Rigging the Game: How Inequality is Reproduced in Everyday Life* (Schwalbe 2007). In particular, the chapter *Arresting the Imagination*, goes into the pitfalls and misconceptions of TINA (There Is No Alternative) thinking. Social reproduction readings contextualize the current labor force and help students contextualize persistent inequalities. In particular, Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Anyon (1980) focus on the educational trajectories of working class individuals. Finally, *The Hidden Injuries of the Working Class* (Sennett and Cobb 1972) would be a good read to frame the activity in terms of workplace inequality and the take-home stressors of working class occupational positions. These readings encourage critical thinking and contextualize the experience of alienation. Combined, they form a sufficient story of the importance of alienation in the lives of Americans from school to career. These materials will prepare students to more confidently share in the classroom by helping them to see the link between this activity and real life examples. Although Marx discusses numerous forms of alienation, this activity will focus on two, alienation from the labor product and alienation from the labor process, with room to incorporate others.

### *Activity Part I*

I tell the students that we are going to begin class with an activity. In line with readings from today, I announce that even though I know that their imaginations may not be fully developed, because after all they are students in a system that prioritizes



test scores (Meier and Wood 2004), I need them to try to tap into the part of their brain where imagination resides and cultivate it. I ask students to take out a sheet of paper (preferably one with as few lines as possible) and at least one writing utensil.<sup>1</sup> Next, I have them imagine they are amazing artists. The paper in front of them is not an ordinary sheet of paper. Rather, it is a large, empty canvas of the finest quality. The writing utensils at their disposal are not ordinary pens and pencils, rather they are artists' tools, especially designed for their particular craft.

I instruct them to use the tools to draw a picture, write a letter or create some other art form, for someone or something they care about deeply. This can be a person, an animal, a place or a cause. They can envision themselves as poets or paper mâché artists. I have seen really fabulous paper airplanes, a swan and various other paper figurines. Sometimes here students will ask questions, such as "Can I draw a slogan?" or "Does it have to be to just one person?" I reply that they can set their own rules today. I try to answer these questions in such a way as to highlight the divide between this activity and the normal routine in the classroom, where students are less autonomous.

Although students have been responsive in the ten times I have implemented this activity, a few have resisted buying into it. I use these points as teaching moments. By being "forced" to comply with an activity they do not voluntarily want to do, they are experiencing alienation from their task at this stage in the activity.

I do not set an initial time limit, and if students ask I avoid giving objective measurements of time. I then walk around the classroom to make sure that students are engaged in the activity. Hovering over them replicates aspects of Taylorism and

increases the possibility that students will feel self-conscious, however I find it helpful to do so, in order to get a sense of which students I should prompt during the share period. After approximately 5 minutes, approximately one half of the class will have shareable pieces of art. Typically, many students show no sign of finishing. Once a substantial portion of students appears to have a near finished product, we move to discussion.

### *Sharing Section*

During this section, I ask for volunteers to show off their artwork for the class. I ask them to describe the artwork and explain what inspired their particular piece. Students have created symbols of their hometown, banners for a social movement, sympathy cards, drawn pets, and written letters to their partners. The majority of the drawings involve common shapes and images, like flowers. I let as many students shared as are so inspired in order to build the impact for the next stage in the activity.

After sharing, I thank the students for their time and energy. I tell them I appreciate their work, particularly because I am a capitalist and they have been working as laborers for me. I state that I am going to collect their magnificent works of art and sell them at a profit. When they start moaning and groaning (which they do) I tell them not to worry because I am so impressed with their work I want to make sure they all come back the next day. To this end, I will provide them with just enough compensation to get a bit of food and shelter for the night. I have them pass their artwork to the end of the rows and keep them in stacks there<sup>ii</sup>.

### *Discussion of Alienating Experience 1: Alienation from the labor product.*

I ask students about their perceptions and experiences with the activity to this point. Do they think it is fair? Why or why not? How did they feel when they were

working on the project? How do they feel now? I let them share how they felt connected to the work and how now they feel disconnected. Then I ask them to relate this initial part of the activity to Marx and the concept of alienation from the labor product. Can they think of ways that work could exist without this alienation? Students' answers vary to these questions, but overall all the activity encourages discussion.

### *Activity Part II*

After this discussion, I ask students to take out another sheet of paper. This time I tell them that while I am impressed by the profits made from their last round of products, I think they can do better. So, instead of one drawing, I want them to make 16 replicas. I am less concerned about size, so I ask them to please divide their new canvas into 16 pieces and use these smaller pieces as many mini-canvases. I want their art to be exactly the same, only smaller. If students who designed figurines or others complain that they do not have enough space, I either tell them to do their best, including making modifications that the buyer would not notice or that since they are producing specialty items, 4 replicas will suffice. Finally, I add that they only have 3 minutes to complete this task.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Discussion of Alienating Experience 2: Alienation from the production process.*

After three minutes, I ask students for their reactions to the latter part of this activity. What are their thoughts? What happened to their connection to their product? How did they feel this time when they were working on the project? How is the new system different from the old system? How do they feel now compared to how they felt before? I let them share. Students often describe how this time they felt less connected to the work. Then I ask them to relate this second part of the activity to Marx and the

concept of alienation from the production process. Can these processes exist without the experience of alienation? How did it feel to have the work process externalized?<sup>iv</sup>

Typically, students respond with negative reactions to these situations.

### *Student Evaluations*

Student evaluations of this activity are overwhelmingly positive. All of the evaluations were given directly after the activity. In evaluating the activity, I ask students to comment on the activity, offer suggestions and finally to recommend whether to keep or drop the activity for future classes. I received evaluations from two upper division Social Stratification classes. N=39 for one class and N=32 for the other class for a total N=71.<sup>v</sup> Seventy out of seventy-one upper-division Sociology students recommended keeping the activity. Use of the following student evaluations has been cleared with the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Merced as Category 4 Exempt.<sup>vi</sup> Below are typical, positive comments:

“I enjoyed this activity. It helped me understand capitalism and the idea of creating a good or doing a service because you like it and want to, as opposed to creating a mass product and not being able to reap the benefits.”

“I think the activity was a good illustration of the concept being illustrated. It gave me a better understanding of what Marx was explaining. The personal feel amplified perhaps feelings Marx had.”

“I consider this activity small, but with a big meaning.”

“The game was fun to me and definitely explained the relationship between the worker, the product and the owner.”

Such comments demonstrate that students not only enjoyed the activity, they also learned from it. Students are linking this activity with the labor market and with the main elements of Capitalism, namely the worker, the owner and the product. While most

were enthusiastic, some were less impressed, but still gave encouraging feedback or specific recommendations:

“The activity was pretty good and I enjoyed it. I feel that with activities like this I could open up more and engage in discussions. I would like to do more like these in the future.”

“I liked the point this activity made. Maybe some numbers should have been thrown in there for greater effect. For example, saying that each drawing is \$5 and then saying the artists only receive \$.50 of it while the owner receives another amount. Overall, good activity.”

The latter comment is particularly telling. As millennial students (Howe and Strauss 2000), these students are most comfortable with defined boundaries in regards to their schooling. I am encouraged when students suggest how to improve their learning experience. Other students commented on the fact that the activity was a nice break from lecturing and offered insight into a difficult reading. As an example:

“I enjoyed the activity because it helped me better understand what Marx was saying. Rather than simply having an explanation, the activity provided a hands-on learning experience.”

Lastly, I received comments from students who were not thrilled to be asked to draw in class, but ended up thinking the activity was helpful. The following comment reveals that this activity can expose students to a challenging activity in a secure environment. Overcoming this small gap imbues confidence:

“I liked the activity. At first, I was freaked out because I’m terrible at art and creative activities, but in this case, it really helped me to understand the point you were trying to make.”

These panic moments can be expected, but they are not the most common reaction of students. Overall, students enjoy the activity. It is a break from lecture and may particularly benefit overworked and generally high-anxiety undergraduates. Further,

the intellectual benefits are twofold-this activity gives students the opportunity to be creative and to match a real life experience with Marxian text. Finally, and based on in-class evaluations of students level of comprehension throughout the semester, this activity appears to promote more frequent correct usage of this term compared to other course concepts.

### *Adaptations to Activity*

This activity can be further developed to incorporate other aspects of Marx's theory of alienation. For example, students could be placed in different groups in the second alienating exercise, based on the quality of their work, or their skill. There can be one group of skilled laborers, another group of semi-skilled and a final group of unskilled laborers, each with different levels of access to resources. For example, the skilled laborers could be the only group that still gets to use markers, the semi-skilled could be reduced to using only pen or pencil and the unskilled group could be laid off and told that they were not needed this season. I could also offer different rewards for the three groups, such as bringing treats into the classroom or giving away the scented markers, highlighters or colored pens used during the activity. As suggested by one of the evaluations presented in this paper, I could also specify a monetary value of the products along with a wage for the student workers.

Additional pressure could be applied by highlighting the instability of the students' work positions. After the second part of the activity, their work could be rated as subpar. Students could be told that due to the weak economy their wages will have to be cut and if they don't like it, due to the high rate of unemployment, the owners are confident they will be easily replaced. By emphasizing this angle of competition, students are

given insight into labor market mechanizations where in an increasingly globalized workforce, workers experience alienation from other workers in part by being forced to compete with them for limited resources. This section would work particularly well to tie into readings from who discuss in detail where the frustrations of the working class are misdirected towards one another and not to the owners (Bonacich 1972; Wilson 1980).

### *Limitations*

This activity requires buy in on the part of students and it also produces buy in on the part of students. For the latter reasons, I recommend using the activity only after at least a small amount of rapport has been established with the students. I last used the activity during the third week of a sixteen-week semester, which worked well as an icebreaker for those students who were previously hesitant to verbally engage in class.

Comprehension of the concept of alienation is complicated because there are multiple forms of alienation. This activity clearly demonstrates both the difference between alienation from the labor product and alienation from the production process, as well as the significance at the experiential level of each. However, as currently developed this activity does not attend to all forms of alienation.

### *Conclusion*

Experiencing alienation may be common in the current socio-economic system, but recognizing it as such is less common. When students are able to see how sociological terms apply to their life, they are developing an important tool. Beyond shedding light on alienation, this activity allows students to experience what alienation is not. In doing the first part of the activity, students get a glimpse of the distinction between an alienating and a non-alienating experience. In order to be non-alienation,

according to Marx, work must be experienced voluntarily, i.e. not out of forced necessity. The worker needs to experience wellbeing when working. When the worker has an environment that encourages wellbeing, other important internal processes such as creativity are more easily developed. The work experience develops out of the needs and desires of a worker internally, not from external forces. These are potentially lofty, but also important notions to ponder, not only for undergraduates, but also for those of us who care about our students and hope that they always have jobs that are big enough for their spirits (Berkman 2004).



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i If resources are available, I suggest bringing many sets of colored markers or crayons for this activity.

ii I hand the art pieces back to students at the end of the activity.

iii During this segment of the activity, the point would really be driven home if the instructor brought in a timer and gave students a short amount of time to complete each replica of their original design.

iv It should be noted that I return all artwork to students at the completion of this activity.

v I did not generate evaluations from the Introduction to Sociology discussion sections or the first time I used it in an upper division Social Stratification class.

vi Category 4 Exempt applies to evaluation and use of existing data.