

Alienation: An Overview

By Walter Jensen, Doctoral Student
<http://www.walterjensen.net/>

Department of Sociology
Western Michigan University

According to Lewis A. Coser (1977), “Alienation may be described as a condition in which men [and women] are dominated by forces of their own creation, which confront them as alien powers” (*Masters of Sociological Thought*, 2nd Ed., New York: Harcourt Brace, pg. 50-53.) In short, the creation becomes the master of the creator.

According to Eric Fromm (1995),

“Alienation (or ‘estrangement’) means, for Marx, that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object” (*Marx’s Concept of Man*, New York: Continuum, pg. 44).

Fromm goes on to explain that the human being become estranged from their own life forces, from the wealth of their own potentialities, and is in touch with themselves only “in the indirect way of submission to life frozen in the idols.” In the second footnote for that page, Fromm explains,

“This is, incidentally, also the psychology of the fanatic. He is empty, dead, depressed, but in order to compensate for the state of depression and inner deadness, he chooses an idol, be it the state, a party, an idea, the church, or God. He makes this idol into the absolute, and submits to it in an absolute way. In doing so his life attains meaning, and he finds excitement in the submission to the chosen idol.” (pg. 44-45)

In ‘On the Meaning of Alienation’ (*American Sociological Review*, 24 (6): 783-791), Melvin Seeman (1959, Dec.) distinguishes five different forms of alienation: (1) powerlessness, (2) meaninglessness, (3) normlessness, (4) isolation, and (5) self-estrangement. In addition, he argued that these different forms of alienation had behavioral consequences.

Classroom Assignment: Contemplate how the following elements, separately or in conjunction, create alienation: working a plastic extrusion machine; voting in a republic; attending religious services in a secular society; earning a paycheck; having a cell phone, a computer, and/or email account; learning in an academic environment; and, finally, the ‘time clock’ and the ‘alarm clock.’ Come to class prepared to discuss your contemplations concerning alienation.

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