

Unpacking the Impact of Capitalism on Human Subjectivity: A Qualitative Analysis of Marx and Weber's Ideas

Abdullah Farooq ^a Mudasar Ali Nadeem ^b Kiran Ikram ^c

Abstract: This article examines how human subjectivity is impacted by capitalism through the perspectives of two significant intellectuals, Marx and Weber. Marx analyzes capitalism's effects by focusing on the alienation it causes. He argues that humans are inherently productive and interact with each other to fulfill their basic needs, making them inherently social. According to Marx, capitalism creates a separation between individuals and their labor, leading them to feel disconnected from their own creation. Conversely, Weber approaches capitalism from a different perspective. He critiques the system based on its formal rationality, influenced by Nietzsche's sense of cultural disenchantment. Weber highlights how capitalism's emphasis on rationality and efficiency can impact human experiences and values. In Max Weber's canon, rationality has been acknowledged as possibly the central theme. Practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal rationality are recognized as four different types of rationality. According to Weber, the prominence of formal and theoretical rationality should be attributed to the capitalist system.

Keywords: Capitalism, Alienation, Formal Rationality

Introduction

Drawing on the views of two significant intellectuals, Karl Marx and Max Weber, the article investigates the ways in which capitalism impacts human subjectivity. Building on his understanding of human nature, Marx offers a theory of capitalism. Using practical tasks to address their basic survival needs, he believes that humans are essentially productive. They naturally establish social bonds with others in order to accomplish this, as humans are social creatures. However, according to Marx, the capitalist system shatters this bond between people and their labor, resulting in a disconnection and alienation from the product of their own labor. Marx calls this barrier alienation. Marx Writes.

“Up until this point, we have only looked at the worker's estrangement, or alienation, from one perspective, namely, his relationship to the things that come from his labor. However, estrangement can also be seen in the process of production, within the activity of production itself, in addition to the result.” (Steven, 2009).

In his critique of capitalism, Marx emphasizes how capitalism alienates people, separating them from their work and from one another. On the other hand, Weber takes a different approach when addressing the issues surrounding capitalism. He doesn't focus as much on topics like economic crises, exploitation, working-class conflicts, or colonialism as Marx does. Instead, Weber is more interested in other aspects of capitalism, setting his critique apart from Marx's more socially and economically focused analysis.

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^a M.Phil. Sociology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

^b Lecturer, Sociology, Government College University Faisalabad, Chiniot Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.

^c Lecturer, Sociology, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

These four varieties of rationality are related to Weber's typology of social action. Weber distinguishes between four categories of social action: traditional action, means-ends rationality, or action, value rationality, or action, and effective action.

According to Weber, formal rationality strengthened and materialized itself in all social and political institutions in addition to giving rise to capitalism in Western Europe. In the West, according to Weber, formal rationality was beginning to outweigh the other types of rationality, particularly substantive rationality. The triumph of formal rationality over all other forms of rationality poses the biggest threat to Western civilization.

Drawing on Nietzsche's notion of cultural disillusionment, Weber analyzes the formal rationality of the capitalist system. He contends that bureaucracy is a key manifestation of the capitalist system. In addition, Weber questions Enlightenment rationality by pointing out its flaws and limitations in the context of contemporary capitalism.

Problem Statement

Capitalism has grown more global as a result of multinational firms operating internationally and supply chains connecting numerous nations. Numerous industries and business models have undergone radical change as a result of the quick advances in technology, particularly in information technology. Increased productivity, efficiency, and the possibility of future growth in capitalist economies have been greatly enhanced by the development of the Internet, e-commerce, automation, artificial intelligence, and other advances. The objective of this study is to investigate the effects of capitalism as perceived by Max Weber and Karl Marx. Marx argues that the main reason capitalism is exploitative is because it makes people feel alienated, whereas Weber emphasizes the function of formal and theoretical logic in the capitalist system.

Research Objectives

- To examine Karl Marx's interpretation of the consequences of capitalism, specifically with regard to alienation and how it affects connections between people and labor.
- Analyzing Max Weber's theory of capitalism with an emphasis on formal rationality's function and effects on the composition and operation of the capitalist system

Research Methodology

The current study aims to explore the impact of capitalism on human subjectivity using the lens of two great Sociological thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Qualitative content analysis was used for the current study. The ontological stance of qualitative content analysis helps to explore the nuanced social, cultural, and political dynamics of society with the help of text (Roller, n.d.). Karl Marx and Max Weber played a critical role in developing the understanding of academic discourses around capitalism. Therefore, to fulfill the aim of the current study, two key writing scripts were used for the qualitative content analysis: The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 by Karl Marx (2023) and The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber (2013). The selected books are the seminal work of the authors and have been cited by more than 1000 scholars across the globe. The identified concepts for the current study are capitalism and human subjectivity, which were discussed in Marx and Weber's ideas. A coding scheme was prepared to analyze the concepts in detail. The identified codes from the readings include the definition of human subjectivity, conception of the concept, labor, rationality and its types, alienation, capitalism, freedom, emotions, and relationships. Afterward, considering the comprehensiveness and relevance of the content with the study, text was sampled and selected. The selected texts were inserted and discussed in the analysis section.

Findings & Analysis

Capitalism and Subjectivity

Capitalism is a concept that sparks a lot of debate, and many scholars tend to avoid discussing it because of its controversial history. The term itself originated as a criticism and was used that way for years, which makes it feel loaded to some. Some even suggest that instead of using "capitalism," we should refer to it simply as a "market economy." Yet, despite these issues, many researchers have devoted significant effort

to understanding capitalism. After the Cold War, discussions around capitalism became more prominent again, and the 2008 financial crisis reignited critical interest in it.

Before exploring Marx's and Weber's views on capitalism, it's helpful to first look at how the idea of capitalism developed over time. In the early 1800s, merchants often used the word to describe wealth in the form of money and goods, especially the profits they made as far back as the 1600s; capitalism was associated with those who had accumulated enough wealth to live off their investments, such as merchants, bankers, and retirees.

By the 1700s, capitalists were increasingly seen as being in opposition to the working class. The rise of industrialization in England, with its factory systems, brought increased poverty and social unrest, and intellectuals began using "capitalism" as a way to critique class inequality. By the mid-1800s, scholars in France, Germany, and England used the term to describe a class of people who owned large amounts of private property and were driven by the pursuit of surplus profits. While the debates around capitalism varied, most agreed that the system existed long before industrialization, but reached its peak with the advancements in machine technology.

In essence, the concept of capitalism emerged to help people make sense of the social changes happening in their time, contrasting them with older systems. In the 19th century, many scholars saw capitalism as the key feature of their era. Writers expanded on the idea, shaping how we understand it today. In the following sections, I'll look at two important thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber, who significantly shaped modern debates on capitalism.

Karl Marx's ideas were largely influenced by the philosopher Hegel, especially Hegel's concepts of dialectics and idealism. For Hegel, dialectics wasn't just a way of thinking but a reflection of how reality works. Dialectical thinking focuses on processes, conflicts, and relationships, viewing the world as constantly changing and interconnected. While Marx criticized parts of Hegel's dialectics, he recognized its importance, applying it to the economic and social realms rather than just to ideas, as Hegel did.

Hegel was also known for his idealism, which holds that reality is shaped not just by the material world but also by mental and psychological ideas. Hegel argued that people first understand the world through their senses, and then they develop self-awareness. This self-understanding leads them to realize their full potential, and through this, they come to recognize their role in society and the larger development of collective spirit.

Feuerbach, another philosopher, played a role in shaping Marx's criticism of Hegel's idealism. Feuerbach argued against Hegel's focus on consciousness and spirit, favoring a materialist philosophy instead. He also criticized Hegel's view of God, suggesting that people project their best qualities onto God, diminishing their own sense of worth.

Marx's critique of capitalism revolves around the idea of alienation. He believed that humans are naturally productive and social beings but that capitalism disrupts their connection to their labor. In a capitalist system, labor becomes a means to earn money for the capitalists rather than a way for workers to find fulfillment. This leads to alienation, where workers feel disconnected from their work, themselves, and society as a whole.

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx identified four key forms of alienation: alienation from the product of labor, from the act of labor itself, from one's own self, and from society. For Marx, alienation wasn't just a personal feeling—it was built into the structure of capitalist society. He believed the only way to overcome this alienation was to overthrow capitalism. Marx describes the first form of alienation as the disconnection between workers and the products they create. In a capitalist system, the ownership of these products lies with the capitalist, not the worker. The capitalist is free to use or sell the product for profit, while the worker who actually produced it has no claim over it. Often, workers are forced to purchase the very goods they helped create to meet their own needs. This separation creates a gap between workers and owners, leaving workers detached from their labor and unable to fully realize the value of what they produce.

The fact merely indicates that the thing produced by labor, or its output, opposes it as something foreign and as a force independent of the producer. The objectification of labor is the process through which work is materialized and made into a product. The objectification of labor results in its realization. This realization of labor appears as a loss of reality for the worker in the context of political economy, objectification as a loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation (Steven, 2009).

The second kind of alienation is from the activity of labor. In a capitalist society, workers in a capitalist economy don't really generate items based on their ideas. Workers produce things according to capitalist desires. In this way, workers lose control over the activity of their production. In capitalism, the activity is not the self-expression of the labor. Workers' activity has no relation to their desires or what they want to produce. They only produce things that are necessary for their survival. Workers are reduced to the level of animals.

Up until this point, we have only looked at the worker's estrangement, or alienation, from one perspective, namely, his relationship to the things that come from his labor. However, estrangement can also be seen in the process of production, within the activity of production itself, in addition to the result (Steven, 2009).

The third form of alienation, according to Marx, involves a disconnection from the worker's own sense of self. It's not just about being cut off from the products they make or the work they do, but also from their own human potential. When workers are forced to sell their labor, they lose touch with their true selves and experience a kind of dehumanization at the workplace. They're treated more like machines than people, and because of this, they struggle to express their natural human qualities and creativity.

Consciousness, inherent to humanity, undergoes a transformation through estrangement, making our species' lives a mere tool for survival. This estrangement of labor disconnects individuals from their essential nature and intellectual capabilities, turning these qualities into something foreign and separate from themselves. As a result, people become alienated from their own bodies, the natural world, and their spiritual essence, losing touch with what it truly means to be human (Steven, 2009).

The last form of alienation is from the fellow workers. Marx argues that, people want to work in cooperation to pursue their survival. In a capitalist system, cooperation becomes disrupted, and workers are forced to work for capitalists. They become isolated in capitalist system.

An A direct result of humanity's estrangement from the products of their labor and from their own essence is the alienation between individuals. When a person faces their own identity, they also confront others. The disconnection one feels toward their work and their own self mirrors how they relate to others and their efforts. Essentially, the idea that people are estranged from their true nature means that each individual becomes isolated from others, and collectively, humanity is distanced from its core essence (Steven, 2009).

In contrast to Marx, Weber approaches the critique of capitalism from a different angle, focusing less on issues like exploitation, economic crises, or the plight of the proletariat. Instead, Weber critiques capitalism through the lens of *formal rationality*, influenced by Nietzsche's cultural pessimism. He argues that bureaucracy is the concrete form of a capitalist economy, and he questions the limits and contradictions of Enlightenment rationality in the modern capitalist world. In his analysis, Weber dissects the unique rationalization of Western culture, tracing its origins and development. Weber identifies four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal.

The first, practical rationality, involves individuals acting according to their personal needs and interests, guided by practicality and self-preservation. Weber notes that practical rationality has existed across all civilizations and is not exclusive to the modern era. It represents a break from primitive superstition and focuses purely on what is immediately useful. In contrast, theoretical rationality engages the intellectual capacity to create concepts and logical systems through deduction and induction. This type of rationality is primarily utilized by scientists and philosophers. Although it aids in understanding the world, Weber argues that it has little impact on day-to-day human behavior compared to practical rationality. Substantive rationality, on the other hand, is based on values and social norms. Actions driven by substantive rationality are determined by what is considered morally or culturally right. Like practical

rationality, substantive rationality transcends historical periods and civilizations. Finally, formal rationality involves calculating the most efficient means to an end based on universal rules and regulations. While practical rationality focuses on personal gain, formal rationality is driven by impersonal rules. Weber views bureaucracy as the embodiment of formal rationality in capitalism, stating that it represents a system where efficiency and rules take precedence over individuality and human values. In *Economy and Society*, Weber writes,

“The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization.” (Weber, [2016](#), p. 956).

He emphasizes that bureaucracies, though efficient, pose a threat to individual freedom and personal expression. Weber’s critique of formal rationality extends to his concern about the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy, where individuals are reduced to mere cogs in a machine. He referred to this as the “iron cage” of modernity, where people are trapped in systems of rules, regulations, and efficiency, with little room for personal freedom or creativity.

Weber also questions whether there is any viable alternative to bureaucracy in modern capitalist societies. His conclusion is grim: bureaucracy has become so dominant that there is no escape from it. He even argues that socialist systems would only increase bureaucratization, worsening the very problems they aim to solve. Weber states,

“The discipline and routine which capitalism imposes upon the worker cannot be ended by socialism, which, instead of eliminating discipline, would intensify it.” (Weber, [2016](#), p. 202).

At the heart of Weber’s critique of capitalism is his disillusionment with modernity’s focus on instrumental rationality—what the Frankfurt School would later call the obsession with efficiency and profit maximization at the expense of meaning and human values. Weber contends that capitalism’s drive to accumulate wealth is ultimately irrational and devoid of meaning. As he observes,

“The capitalist system rests on an enormous cosmos of means, not of ends, and certainly not of moral ends.” This constant pursuit of profit, for Weber, is not only irrational but profoundly alienating. (Weber & Kalberg, [2013](#), p. 14).

Weber’s critique highlights the contradictions in the capitalist system, where rational structures like bureaucracy and instrumental logic are, in fact, irrational in their inability to provide meaning or fulfill human potential. His sense of detachment from capitalism reflects a deep unease with modern society’s endless pursuit of profit, where efficiency becomes an end in itself, and human values are lost in the process.

Conclusion

As we have analyzed the impact of capitalism in the writings of Marx and Weber, It is indispensable to remember that both these great thinkers warned us about the destructive nature of capitalism on human subjectivity. In late capitalism, we have been deeply experiencing the alienating outcome of the market, as described by Marx, for more than a century. The quantification and commodification of everything around us, including the human body and mind, have been prophesized by Weber in his analysis of formal rationality as a nucleus of the capitalist economy.

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