

## On Work and Alienation Kai Erikson

Kai Erikson's article "On Work and Alienation" seeks to comprehend the concept of alienation and its significance in the sociological study of work in contemporary contexts. Erikson first examines Karl Marx's views on the nature of human alienation. Second, he investigates how alienation manifests in today's computerized and automated workplaces. Finally, he delves into recognizing signs of alienation and comprehending how people relate to their jobs. This essay applies Erikson's insights to comprehend the complexities of human work and its impact on individuals.

Although the concept of alienation is often associated with Marx's works, its origins can be traced back to philosophers such as Feuerbach, Hegel, and Fichte. Marx places the human capacity for labor at the center of his analysis, claiming that it distinguishes us from other animals. He contended that humans are both made for and influenced by their work. Marx argued that since workers invest a portion of themselves into every creation they make, the natural order of things is one in which the worker and the object are one and the same; and people view, assess, and come to know themselves through the things they create.

However, the emergence of capitalism and industrialization altered the fundamental nature of work and altered the natural order of things. As opposed to the pre-industrial, artisanal era, when labor was a means of self-expression, labor in the industrial world became a means of making a living. Workers were given meaningless tasks that only required a small portion of their skill and intelligence as the division of labor became more complex, which made work more repetitive and tedious. Workers in the capitalist system had no ownership over the means of production or the finished goods; they also had no say in the products that were produced. Additionally, workers were devoid of community and connection due to market competition, machine dominance, and planner control over every aspect of their work.

These experiences resulted in what Marx refers to as "alienation," or the disconnection or separation of human beings from their natural moorings in the world because of the unnatural, alien work arrangements. According to Erikson, people can become alienated when they lose contact with the product of their own labor. They breathe life into the products they create, which are an extension of themselves, so when those qualities are taken away, they lose the qualities they have invested in those products. People are said to be alienated when they lose interest in their work and no longer see it as a meaningful act of creation. He contended that working in the capitalist system depletes rather than replenishes the worker's spirit, making them less than human and alienated even from themselves. Furthermore, because workers are commodities for sale, they are constantly competing with one another, which reduces feelings of comradeship and communality, alienating them from their coworkers.

Erikson then expands on Marx's analysis to identify structural conditions or sources of alienation in modern workplaces—structures that deepen the division of labor and restrict workers' control over their working conditions. Notably, Marx concentrated on alienation in artisanal and

industrial settings, whereas Erikson argued that the majority of pre-industrial workers were farmers rather than artisans. While there are similarities, such as their close relationship with their tools and materials, it is unknown whether farmers experience and perceive their work in the same way that artisans do. While artisans associate their work with a sense of charm and honor, it is difficult to expect the same from a farmer who has been toiling in the sun for generations. As a result, we cannot apply the same principles to locate alienation in contexts other than those described by Marx. As a result, we must devise new methods for locating and articulating the various forms and experiences of alienation in contemporary times, when work is primarily defined by computerization and automation rather than assembly line production.

It was once thought that automation would lessen alienation in contemporary workplaces by relieving employees of the monotony of repetitive, mindless work. While this is partially accurate, some scholars, such as Daniel Bell and Robert Blauner, have noted that automation has diminished the worker's role to that of a mere attendant, watching over the machine to make sure it is operating as intended. This task does not require the mastery of materials that a craft would, only quick reflexes and attention to detail. When using automated machinery, especially computers, one is totally cut off from the tangible materials and finished products, unlike artisans who have the opportunity to touch and feel both.

Furthermore, the human element of work has been eliminated by the widespread use of computers in the workplace. The importance of the skills and knowledge that an employee acquires through years of experience is diminished by the computer's capacity to store the knowledge of generations of workers. Information flows back and forth along the circuits of the computer draining the workers of their years of wisdom and judgment. The fact that computers can calculate, check their own performance, decide for themselves, and even turn on and off makes them independent beings that operators have to submit to. Many workers tend to find their jobs uninteresting because their skills, experiences, motor skills, and senses are not used in the process. Thus, the computer programs the operator as well as the machine. This process of dehumanization, which Harry Braverman refers to as "lobotomization," is one of the main causes of alienation in contemporary workplaces. The machine absorbs human qualities.

Automated processes in general, and computerized processes in particular, can become an almost perfect tool for process control. The computer also functions as a workplace surveillance system, as it can monitor the operator's every move and activity. This results in the machine monitoring those who monitor it. As the number of management personnel and supervisors grows, the worker becomes increasingly alienated as the levels of supervision increase at each stage of the process. Erikson cites Harry Braverman's work, in which he claims that clerical workers are frequently subjected to mechanized routines dictated primarily by rules and machinery, to the point where they lose their ability to understand and decide for themselves. Every working minute is evaluated, and work is dictated by someone else's routines and quotas. Workers must be granted permission to leave their desks for even a few minutes, which can be humiliating and infantilizing. As a result, surveillance serves as a source of alienation in modern workplaces.

Erikson also addresses the issue of recognizing when one is experiencing alienation. Joachim Israel distinguishes between "estranging processes" and "states of estrangement." The former refers to the structural conditions that lead to alienation, while the latter refers to the psychological character that results. Braverman's argument revolves around estranging processes, in which he claims that certain types of work are inherently alienating. He asserts that regardless of how they personally perceive their situation, people who work in such fields virtually always feel alienated. This method prevents a sociological understanding of the issue since it ignores individual experiences and fails to provide empirical evidence of workers' feelings of alienation.

In contrast, Blauner's strategy concentrated on using surveys to gauge employees' job satisfaction. Employees' expressions of satisfaction are frequently contradictory to what they actually experience at work. In a study of Parisian office workers, for example, Michel Crozier discovered that those who expressed the most interest in their jobs were also the ones who complained the most about them. As a result, alienation cannot be determined using this method, as surveys fail to delve deeper into the nuanced layers of the alienation experience.

Furthermore, the effects of alienation are not always visible to those who are experiencing it. Marx makes a crucial point in stating that the lack of insight into one's true condition is itself a consequence of alienation. To truly understand alienation, Erikson suggests that we carefully examine how workplace experiences influence the worker's personality and behavior outside of the workplace. For example, behaviors such as calling in sick, filing grievances, and quitting the job may indicate dissatisfaction, and research shows that such occurrences are more common in alienating work environments. Furthermore, increasing reliance on alcohol and drugs as a form of escapism can be linked to alienating working conditions. Erikson also suggests that there may be connections between the experience of alienating workplaces and growing human indifference and cruelty in modern times.

In conclusion, Erikson has delved into the nuances of understanding work and alienation, demonstrating how workplaces have become increasingly alienating over time. Marx and Erikson raised important questions about the impact of alienation on the human spirit outside of the workplace, making it a critical perspective in the sociological study of work today.