

A Level Sociology: Induction Task

Aims:

- To discover what it is like to study A Level Sociology and the skills that will be required of you
- To help you decide if A Level Sociology is the right course for you and if you are interested in learning about sociological concepts and theory

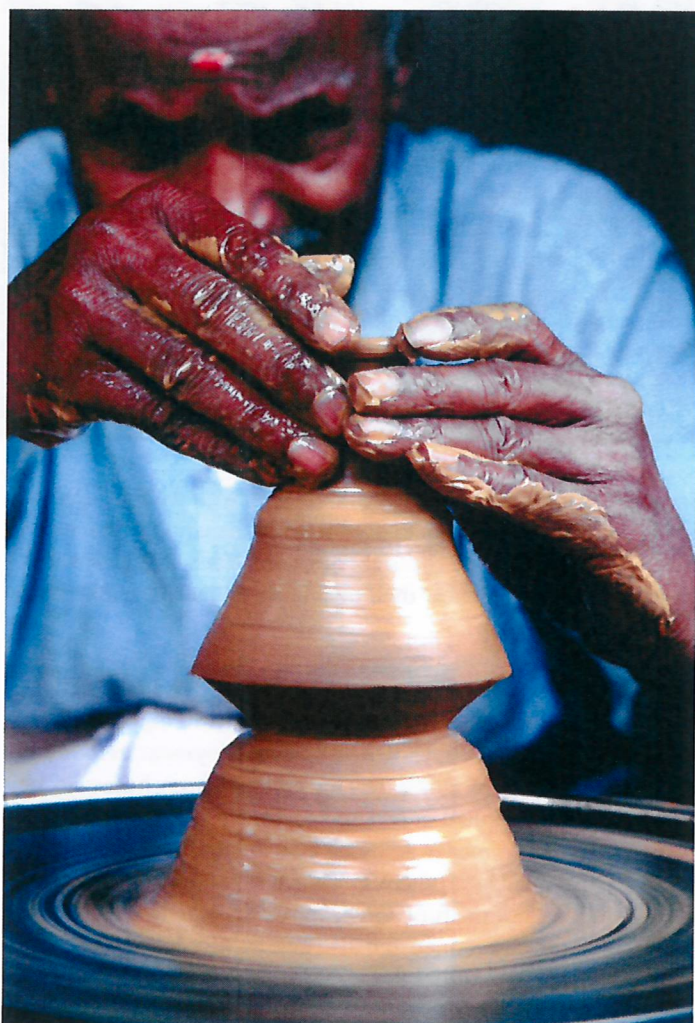
Instructions:

- Please read the article below, this is a difficult piece of writing and will require careful reading and engagement
- The article will introduce you to an advanced sociological concept – alienation. Once you have read the article answer the comprehension questions on separate pieces of paper
- Once you have completed the comprehension questions, complete the follow-up tasks using the internet to research – complete on separate paper
- Please make sure that this work is completed when you start college after the summer holidays and bring your answers with you



stretch and challenge

Alienation



Alienation is a word commonly used in many aspects of social life. But where does the concept come from, and what does it mean?

Alienation is an important concept in the writings of Marx. In order properly to understand what Marx meant by alienation, we must first look at his idea of human nature. Marx believed that humans are naturally creative. Although they need to produce things in order to survive, in the act of production, whether this is growing or making something, they release the creativity and innovation that is their true nature. In doing this, they shape and mould the society in which they live. This means that the nature of society is the result of human actions, rather than being formed by seemingly impersonal forces.

Marx and the 'species being'

Marx referred to our capacity for work as our 'species being' — that which makes us truly human. In the process of working, however, we also become 'social beings', because in order to produce what we need to live, we need to cooperate and work together.

Marx argued that as societies develop, they become capable of producing more than people need to survive — in other words, they produce a surplus. This means that some people become freed from the need to produce things. Such people can then live not by their own labour, but by controlling and making a profit from the labour of others. This led to the development of class divisions in society. With the development of industrial society a new class emerged (the bourgeoisie) whose power rests on their control over others. The rest of society (the proletariat) lost control over their own labour: a capitalist society was born.

Workers thus lose control over *what* they produce and *how* they produce and dispose of it — they become *alienated* (separated) from the product of their labour, and thus from their 'true' nature. It was Marx's belief that under these conditions, human beings could not be properly 'human'.

Industrialisation and alienation

While Marx wrote about the development of capitalism in earlier societies, it was the process of industrialisation and its effects on capitalism that were of particular interest to him. He argued that once the manufacturing process becomes industrialised and moves into factories, the division of labour changes its nature and moves into all aspects of production.

Industrial capitalism led to a very detailed division of labour, with workers specialising in small, atomised activities, which allowed them to use only one or two of the creative powers of which they were capable. An extreme example is the division of labour on a production line where each worker has a small and repetitive task to perform in the production of a complex product such as a car.

The worker as machine

Under this system, workers become increasingly dependent on the capitalists who own the means of production. Workers are reduced, both intellectually and physically, to the level of a machine. Wage labour replaces all other forms of payment, and labour itself becomes a commodity, something to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Workers can no longer live independently of capitalism — they rely on capitalists for a job and work becomes a matter of survival. To work means to work within the system, and to be deprived of work threatens life itself.

It was Marx's belief that all the major institutions of capitalism, such as religion and the state, are marked by the condition of alienation, and that we are confronted by alienation in all spheres

of life. However, because of his belief that it is in the process of creating something over which we have some control that people experience and express their true humanity, he argued that it is alienation in the workplace that has overriding importance.

Theoretical and methodological issues

Marx's idea of the essence of human nature is important here. He saw humans as essentially creative, expressive and, above all, sociable beings, happy to cooperate with each other. Capitalism prevents the expression of these characteristics — it alienates people from their true nature. This view of human nature is in contrast to social theorists such as Emile Durkheim who see people as essentially anti-social and individualistic, needing the process of socialisation to make them fully human and thus able to live in harmony with others.

In terms of methodological issues, alienation is a very difficult concept to operationalise. How can you test whether someone is alienated? And even if you think that you have found that they are, how do you uncover the cause or causes of their alienation?

Alienation today

Obviously, the world is a very different place from that which existed when Marx was writing in the late nineteenth century. There are now trade unions, laws governing health and safety, and welfare benefits for those who are without work. Nevertheless, the underlying arguments remain the same.

Globalisation

The forces of capitalism that Marx clearly understood to be controlling all aspects of the workers' existence are now global in scale. Decisions made in another continent can have far-reaching effects on workers here — indeed, even on whether they have any work at all.

It is not simply manual workers in factories who are affected by globalisation. Moving work to overseas call centres, the merging of companies and the resulting 'efficiency savings' — these are all things that can and do affect white-collar workers and managers. Even those who have work, including some very senior personnel, have to work harder and for longer hours to try to show how invaluable they are to the company. Again, there are few people who have not been touched by the global forces of capitalism that led to the recent economic recession.

Feelings of alienation

Even away from the world of work, many people increasingly experience feelings of 'alienation' — feelings of isolation and loneliness, even when living in the heart of large cities. We increasingly hear talk of young people being alienated from the education system, or people becoming alienated from religion or from politics, or families splitting up and members becoming alienated from each other. It is obvious that the concept is in everyday use to describe ways in which people feel that all is not right with their world.

How can I use this concept?

Providing it is relevant to the question, you could perhaps discuss alienation in relation to education, citing the view that the emphasis on punctuality, obedience to authority, being forced to study things that are no interest to you, being 'taught to the exam' rather than exploring knowledge for its own sake — all these are



Marx wrote of the power of work to make human beings happy, but also warned of the dangers of treating workers as machines

preparing young people for the world of work with its high levels of alienation. For those unable to obtain work, the emphasis on exam results, league tables and the 'right attitudes' leads to the view that unemployment is somehow their own fault, rather than something wrong with the system.

You could also introduce the concept in a discussion of the alienating effects of striving to find the 'work-life' balance, something many people find increasingly difficult, especially with the stress of factors such as the threat of unemployment, zero-hours contracts, problems of childcare and pressure from bosses to be always available via email or text and so on.

Marxists see the media as being part of the ideological state apparatus that manages potential dissent, and you could discuss the view that part of the function of the media is to keep members of the proletariat entertained and also give them a distorted view of the nature of society so that they are unaware of their exploitation and alienation, and are therefore in a state of 'false consciousness'.

Activities



1 Watch these two YouTube clips, which will explain further both the concept of alienation and more of Marx's views of society.

www.tinyurl.com/ptl8alc

www.tinyurl.com/pc3wqaz

2 Use the index in your textbook to look up all the references to alienation, and make notes of any that fit in with the topics you are studying.

Marxism: Alienation

Comprehension questions:

- 1) Why did Marx believe that humans are naturally creative?
- 2) Why did Marx think that work made us social beings?
- 3) What is *surplus*? How does *surplus* lead to the development of class divisions?
- 4) Why was a capitalist society born?
- 5) What does it mean to say that workers are *alienated* from their labour?
- 6) What is an extreme example of the division of labour?
- 7) Identify one methodological issue with the division of labour?
- 8) In what other areas of life do people experience *alienation*?
- 9) How can people be *alienated* in education?

Follow-up tasks:

- 1) Who was Karl Marx?
- 2) What did he believe about *capitalism* and *communism*?
- 3) Define what is meant by *ideological state apparatus*.
- 4) Define what is meant by *false class consciousness*.