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Article

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE REINVENTION OF LABOUR: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF ALIENATION

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Abstract

In today's world, artificial intelligence is altering the way people work. Many jobs are now performed by machines, and more changes are still coming. This paper raises a deep question: as machines take over more tasks, are workers becoming more alienated? Using Karl Marx's idea of alienation, this article looks closely at how labour is being reinvented by artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence may seem like a solution to many problems, but it also brings new challenges. Many workers no longer understand how the systems they work with actually function. Some feel like tools used by technology rather than the other way around. This study explains how this new reality fits into the four stages of alienation that Marx described, and suggests ways to resist this alienation. It seeks to know whether we can build a future where machines help without making people feel useless or lost. It concludes by inviting us to pay attention and understand what is really happening to work, and what kind of future we want to build.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Labour, Alienation, Marxist

Introduction

The work environment is changing, and it is changing faster than ever before. Imagine surfing the net and a robot is telling you to prove that you are not a robot. Factories once filled with workers are now filled with machines. Offices once filled with people are now silent, with computers doing much of the thinking. Sadly, many people are excited about these changes. They believe artificial intelligence will make life easier and make them have more free time and less stress. But this is not the whole story because many people are also afraid. They ask, "Will there still be work for us?" "Are we becoming useless?" "What happens to our dignity when machines do what we once did with pride?" This paper attempts to answer these questions

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using the ideas of Karl Marx. Marx saw how workers in his time were being turned into parts of a machine. They were no longer proud of what they made. They did not feel connected to their work. They were tired, poor, and empty. Marx called this alienation.

Today, artificial intelligence is creating a new kind of work, but the problem of alienation remains. In some ways, it is even worse. In the past, a worker in a factory could still touch the object they helped create. A carpenter could point to a chair and say, "I made this." But what can a data labeler or an AI prompt engineer point to today? A machine finishes their job and moves on. Often, the worker never sees the final result. They are like invisible hands in a system they do not control or understand. This study explores how artificial intelligence is shaping the nature of work and bringing new forms of alienation, and also examines how work is being reinvented in ways that often leave the worker feeling lost, powerless, and unseen. It does not reject technology, or tell us to return to the past. But it invites us to look at the human cost of progress. If machines are here to stay, then we must ask: how can we make sure people are not left behind? How can we create a future of work that respects human dignity and avoids the trap of alienation?

Conceptual Clarifications

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Artificial Intelligence is a way of using machines to do tasks that normally require human thinking. These tasks include things like talking, understanding language, recognising faces, playing games, driving cars, and even creating music or writing essays. AI works through algorithms. These are sets of rules or instructions that tell a machine what to do. The machine learns from data, just like humans learn from experience. These machines can make decisions quickly and without getting tired. But they do not understand feelings, morals, or meaning the way humans do. They do not feel pride in their work or shame when they fail. According to Shoshana Zuboff, "Artificial Intelligence systems, while presented as intelligent, are only clever at prediction and control. They do not understand value; they extract value. And in doing so, they create a world where human labor becomes invisible, reduced to data points and patterns" (Zuboff, 2019: p89). This shows that AI is not neutral. It changes how humans work and how their work is valued. AI does not just replace humans; it reshapes what it means to work. It often hides the role of the worker. Their effort becomes invisible, and they may never feel proud of what they helped create.

Labour: Labour simply means human work. It can be physical, like farming or building a house. It can also be mental, like teaching, writing, or planning. For Karl Marx, labour was not just about earning money. It was a way through which human beings expressed themselves. Through work, people shape the world around them. They also shape themselves. Marx believed that human beings are "homo faber", the ones who make and create. Work was not meant to be a punishment. It was meant to be meaningful. However, under capitalism, Marx said work had lost its meaning. People no longer worked for joy or pride, they worked to survive. Marx wrote: "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces... The product of labour confronts the labourer as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. Labour becomes a commodity that the worker sells to the capitalist not a means of self-expression" (Marx, 1988: p71). The more a person works in a system that does not value their humanity, the more they feel empty. The things they make no longer belong to them. Their own energy becomes a stranger to them. This is where alienation begins.

Alienation: Alienation is a word that means "separation" or "disconnection." In Marxist thought, alienation is what happens when a worker is no longer connected to their work, the people around them, or themselves. David Harvey writes: "Alienation today is not limited to factory floors. It now includes the office worker who follows a machine's command, the delivery driver tracked by an app, or the online moderator filtering violent images. Each performs labour, but without ownership, control, or social connection. They are alone in a crowded digital world, and in that aloneness lies the modern form of alienation" (Harvey, 2005: p143). This implies that alienation has changed form, but not disappeared. In fact, artificial intelligence may deepen it. When the job is to approve or reject images for an AI system, and the decisions are reviewed by another machine, how do people find pride or meaning in that? Humans may earn money, but they feel like a ghost in the system.

Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx's theory of alienation is not just about being unhappy. It is a deep and painful separation. It is what happens when human beings can no longer see themselves in what they do, they become strangers in their own lives. In his manuscripts, Marx explains: "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size... Labour produces marvels for the rich but it produces deprivation for the worker. It produces palaces for the wealthy but hovels for the labourer. It produces intelligence for the ruling class but foolishness for the worker. The more the worker produces, the more he is devalued" (Marx, 1988: p67). This means that when work is controlled by capitalists, it stops being a source of pride. It becomes a prison. The more workers give to their job, the less they seem to have. They build wealth for others, but not for themselves. This is separation in, which man is separated from his product. This is the first sign of alienation. Thus, Elijah John submits:

Any attempt to stop a man from enjoying the product of his labour or take it away from him either by force or disguise or in whatever form, is alienation is alienation. The dehumanizing and instrument along tendencies in capitalism have been interpreted as the trampling upon of the dignity of labour and by extension, the worth of man (2024, p106 -107),

Marx outlines four key ways that alienation appears in capitalist labour. The first is the alienation from the product of labour. In a capitalist system, the things a worker produces do not belong to them. Imagine a shoemaker who spends all day making shoes, but cannot afford to wear one. The shoes are taken away, sold by someone else, and the worker receives only a wage, not the shoe, not the value, not the pride. Marx writes: "The object which labour produces - its product - confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer... The life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien" (Marx, 1988: p71). This means that workers pour their life, their energy, into something they can never enjoy. The very thing they create becomes a stranger, even an enemy. It no longer reflects them. They become like machines making goods for someone else's profit.

The second one is the alienation from the process of labour. In a healthy world, people should enjoy the act of working. A farmer might enjoy planting seeds, watching them grow, and harvesting crops. A painter enjoys every brushstroke. But under capitalism, the process of work is controlled by others. The worker must follow orders. They cannot decide how or when to work. Their creativity is crushed. Work becomes routine, dull, and tiring. As Marx says: "Labour is external to the worker... He does not affirm himself in his labour but denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx, 1988: p74). Marx shows that the worker becomes

like a puppet, moving not by choice but by command. The process of labour, which should be joyful, becomes torture.

The third one is the alienation from other workers. In traditional societies, people worked together. They shared tools, helped each other, and celebrated success. But under capitalism, workers are often placed in competition. They are told to work faster than others, to keep secrets, or to fight for promotions. Friendship at work is replaced by rivalry. Teamwork becomes loneliness. Marx says: "The direct relationship of labour to capital is not the relationship of one person to another but the relationship of labour to a thing... And to the extent that labour is externalized, man is externalized from man" (Marx, 1988: p76). This means that instead of seeing each other as brothers and sisters, workers begin to see each other as enemies. They become like isolated parts in a machine, each one afraid of being replaced. Artificial intelligence makes this worse. The fourth one is the alienation from the Self (Species-Being). Marx believed that human beings are different from animals because we can imagine, plan, and create. We are not just consumers. We are builders, dreamers, and makers. When we work with freedom, we discover ourselves. But when we are forced to work like machines, we lose our humanity. Marx calls this our species-being — our true human nature. "In his human functions [the worker] no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. Eating, drinking, procreating, walking, and talking become the only joys left. But work, which should be our human expression, becomes the worst part of life" (Marx, 1988: p78). This shows the great tragedy of alienation. Humans are meant to find meaning in their work. But instead, work becomes suffering. People live for the weekend. They only feel alive when not working. This is not freedom, it is survival. In the age of artificial intelligence, many workers feel like tools for the machine. Their minds are not used, their hearts are not touched, and their dreams are ignored. They type, click, label, and scroll, but never create. They are paid, but they are not fulfilled. This is the final and deepest form of alienation.

Reinvention of Labour: From Physical Factories to Digital Platforms

When Karl Marx wrote about labour in the 1800s, the world was filled with steam engines, coal mines, and textile factories. Work was loud, full of machines powered by human hands. In today's world, machines are now powered by something invisible: data. And this change has brought a new kind of worker, a new kind of factory, and a new kind of alienation. But the logic remains the same: workers do not own the tools, do not control the pace, and do not enjoy the fruit of their labour. Just like the industrial bosses of the past, platform owners now decide what work is, how it is done, and who benefits from it. Workers become invisible engines in a system that grows richer while they remain stuck in survival.

Today, many jobs have become "gigs"; short-term, flexible, and without security. A gig worker might deliver food one hour, take surveys the next, and label images for AI training in the evening. There are no offices, no pensions, and no guarantees. Every task is paid by the minute or the click. It is work without structure and often without dignity. Sofia Mensah says: "Gig workers live in a state of permanent insecurity. They are not considered employees, so they do not have health insurance, paid leave, or retirement plans. They are always available but never protected. Their phones become their bosses, and their lives are reduced to task after task, app after app" (Mensah, 2021: p89). This shift represents a reinvention of labour, but not a better one. It disconnects workers from long-term identity and from social bonds. It turns every person into a lonely business, always competing, always rushing, always uncertain. Alienation becomes normal. Gig work also reinforces Marx's third type of alienation, alienation from other

workers. Since gig workers rarely meet one another, they cannot organize or form unions easily. Each one is like a solitary unit in a massive, silent network. There is no shared lunch break, no group laughter, no solidarity. Workers are connected by data but divided by design.

AI, Alienation, and the Global South: A Nigerian Perspective

In most conversations about artificial intelligence and labour, the spotlight remains fixed on the Global North, places like the United States, Europe, and parts of East Asia. But the winds of technological change do not stop at borders. Countries in the Global South, especially Nigeria, are facing their own versions of digital transformation. What many Nigerian workers experience are deeper marginalization, economic struggle, and a modern form of alienation. In Nigeria, the rise of digital platforms and artificial intelligence was initially welcomed as a doorway to global inclusion. Young people signed up in thousands to work remotely, learn tech skills, and build startups. The vision was that Africa would move into the digital future. However, what has emerged in many cases is a low-wage digital underclass working for AI systems they do not own and platforms they cannot control. Many Nigerian youth are performing the invisible, labour-intensive work that trains AI models for global giants like Amazon, Google, and Facebook. Yet they are paid in pennies, denied legal rights, and often subjected to harsh digital surveillance. These are not the architects of the future; they are the bricklayers of a system that will exclude them.

The idea of working from home or a digital café sounds flexible and free. But for many Nigerian freelancers, the opposite is true. The internet is expensive. Power supply is unstable. Payments are slow or unreliable. And without official employment status, there is no labour protection, no healthcare, and no pension. These workers are isolated, overworked, and ignored. Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri write: "Most digital workers do not see themselves as part of a workforce. They are scattered across cities and villages, paid by the task, and constantly hustling. They do not have contracts or careers. They are in a state of constant motion - always chasing the next job, the next click, the next payment. Their labour builds the AI systems of the future, but they remain ghosts in the present" (Gray and Suri, 2019: p104). This "ghost work" describes the condition of many Nigerian freelancers, who spend hours clicking, tagging, coding, and translating — often without any recognition. They are not seen as employees, so they are not protected. They are not seen as creators, so they are not credited. They are only visible when something goes wrong. Alienation in this context is sharp. These workers are alienated from their product (since the final software or system is owned by others), from the process (since they cannot see the big picture), and from their fellow workers (since most of the work is done alone). Marx's old theory becomes a living reality in cyber cafés across the states in Nigeria.

Alienation and What AI Cannot Replace

Today, AI is praised for being faster, smarter, and more consistent than humans. It has changed so many things, but it cannot replace meaning, connection, spontaneity, and care. These are exactly what make us human. When society begins to treat these as inefficiencies, it loses more than just jobs; it loses its spirit. Capitalist societies have long worshipped productivity. Every minute must be maximized. Every process must be streamlined. Workers are judged by output, not outlook. AI fits perfectly into this culture. It promises an ideal worker: one that never sleeps, never complains, and never unites. Karl Marx describe this logic well when he says "The instrument of labour, when it takes the form of a machine, immediately becomes a competitor of the worker himself. It is no longer a mere helper. The capitalist buys the machine to increase surplus labour. The worker's life is then measured in productivity, and any decline in his pace or

strength becomes a cost. In this arrangement, the worker becomes an obstacle to profit, rather than its partner” (Marx, 1990: p548).

This perfectly captures what is happening in workplaces today. When efficiency becomes the only value, human workers are not celebrated for their insight or emotion. They are measured against machines and often found lacking. This creates alienation not just from labour, but from worth. A person begins to feel they are not fast enough, smart enough, or useful enough. That is a spiritual wound, not just an economic one. One major myth about AI is that it will soon become emotionally intelligent. But while machines can be trained to recognize emotions and mimic responses, they do not feel. They do not grieve. They do not celebrate. They do not draw wisdom from suffering. And that makes all the difference. Rodrigo Chavez writes: “Efficiency does not weep at a funeral. It does not pause to hug a colleague. It does not remember the sound of laughter in a shared meal. These are not interruptions, they are the fabric of work done with care. A robot can diagnose, but it cannot comfort. It can compute, but it cannot console” (Chavez, 2020: p87).

This shows that AI cannot replace the emotional and moral dimensions of work. Teachers do more than teach; they inspire. Nurses do more than inject; they care. Pastors do more than preach; they journey with people. When these roles are reduced to tasks and outputs, society loses the warmth that binds it together. The myth of efficiency tells us that emotion is a weakness. But emotion is what makes work meaningful. Without it, we become efficient machines ourselves; cold, quick, and empty. Ezekiel Bassey says: “A computer can scan a thousand paintings and reproduce their styles, but it cannot feel the hunger in Van Gogh’s brush. It can generate a perfect melody, but it cannot hear the silence between notes. True creativity requires pain, memory, doubt, and hope. These are not algorithms. They are human fires” (Bassey, 2021: p115). These words help us see how alienation enters even the creative professions. Artists, writers, and musicians are now being asked to compete with machines that produce faster and cheaper. This creates a deep insecurity, as if being human is a disadvantage. But in truth, the machine’s imitation only proves its limitation. It cannot suffer, transcend, or stand in awe of mystery. True creativity comes from living, and that is something only humans do.

Reclaiming the Meaning of Work in a Digital Age

History has shown that human beings, when faced with dehumanizing systems, do not remain silent forever. They resist, reclaim, and reimagine their world. In the age of artificial intelligence, this spirit of resistance is needed more than ever. While machines may be programmed, humans are imaginative. While algorithms follow codes, humans ask questions. Karl Marx believed that alienation could only be ended when workers became conscious of their condition. He writes: “The alienated worker does not see himself in his product. His labour becomes an external activity... But once the worker becomes aware that this condition is not natural but imposed, he begins to act - not as a tool of production, but as a subject of history. Consciousness is the first step toward freedom” (Marx, 1988: p108). This idea remains true today. Workers alienated by artificial intelligence often feel powerless as if their skills are outdated or unwanted. But when they begin to see their humanity as a strength, not a weakness, they stop competing with machines and start reclaiming what makes them human: emotion, creativity, care, and connection. For example, a teacher may embrace storytelling and mentorship, knowing that these cannot be replicated by AI. A local craftsman may return to handmade work, not for mass production, but for beauty and meaning. This is the first form of resistance; awareness that human worth is not tied to technological output.

Another form of resistance is found in how people are organizing their work. Rather than accepting top-down systems where AI decisions dominate, many are building cooperative models; workplaces where decisions are made collectively, profits are shared, and human values are prioritized. According to Ayo Ogundipe, “Cooperatives allow workers to resist alienation by giving them control over their labour. Instead of being ruled by invisible algorithms or distant executives, they vote, discuss, and build together. AI may still be used, but it is a tool - not a master. This shift restores dignity and meaning to work” (Ogundipe, 2022: p92). This model is already being practiced in parts of South America, rural India, and small communities across Africa. Workers pool resources to build businesses that reflect their values. They may use technology, but they do not worship it. They place people over profit. But then, one powerful way to resist alienation is by redefining what success looks like. Under capitalism, success often means constant growth, more output, more money, more speed. But this definition traps people in a cycle of stress and dissatisfaction. Nkiru Eze speaks directly to this: “We must ask: what kind of work makes us whole? What kind of economy lets us rest? If our only goal is to keep up with machines, we will lose the very essence of being human. Success should not mean exhaustion. It should mean connection, joy, and enoughness. AI must not set the standard for our lives. We must set it ourselves” (Eze, 2021: p105).

This challenges the entire philosophy behind the use of AI in labour. If machines push us to live faster, maybe the real revolution is choosing to live slower. To value meals shared with others, hands that make things, and minds that wander freely. This resistance is not loud or violent, it is quiet and strong. It says: “I will not let the machine define me. I am not a processor. I am a person.” Resistance must also begin in education. If schools only train students to meet market needs, they will keep producing workers who are easily replaceable by machines. But if schools teach philosophy, art, ethics, and empathy, they raise humans who cannot be replaced. Chika Umeh argues: “Education must not prepare students to compete with machines—it must prepare them to be human. This means cultivating reflection, conversation, doubt, and wonder. We do not need more coders who lack conscience. We need thinkers, feelers, and builders of community. That is the real defence against alienation” (Umeh, 2020: p117). This view sees education not as a tool for industry, but as a space for human development. AI may become more intelligent, but it will never ask the kinds of questions that make us human: Who am I? What is justice? What does it mean to love?

Evaluation and Conclusion

Alienation in the age of artificial intelligence is real. Over the world, people are waking up to the dangers of a machine-driven existence and choosing to reclaim their humanity. But people must ask the most important question: Can humans imagine and build a world beyond alienation? This can be possible if people can bring back the human face to labour. Machines may be efficient, but they are not alive. They cannot suffer, dream, or rejoice. When humans design workplaces, schools, and economies that treat people as mere tools or data points, they reduce humanity to machinery. Adebayo Okonkwo argues that “Any society that allows technology to become its master has already lost its soul. Artificial intelligence must be made to serve human dignity, not efficiency, or profit. The worker must be seen not as a machine operator, but as a bearer of meaning, memory, and moral responsibility” (Okonkwo, 2022: p129). This means employers must rethink how they treat workers. Instead of pushing for 24/7 productivity, they must create room for rest, creativity, and dialogue. It means workers should be included in decisions about how AI is introduced, trained, and applied in their industries. Only then can work become a space of belonging again. People must also democratize the tools

of production. If a few corporations own and control the development of AI, then workers will always remain dependent and alienated. But if communities can have a say in how technologies are built and used, then humans begin to see labour as a collective project.

At the heart of Marx's critique of alienation is a deeper philosophical insight: capitalism teaches people to value having over being. This is also the root of our current obsession with artificial intelligence. People want machines that can produce more, faster, cheaper. But in the process, they lose the being, the human spirit. Mfon Essien points out that "The crisis of our age is not technological, it is existential. We have built machines that can do almost anything. But we have forgotten how to be. To be kind. To be still. To be in community. Alienation ends not when we get better machines, but when we remember what it means to be fully human" (Essien, 2022: p94). This philosophical renewal must guide all human efforts. When people choose being over having, they begin to heal the wounds of alienation. We remember that work is not just about making money, but about making meaning. In conclusion, alienation is not a local issue. It is a global crisis. Workers in Lagos, London, Lahore, and Los Angeles are all facing the same dehumanizing systems. That is why building a post-alienation society requires global solidarity. We must learn from one another. African philosophies of communalism, Latin American liberation theology, Asian spiritual traditions, and European humanist ideals all offer different ways of resisting alienation. When we come together across borders, we become stronger. The message here is simple: we do not have to live alienated lives. Artificial intelligence is a powerful force, but it is not a destiny. People are not machines, they are makers, thinkers, dreamers, and they are humans.

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