

## **Veblen's idea on “irksomeness” of labor and workmanship and their relevance to Marx's notion of “estrangement of labor”**

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From the viewpoint of neoclassical economics, “it is one of the commonplaces ... that work is irksome.” Neoclassical theory implicitly embraces the assumption that human beings prefer leisure to work and generally treat this human nature as unchangeable. Accordingly, they used to leave the matter of human preferences itself out of consideration in analyzing economic phenomena.

According to Veblen, there is, however, a flaw in the neoclassical theory owing to its unrealistic assumptions as to human nature and lack of an evolutionary approach to social changes. Veblen held that the irksomeness of labor should be viewed in the light of cultural history and presented two major concepts of instinct, i.e., workmanship and sportsmanship. He used these terms to explain social change, from primitive to modern society. In this respect, there seems a resemblance between the point of view on the human labor of Veblen and that of Marx.

In this essay, I will examine the relation between Veblen's idea on “irksomeness” of labor and workmanship and Marx's notion of “estrangement of labor”. First of all, I will try to explain Veblen's idea on “irksomeness” of labor and workmanship, and then, Marx's notion of “estrangement of labor”. Clarifying Veblen's idea and Marx's, I will emphasize that there is similarity between the theories of Veblen and Marx.

### Veblen's idea on “irksomeness” of labor and workmanship

In his “The Instinct of Workmanship”(1934), Veblen criticize mainstream theory for assuming that “an aversion to useful effort is an integral part of human nature.”

“Under the selective process ... there is no chance for the survival of a species gifted with such an aversion to the furtherance of its own life process. ... there is a considerable body of evidence, both from cultural history and from the present-day phenomena of human life, which traverses this conventionally accepted view that makes man generically a sportsman.”

Veblen asserts that in the evolution of economic institutions two conflicting types of human nature have been generated: the warlike, predatory, competitive, on the one hand, and the peaceful and industrious, on the other. In this connection, he proposes two contrasting conceptions of instinct, namely, sportsmanship and workmanship. Looking backward, he finds that these conflicting instincts are represented in the early stages of history by two opposing types of society: “communities that have retained the archaic, peaceable constitution” and the warlike barbarian culture. In the primitive savage community rivalry existed, but the conditions favoring a predatory life were absent; so that the emulation between members of the group ran its course in terms of workmanship.

“The habits of life of the race were still perforce of a peaceful and industrial character, rather than contentious and destructive. Tools and implements, in the early days, must have served chiefly to shape facts and objects for human use, rather than for inflicting

damage and discomfort.”

With an improvement in technology and the resultant growth in surplus wealth, primitive savagery, which is characterized by peace and industry, gradually receded before the emerging culture of the predatory barbarian.

“As the industrial efficiency of the group increases, and as weapons are brought to greater perfection, the incentives to aggression and the opportunities for achievement along this line increase.”

As the predatory culture advance, the tradition of prowess, barbarism, and exploit becomes worthy and encouraged, while peaceable and industrial employments come to be accounted intrinsically base. And then it has been developed into the popular apprehension that labor is ignoble and indecorous.

With these considerations in cultural development in mind, Veblen proceeds to sketch the role played by the instinct of workmanship from the stone age to the present day. One of Veblen's main assumptions on social change is that the discipline of different institutions generates different social habits among the classes of persons who are mainly occupied with them in getting a livelihood. That is, the different stages of cultural history - peaceful and barbarian culture - produce and structure the diverse instincts - workmanship and sportsmanship. Therefore, Veblen's account of “irksomeness” of labor, workmanship and social change is based on the view that social culture is the result of material conditions, but that the changes step forward in the form of social habits and customs that become embodied in institutions in the group's repeated responses to its surrounding environment.

Marx's notion of “estrangement of labor”

In Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx wrote a section entitled "Estranged Labor". This piece is often referred to as one of the passages where Marx introduced his complicated notion of human alienation or estrangement. (Marx uses two terms, namely, estrangement and alienation, to describe the nature of human and labor in the capitalist society, yet, these words are by and large interchangeable.) "Estranged," in the Marxist tradition, means to stand as a stranger to -- to be in some significant way outside of, or apart from, something. Marx argues that the characteristic of labor under capitalist economy is one that estranges the worker in the four ways mentioned below.

According to the Marx in his discussion of “Estranged Labor”, there are four basic relationships; (1) The worker's relationship with nature or product of labor, (2) his or her relationship with the process of labor, (3) the relationship of the worker with him or herself, and (4) the relationship of the worker with other people.

From the viewpoint of the first relationship, estranged labor means that the worker is estranged from the product of his or her labor.

“the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. ... the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital.”

In explaining this first theme, Marx makes two main points. First, the object produced by

labor is an external object. Second, this object gains its own power which is hostile to the worker who produced it. Marx describes nature as the external world that people can sense. It not only provides the material upon which labor acts, or the basis on which labor can be recognized, but it also provides the material to facilitate producing. Marx goes on to say that nature not only provides the material without which labor would not exist, but nature also provides the food without which the person who labors would not exist. Since the worker depends on these objects of nature in order for labor to exist and in order to physically survive, the worker in effect becomes dependent upon the objects he or she takes away from nature. As a result, this object gains its own power which is hostile to the worker who produced it.

In connection with the second point of relationship, estranged labor means that producing an object is an alienating activity. Labor is external to the worker - i.e., does not belong to his essential being.

“He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is, therefore, not voluntary but forced, it is forced labour. It is, therefore, not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself.”

Marx writes that the negative feelings experienced by workers are evidence that the worker is separated from his or her labor, and from this he concludes that productive activity within labor is alienating, which is called “self-estrangement, as compared with the estrangement of the object”.

From these first two contents of estranged labor, Marx develops the third feature: estranged labor degrades human nature. To explain this character of estrangement, Marx uses the concept of “species being.” Species being refers to that which unites humanity as distinct from other animals. For Marx, “free conscious activity constitutes the species character of man,” that is, “Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity.” However, “estranged labour reverses the relationship so that man, ... makes his life activity, his essential being, a mere means for his existence.”

“Estranged labour, therefore, turns man’s species-being - both nature and his intellectual species-power - into a being alien to him and a means of his individual existence. It estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his human existence.”

Humanity's unique species activity is the free, universal production of artifacts. Under capitalistic economy, this species activity is neither free, nor universal. Instead, it is forced, individual activity.

The fourth theme of estranged labor is a consequence of the preceding three themes: estranged labor separates people from each other.

“An immediate consequence of man’s estrangement from the product of his labour, his life activity, his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. ... What is true of man’s relationship to his labour, to the product of his labour, and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, and to the labour and the object of the labour of other men.”

Marx had a specific understanding of the very sharp experience of estranged labor which

is found in capitalist society. For Marx, the estrangement of labor manifests itself in the result of production, the activity of production itself, the relation to himself or herself as a species being, and the relationship to other human.

### The relationship between Veblen and Marx

The social theory of Veblen is similar in various aspects to that of Marx. Like Marx, he sought to give a evolutionary and historical account of capitalism as a unique mode of economic organization and, also, to set forth the institutions peculiar to this system. This affinity between Veblen and Marx is well expressed in their central concept of human nature and labor mentioned above.

Their resemblance is represented by the methodology in explaining the relation between human and various circumstances. Veblen sees a human being as a creature of habits and propensities. The process of selection has an effect on human beings and make them different from other species. This Veblen's description of human as a social animal can be associated with Marx's argument that, in explaining estranged labor, the relation between human and object play a primary role. It is the relationship between human and environment that commands the process of making labor irksome in Veblen's theory and the process of estrangement of labor in Marx's theory. Considering the role of subject or human, the two economists coincide on that point. Neither takes human preferences or human nature as given. Both of them treat human preferences and human nature as variables to be explained in terms of social structure and interrelation rather than assumed. Both construct theories of the human and try to explain how the context in which human beings find themselves affects the status of human beings and how the human beings in that context affect the context itself.

Similarity between the theories of Veblen and Marx is represented not only by their methods of explaining the relation between subject and object, but also by their particular concepts of the nature of labor. For Veblen, the irksomeness of labor is a cultural fact, and then, "physical irksomeness and distastefulness can be borne, if only the spiritual incentive is present." That is, it is not a inherent quality but a cultural and historical process that cause labor to be irksome. It is similar to Marx's explanation on the estranged labor. Marx present a relation unique to the particular stage of history, namely, capitalist system, as a key to the cause of the estrangement of labor. Therefore, there is substantive similarity between the concepts of "irksomeness of labor" and "estrangement of labor."

As examined above, there is a resemblance between Veblen's theory of irksomeness of labor and workmanship and a Marx's theory of estrangement of labor as the center of his critique of capitalism. It can be explained by considering how two theories deal with the problem of the role of human in social change and how they define the nature of labor. In that respect, Veblen had a unacknowledged debt to Karl Marx.

### References

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