

CHAPTER 6

Alienation and Work: A Common View

6.1 Introduction

Neither of the previous two chapters has explored what the participants attitude to the need to work which is one of the main conclusions Marx makes is that, given the alienated experience of people at work, as soon as there is no need for people undertake paid employment, they would stop work (Marx 1970b: 111). As he says, labour ‘is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague’ (Marx 1970b: 111). This chapter investigates whether the ICT professionals and/or the scholars would continue working if they had the opportunity to stop.

To facilitate an exploration of this aspect of alienation, the following discussion focuses on the responses of both the ICT professionals and scholars to two questions asking participants to reflect on their work experience. The first sought to examine what changes they would make if they had the opportunity to start their careers again. The second asked what changes they would make if they had access to sufficient resources to enable them to be free of paid employment and to provide funds for any projects they would wish to follow. Although not every participant in each setting was able to answer both questions, most responded to at least one or the other.

6.2 Career Change?

In responding to the question about changing anything in their careers, there was a high degree of unanimity in the attitudes of the ICT professionals. Comments included *‘I think I would go down the same route again... I am actually quite happy with my company... I don’t have a huge itch to move into other*

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areas of IT like networks or servers. So sadly, I am content' (M Software engineer) and 'I don't think I would change anything substantially. There have been good bits and bad bits in this career' (M1 Project Manager II). These could be considered representative of the participants in this setting. One was even more definite about this, saying there was 'nothing particular' he would change (M4 Systems Designer II). The evidence obtained from this question indicates that the professionals expressed a reasonable degree of satisfaction with the way their careers have developed.

One scholar said that his 'world view... doesn't encourage [him] to ask those kinds of questions because they are often invitations to regret and regret is only helpful if you can figure out what you are going to do now' (ME3 US). However, others, like the ICT professionals, he tended to share their positive view about the way their careers had developed whether they were experienced or new entrants into research in the area even if some indicated that they would make some changes. One commented, 'Yes, I would get a PhD in England because most of my problems [have been with] my written English.' Apart from this change however, he said that he would follow the same subject area 'because it is my interest' (ME EU). Another participant also wished for some change when he said, 'I think it would have been smart for me to have had more training in philosophy in general and ethics in particular early in my career... I would have been a more profound thinker in this area.' However, as with the previous scholar, he indicated that apart from this he would not have changed the direction of his career and 'would not change a thing with respect to the people... for collaboration' (ME1 US).

Others expressed no reservations about their career trajectory. One was emphatic saying, 'No, I'm happy' (FE SA). Another said his career 'wasn't planned in any way. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have told you that I would be a professor and head of research... so I am fairly happy with the way it has gone.' He went on to add that 'I am not at the point where I would say that I would do something fundamentally differently' (ME EU). Another participant expressed similar views saying she was 'pretty content with what [her] life eventually became and [believed that] considering the circumstances... made the right decision at each time in [her] life in the given circumstance' (FE EU).

While the above-mentioned scholars are experienced researchers, more recent entrants into the subject area held similar views. As one said talking about her work, 'I feel it is something that needed to be done and I was in a position to do so given my background and the place where I am employed. So no, no I don't think I would change anything' (FR EU). Another recent entrant who was a mature student before becoming a researcher expressed a slightly different view when she said that 'on reflection, based on my knowledge now, I would have also done research on problems associated with the new media. I would have looked at how machines are impacting on how people do jobs' (FR AUS). These comments appear to indicate that both the ICT professionals and the scholars are

reasonably satisfied with their overall work experience. However, the data obtained using a second question, which sought to delve deeper into this theme, revealed a deeper contradictory perspective.

6.3 Greater Choice?

The second question on this theme was designed to draw out the views of the ICT professionals and scholars if they had sufficient resources enabling unrestricted freedom to choose both their areas of work and the way they worked. With the ICT professionals, this issue was discussed in both the group and individual interviews. In the group interview the professionals were asked if they did the lottery and all but one indicated they did. Their responses to the question of what they would do if they won are illuminating. Comments such as *'I have had enough of working in my life... I would say thank you, goodbye and walk out the door'* (M1 Project Manager II) and *'I would need to do some work to keep my sanity. I would probably go and work for a charity in an ethical area'* (F2 Quality Control GD) were common during this part of the discussion. Another said, *'I would leave it and do something for me. It may involve technology and computers'* (M3 Project Manager II). One participant was particularly vociferous in her views which drew a lot of nods of agreement around the table:

Oh, I would come into work every day because it would be absolutely fantastic to come in every day and not give a shit what they did to you and just got on with your job. I would be doing all my union activities and wouldn't care if they tried to discipline me or not (F1 Asset Manager GD).

This theme was also explored in the individual interviews and, as is to be expected, here the respondents were more reflective and detailed in their replies. One ICT professional said:

I have actually thought this one through... I would like to use my IT skills in a socially productive area. I did look into working for Oxfam and I considered maybe a move to Unite, to work for the union. Salary wouldn't be an issue. I wouldn't have the slightest problem about halving my salary if I was doing this kind of work but actually contributing to society (M2 Software Engineer II).

Another remarked that he would be *'very interested in how people use IT for organising and campaigning... because there are lots of free tools... but nobody seems to have... pulled them together into a coherent set and explained how to use them... So that would be a fantastic thing to do'* (M4 Systems Designer II).

A similar view was expressed by a different participant when he said, *'I would have done something completely different ... I am not in IT services project management because I have had a deep burning desire to do that all my life'* (M1 Project Manager II). Contrary to the responses to the first question, these comments begin to bring to the surface a profound unhappiness experienced by ICT professionals with regard to their work, and a strong sense that, given the opportunity, they would want to be engaged in other more meaningful forms of activity that emphasised a collegiate way of working. The next part of the discussion considers the response of the scholars to a similar question.

To facilitate consideration of this aspect, the scholars were asked what type of activity they would like to undertake if given a large suitcase full of money of large denominations with no strings attached. I was quite surprised to discover that all of them treated such a scenario with some seriousness. For one experienced scholar this would have no impact on his work, and another said *'I would do the same thing because I think you need to be accountable and I would research the same areas... With more resources I would add more people to the team'* (FE SA). A similar view was expressed by a more recent entrant into research when she said, *'I would still focus on what I am doing now because... it is really important to make a positive contribution to development. So even with a suitcase of money I would still have to finish my research'* (FR SA). However, a number of other scholars indicated that having access to and control over considerable resources would have a significant impact on how they went about their work. One experienced researcher said:

How much cash? Secure my total retirement? ... I would create a condition for myself in which I would feel secure physically and psychologically and... gather around me a team of people to work with on exploring the problem of... knowledge... in general in society... This would probably be my ideal scenario... so I would stop working at the university (FE EU).

Another participant said, *'I would ditch a lot of the things that take up my time and energy... that is the administrative side of university life... which is not conducive to doing the research... There wouldn't be a radical break with what I do at the moment... I would... read more and... do more empirical research on things such as ICT4D'* (ME1 EU). Some of the scholars intimated that having financial security would result in a change of research topic. Thus, one said, *'I think the health aspect of information communications technology is something that is really important... that would probably be my personal choice'* (ME4 EU). Echoing the thoughts of other academics, he added that *'to manage your own time to try and create something is what it comes down to... you have that sense of creating something... if you are not doing work for money... I want to change society in some way or shape'* (ME4 EU).

Another said that he would use the opportunity to go back to some of his first *'loves and work in moral psychology particularly as it is related to spirituality'*. He added, *'I actually love talking and working with people who build stuff... I might continue with it and then add to it with something from moral psychology'* (ME3 US). One scholar described how this scenario is going to be near enough reality with a change of job that would give him almost total control over his working day. As a result, he said:

This is exactly what is going to happen to me next year... I will be continuing to do things I am doing only collaborating with more people and if I need equipment it will be made available... I will raise the science and technology (and) moral issues about living with robots. I can't imagine anything more fun (ME1 US).

In these changed circumstances, he conceives his activity not as work but something other than work. It is fun. It is still labour with outcomes but relative to his other working life: this will be fun, directly connected to the agenda he wants to follow. The key notion here is relative to his existing employment thus he is not free from alienation for he remains within a labour capital relation. The overall attitude of the scholars is encapsulated in the following quote from a relatively new researcher:

I would try to work on the philosophical and the applied aspects of the technology. I would try to do both because I think they could benefit from each other. I would still do research but would be happy to be relieved of all that publish-or-perish pressure... the choices I make would be based on what I think is important to do that would make a difference to the world (FR EU).

6.4 Analysis

The responses to the first question clearly show that participants in both groups feel they have made the right career choices. Although some indicated that they would make some relatively minor changes to their career trajectory, the general view was that they were comfortable with their jobs, for as was seen, words like 'content' and 'satisfied' peppered the responses to this question. Left at this point it could be argued that despite the adverse conditions described in the two previous chapters, in no sense does the evidence support the view advanced by Marx that a major consequence of alienation, for these two groups of workers, is that they would avoid work 'like the plague.'

However, the responses to the second question bring to the surface a profound, shared set of perceptions about how the participants of both settings see

their work. Further, these perceptions significantly contradict the comments made in the answers to the first question. For the ICT professionals, the option of having financial security would mean that without doubt all but one would quit working for their employer immediately and engage in other more satisfying endeavours which although connected to ICT would be directed to more socially orientated objectives. The one participant who would not leave work would seek to construct a scenario in which she would make life difficult for her employer leading, perhaps, to her dismissal. Here their views very much support the argument made by Marx in that they show that the professionals would indeed shun work as required under current conditions but would pursue other more worthwhile activities. At the same time, they reinforce Marx's argument about working being important since they also articulate a need to continue with some sort of labour-related activity but in an environment seeking to resist the labour-capital relation. Whereas the answers provided by the ICT professionals for the first question were in contradiction to the evidence they provided for chapter 5, their views expressed in response to the second question were entirely consistent with and indeed emanate from the nature of their work as described in that chapter.

While the comments of the ICT professionals sharply expressed the alienation they experience, those of the scholars were more nuanced and they identified two aspects of their work where they would make significant changes. The first was the work process where the scholars spoke of asserting their own priorities in their day-to-day activities. For one this meant quitting her job, while for some others it meant obviating the requirement to undertake onerous administrative duties and/or to remove the pressure to publish. This latter aspect would mean they could publish what and where they wanted rather than having to meet managerial publishing demands emanating from the needs of submissions to research assessment exercises.

The second element relates to the choice of research topic with a number saying that financial security would enable a change in the direction of their research allowing them to address issues they recognise as important and which would have a direct impact on society. strongly echoing the aspirations expressed by the ICT professionals. Scholars would clearly strive for much greater control over the processes and subjects of their research which would mean challenging the managerial imperatives of universities and research institutions inevitably leading to a conflict with their employers. It is not unreasonable to conclude that, given a situation of financial security, most of the academics interviewed would, like the ICT professionals, ultimately choose to leave their jobs. Under such circumstances, where they would have much greater control over how and on what they work, work would seem to be determined and judged by the needs of the other. However, while financial security would appear to provide a buttress against aspects of alienated work, all the preferred activities outlined by the ICT professionals and scholars would have been negatively impacted by existing social and economic frameworks. The

projects scholars and ICT professionals would want to pursue are directly concerned with the problems associated with digital technologies arising from the priorities of capital. This does of course raise several questions linked to possibility of engaging in non-alienated labour within a context where every aspect of life is dominated by alienated labour (McKenna 2013; Molyneux 1998, 1999).

6.5 Conclusion

Using evidence obtained both from the ICT professionals and scholars validates Marx's view that, as soon as the necessity to work has been removed, it is avoided like the plague. However, for both groups their specific working contexts influence the way the contradictions and conflicts arising from alienation are expressed. In one sense there is not anything remarkable in the discussion in this chapter. Its value lies in its contribution in enabling us to construct a comprehensive depiction of the shared underlying impulses governing the working conditions of both ICT professionals and scholars researching the societal and ethical impact of ICT. Stitching together chapters 4, 5 and 6 creates a tapestry clearly demonstrating that it is feasible to use Marx's theory of alienation to investigate and grasp those drivers that lead us to experience alienation in a contradictory way.