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Joker and the Cult of Alienation:

A Marxist Critique of Estranged Labor at the Box Office

In the movie *Joker*, a glum, socially isolated Arthur Fleck lives in poverty with his disabled and unstable mother. He works various alienating gig jobs, from a sign twirler to a hospital clown, and aspires to become a successful stand-up comedian, with dreams of getting on *The Murray Franklin Show*. Arthur's first killings are acts of self-defense, but he soon embarks on a killing spree, eventually adopting the persona of the Joker. This transition can be viewed as not only psychological—the product of dissociation and delusion—but also social and political. Karl Marx's critique of estranged labor and theory of alienation help explain the material conditions driving Arthur toward violence: his labor under capitalism separates him from his species-being and strips him of his essence.

Karl Marx was not a disbeliever in the value of labor. He was, however, concerned with the ill effects of estranged labor under capitalism, and what specialization, as Adam Smith observed, meant for workers. Gajo Petrovic, in "Marx's Theory of Alienation," points out that for Marx, alienation begins with the development of private property and the division of labor. Petrovic also notes that Marx says the foundation of alienation is rooted in the nature of social relationships, and that human essence is the realization of human possibilities created throughout history (422-26).

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx outlines four interconnected ways labor under capitalism alienates man: 1) man is alienated from the product of his labor; 2) from the process of his labor; 3) from his species-being; and 4) from others (30-32). Each stage reinforces the other and culminates in an impoverishment of the core, the essence, the very nature of man himself. As Walter Kaufmann notes in “The Inevitability of Alienation,” what concerns Marx most is “the dehumanization of man,” including “his involvement in labor that is devoid of any originality, spontaneity, or creativity” (33).

Marx believed that the essence of humans was their sociality. Man’s essence, however, was mystified under capitalism. If we are estranged from our social nature, we are therefore hindered in some way. Whatever prevents us from living in our human nature—including our intellect, consciousness, emotion, and will—is estrangement (Weyher 347). The division of labor under capitalism produces estrangement, or alienation. As Marx states in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, estranged labor “tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species” (32). What the worker loses is not only the thing he makes but the very activity that makes him human.

Emil Øversveen, in “Capitalism and Alienation: Towards a Marxist Theory of Alienation for the 21st Century,” contends that Marx viewed production as inherently social. He insists that Marx saw the division of labor not as the cause of alienation but as a defining feature of the social (446). Here Øversveen observes Marx’s view of human nature, or human essence, as a “‘thin’ conception of essence that emphasizes our capacity for development, change and reinvention” (446). The implication is that “we will be alienated if we are deprived of the ability to freely use and develop our productive capacities or if the results of our activities are estranged from us and turned against our intentions” (Øversveen 446).

The movie *Joker* opens with an audio recording of *The Gotham News* discussing the ongoing labor disputes of the garbage strike in the fictional city of Gotham. This sets an early tone of class struggle. Arthur Fleck is seen putting on clown makeup for one of his various gigs, a sidewalk sign twirler. After a gang of youths beat him and steal his sign, his manager tells him he needs to return the stolen sign or the cost will be deducted from Arthur's paycheck. Working a different gig for kids as a hospital clown, Arthur accidentally drops a gun hidden in his pants, which was given to him by a coworker who later betrays him. His boss fires him.

Arthur is alienated first from the product of his labor (the sign, the clown makeup); second, by the process itself (sign twirling, the assigned gigs, his clown persona); third, because of one and two, he is alienated from his species-being; and fourth, he is alienated from others. After he's fired, he's then permanently alienated from all four: the product, the process, himself, and others. Arthur becomes the material expression of alienation itself.

Arthur suffers from pseudobulbar affect, a condition characterized by uncontrollable, often inappropriate, laughter. This condition further alienates him from society, as others routinely misinterpret these laughing fits as insensitive, mocking, or derogatory. This affliction turns deadly when, riding the subway, he encounters the "Wall Street trio," an obnoxious group of "p****-grabbing" frat-type boys who occupy a contradictory class location.¹ They bully and beat Arthur, who then shoots and kills all three. Class division is once again on display as Thomas Wayne publicly mourns and eulogizes the bullies (his employees), saying, "What kind of coward would do something that cold-blooded? Someone who hides behind a mask. Someone

¹Erik Olin Wright's concept of "contradictory class locations" describes positions within class relations that share features of more than one class simultaneously—for example, managers and supervisors who exercise something like capital's authority over labor while remaining themselves subordinate wage-earners.

who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kind of people change for the better, those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns" (*Joker* 00:39:18–00:39:40). Wayne's insult lands on Arthur twice over, since "clown" is both what he does for a living and what the rich have decided he is.

Chris Byron, in his article "Essence and Alienation: Marx's Theory of Human Nature," posits that because Marx believed that political economists did not consider the economy from the viewpoint of labor, it therefore obscured the alienating factors of production (386). Byron, quoting Marx, says, "For the capitalists, labor produces unprecedented luxury. For the laborer, labor produces privation, deformity, idiocy, and a cog-like existence" (qtd. in Byron 386). Byron further contends, "Alienation during productive activity denies humans an essential expression of their human nature. This denial perverts our human nature, leading us to only express our animal functions" (389). A perverted and alienated Arthur reacted to his material conditions and expressed his animal-like survival instincts as unhinged, feral madness.

Despite Arthur's murderous rampage, the movie goes to great lengths to portray him as a sympathetic character. And in several ways, he is. He has sessions with a beleaguered social worker who tells him the budget's been slashed and, without offering alternatives, that he'll need to seek help elsewhere. She tells Arthur that the system does not care about people like him, or people like her, perhaps because she's an African-American, female social worker. Shortly after this, Arthur goes off his meds.

In one of Arthur's joke book/journal entries, he writes, "The worst part about having a mental illness, is that people expect you to behave as if you don't" (*Joker*). Arthur's mental health issues are institutionally neglected. His medication regimen is overseen by a doctor who

either doesn't see him or does so infrequently. He implores the social worker to ask the doctor to increase his medication because he feels bad all the time. The social worker comments that Arthur's seven different medications must be doing something. The absent doctor—another victim of estranged labor under capitalism—presumably has a huge caseload and is unable to devote the necessary care, time, and attention to patients like Arthur. Both the doctor and social worker are alienated from all four aspects of Marx's estranged labor—the product, the process, the species-being, and others—thus intensifying the alienation of their patients and creating an entrenched, yet untethered, never-ending carousel of alienation. David Harvey, in "Universal Alienation," observes that bureaucratized corporations are "every bit as bad if not worse than the state in relation to consumers" and that their strategy "is to deflect and discourage complaints rather than to deal with them" (428). The social worker's news that the funding is gone, and the pills with it, is that strategy in practice.

During this same session with the social worker, Arthur articulates that he feels unseen and unheard by her. He points out how she doesn't listen to him, especially as he emphasizes that over the course of his life he's felt as though he didn't even exist. He is expressing what I consider to be an ontological or existential alienation from the very idea of his species-being. Arthur exists in a "zone of social abandonment." According to Henry Giroux, João Biehl identifies "zones of social abandonment" as "spaces in which individuals are rendered invisible, severed from the histories and relations of power that have shaped their lives, and subjected to what he calls 'domestic machineries of inscription and invisibility'" (qtd. in Giroux).

Arthur continues to tell the social worker that people never "saw" him, but now people are starting to take notice. This revelation comes after the subway murders. In this, we witness a "rebirth" of Arthur, as the murders give way to a newfound sense of power, purpose, and

validation. His revanchism causes a disruption of his “unseenness,” a de-alienation from the bleak hollowness of his current existence.

Early in the movie, we see a forlorn Arthur, head down with an air of resignation, walking past piles of garbage on the street, which serve as visual representations of a society in decay. Contrast this with sunny Arthur toward the end of the movie, in his Joker persona, possessing a reinvigorated confidence as he struts and dances through Gotham City on his way to the Murray Franklin show. The capitalist mode of production creates a sense of powerlessness, loneliness, and invisibility in workers. For Arthur, the murders are a way to reclaim this power, a way to make himself visible in a world blinded to the suffering of others.

There is an added dimension worth noting, which is the emotional labor Arthur Fleck is required to do. In “The Alienated Heart: Hochschild’s ‘Emotional Labour’ Thesis and the Anticapitalist Politics of Alienation,” Paul Brook quotes Arlie Russell Hochschild on emotional labor: “This labor requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (qtd. in Brook 26). Brook contends that one flaw in Hochschild’s theory is that she leaves ambiguous the notion that away from the workplace one is free from alienation (21). He points out that for Marx and his idea of commodity fetishism—when social relations between people appear to be like social relations between things—there is no escape from alienation in a society based on commodity production (Brook 21).

David Harvey, in “Universal Alienation,” confirms Brook’s claim, saying that alienation is not confined to labor; it’s everywhere. He says, “It exists at work in production, at home in consumption, and it dominates much of politics and daily life” (428). He goes on to assert that alienation has a more expansive meaning that encompasses a loss of trust, fairness, or reciprocity

in the exchange process. Harvey contends that while legal, there is something fraudulent about the “free” exchange of labor under capitalism, saying, “For the labourers, the response is a sense of loss and unfairness, of powerlessness and loss of dignity, which is prone to provoke resentment, anger and frustration. Capital produces alienation in both its objective and subjective garbs” (426-27). The problem for labor, he adds, “isn’t simply that there are not enough good-paying jobs to go around . . . but that there are few meaningful jobs” (428). Twirling a sign is a job, but it is hardly a meaningful one.

Emile Durkheim, in *On Suicide*, observed that suicide rates coincided with the rise of industrialization, specifically with the division of labor. Durkheim theorized that the more specialized or individualized work becomes, the more isolating it becomes. The more individualized and less cooperative people become, the more social bonds weaken. As social bonds weaken, so do the norms and rules that bind societies together. When this happens, people begin to disengage from each other, and the responsibility communities once felt for one another breaks down; thus, anomie begins (Durkheim 21). Capitalism, then, is antithetical to creating and sustaining the necessary relationships that are vital to social bonds.

John Horton, in “The Dehumanization of Anomie and Alienation: A Problem in the Ideology of Sociology,” differentiates alienation from anomie, asserting that alienation is about the legitimacy of control. It is concerned with the hierarchy of control, while anomie’s locus lies within the culture. Horton contends that alienation is “power defined as domination” (285). He feels that non-alienated persons do not automatically bring about social harmony; rather, non-alienated individuals are free to maximize their potential. Horton frames alienation and anomie as metaphors for a radical critique of industrial society’s institutions and values, with Marx assuming an immanent view rooted in the relationship between man and society and tied to the

value of freedom from constraint, and Durkheim assuming a transcendental perspective rooted in God and tied to the value of moral constraint. He feels that despite the dehumanization these terms may suggest, they are value-laden, and that the value has changed rather than vanished (283-84).

Arthur is a victim of both alienation and anomie. The capitalist hierarchal system, from his bosses to Thomas Wayne to Murray Franklin, produces alienation. Gotham's collapsing norms, from the garbage strike to the funding cuts to the riots, produces anomie. This is similar to how Chris Hedges describes anomie in *America: The Farewell Tour*, as "a psychological imbalance that leads to prolonged despair, lethargy, and yearnings for self-annihilation" and "a loss of faith in the structures and beliefs that define a functioning democracy. The result is an obliteration of purpose and direction, what Friedrich Nietzsche saw as the core malady of modernity: its aggressive despiritualized nihilism" (45).

In another one of Arthur's jokes/observations, he writes, "I just hope my death makes more cents than my life" (*Joker*). He's aware that his life has little to no value in a capitalist system where everything is commodified. Arthur becomes a commodified simulacrum of himself. In philosopher Jean Baudrillard's idea of simulacrum, a copy of a copy becomes so attenuated that it no longer resembles the original. Baudrillard states that "in high-capitalist societies we breathe an ether of floating images that no longer bear a relation to any reality whatsoever" ("Simulacrum"). Estranged labor treats humans as fungible entities. It deprives people of their essence or humanity, reducing them to interchangeable parts. Eventually, humans become disjointed, unrecognizable fragments of themselves; holograms of shattered beings.

Murray Franklin publicly mocks Arthur by playing a recent stand-up bit in which Arthur was unable to stop laughing at himself. The show then invites Arthur to appear on Murray

Franklin to continue the ridicule. Arthur knows this but still agrees to go on the show. Once there, he takes the opportunity to confess to killing the Wall Street guys, makes social commentary, and berates Murray Franklin for mocking him. In a shocking scene, he shoots Franklin on live television.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord asks what happens once commodity relations have saturated not just production but perception and social life itself. He says in Thesis 1, “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (12). As Debord describes in Thesis 42, in a society alienated from lived experience itself, social relations between people are now mediated by images. The spectacle is “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (Debord 12). From Debord’s standpoint, authenticity requires image-creation. In this sense, Arthur’s alienation is not resolved but spectacularized. Murray Franklin’s talk show is Debord’s spectacle in miniature: a mediated, image-based social relation replacing direct human relation, echoing Thesis 4’s “social relation between people that is mediated by images” (12). Arthur’s pain and alienation become legible to society only once they are converted into spectacle. He has to perform his breakdown on television for it to become as real. Under spectacle, authenticity is unrecognizable until it’s re-presented as image.

Arthur believes—erroneously, through his mother—that Thomas Wayne is his father. Arthur visits the Wayne estate. Here the class divide is visually highlighted by the separation of an iron gate between Arthur on one side and Bruce and Alfred on the other. After discovering that he was adopted and that his mother and her boyfriends had severely abused him, Arthur kills his mother. This traumatic childhood abuse may be the reason for his dissociations and delusions. For example, the movie initially portrays Arthur as positively interacting with a neighbor he has

a crush on, until it's later revealed that he imagined these interactions. The delusions Arthur suffers become a fertile breeding ground for despondency and despair.

The abuse Arthur suffered as a child is separate from the alienation labor creates under capitalism. Arthur's abuse may be the origin of his breakdown, but the alienation he experiences becomes the expression or the form his breakdown takes. This difference leads to some pressing questions: Might Arthur have developed better social and coping skills if he were valued and connected to others instead of discarded? How would someone like Arthur, with clear dissociations, delusions, and psychopathy, behave if he were born into wealth, like Bruce Wayne? Would he still be an alienated being if he owned the means of production? If so, how would his alienation manifest?

Probably yes, though not in the same way. Abuse knows no socioeconomic boundaries. So the abuse would have followed him into wealth. But if alienation reaches into consumption, politics, and daily life, as Harvey argues (428), then owning the means of production would not free him from it. The capitalist and the proletariat alike are both alienated under capitalism. What changes is the form. A wealthy Arthur would have access to a private doctor who could devote the care, time, and attention in him, and a private car that would shield him from strangers' stares. His alienation would remain, but it would stay private, cushioned, and treated rather than neglected. Capitalism did not create his illness, but it decided who would face it alone.

The entrenched systemic forces demarcating the boundaries of class have brilliantly convinced the masses to accept these lines as the natural order of things and, as such, that they are nearly impossible to change. Antonio Gramsci called this hegemony: the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (12). That consent, he argues, is caused by "the prestige

. . . which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (12). Where consent fails, the state’s coercive apparatus “‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively” (12). Arthur consents for most of the film. He keeps twirling the sign, keeps taking the pills, and keeps waiting for Thomas Wayne to write back.

Marx rejected the idea of a fixed, natural social order, arguing instead that material and economic conditions are historically contingent and change through internal contradictions in the mode of production. His materialist reworking of Hegelian dialectic—later termed “dialectical materialism” by Engels—became the basis of Marx’s historical materialism. The stark alienation of Arthur Fleck, juxtaposed against the backdrop of rugged individualism and self-reliance, demonstrates this idea.

The constant barrage of sad, unfair, and terrible things that happen to Arthur highlights class and wealth divisions. He struggles in dead-end, dehumanizing jobs. He’s considered a freak by his co-workers. His mental health issues are inadequately addressed. His disability is misunderstood and mocked. He’s neglected by institutions tasked with his care. He’s ostracized in every way from society. Before Arthur shoots Franklin, he talks about how he is ignored, saying, correctly, that if he were the one killed on the sidewalk, people would just walk over him. He goes on to angrily say that he goes unnoticed every day. Under capitalism, we do not know each other as individuals but as extensions of capital itself. As Marx and Engels say in *The Communist Manifesto*, “In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality” (22).

The riots and spontaneous social movements that arise in the film against the rich are inspired by Joker’s act of vengeance. Arthur’s “revolution” isn’t a Marxist seizure of the means

of production. Rather it's random, aestheticized violence that produces, as Debord might say, a new spectacle (clown-mask rioters) rather than a change in relations of production. The riots (in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "the language of the unheard") are not the focus of the movie but do represent proletariat rage and resentment toward those who own the means of production. The resultant rage the underclass feels, like Arthur, at the constant, daily economic deprivation, struggle, and abuse is palpable and understandable. The violent riots are the most pronounced expression of alienation. David Harvey, in "Universal Alienation," notes that people under chronic alienation tend to remain "passive, resentful, morose and depressed" but "occasionally erupt in anger, frustration and rage, as happened in the London riots. ... They want to tear down and destroy the existing order of things." (429).

Alienation creates an emptiness, a homelessness, a meaninglessness. Society so detaches individuals that they seem almost unable to recognize their own despair; a near deracination from the earth's soil. If capital estranges the soil from the cultivator, it estranges the self from itself in much the same motion. In *America: The Farewell Tour*, Chris Hedges describes a "collective despair and anxiety that is fed by glitter, noise, and false promises of consumer culture idols," a despair that "grows ever worse, but we never acknowledge our existential dread" (309). Kierkegaard understood as much: "the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" (qtd. in Hedges 309).

Joker serves as a cautionary tale of the psychological toll poverty, class, and alienation beget on individuals and society writ large. It belies a decaying society, one that has discarded and ignored people like Arthur, affixing them to "zones of social abandonment." The character of Arthur Fleck is at once disturbing, yet increasingly relatable in our atomized, hyper-individualized, and overconsumerized culture. Arthur Fleck is the embodiment of Marx's theory

of alienation. His labor under capitalism separated him from his species-being and stripped him of his essence. Here, in his monologue before killing Franklin, Arthur, now fully Joker, expresses the language of the unheard best:

Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy. You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what's it like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? They don't. They think we'll just sit there and take it like good little boys. That we won't werewolf and go wild! . . . How about another joke, Murray? What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash?! I'll tell you what you get! You get what you f***ing deserve! (*Joker*)

Arthur's transformation into the Joker, then, is not a triumph but a symptom. It's the logical endpoint of a capitalist system that manufactures alienation and then criminalizes its own effects. His violence does not resolve his estrangement; it merely converts private despair into public spectacle. In this sense, *Joker* offers no revolution, only recognition. It makes visible what Marx, Durkheim, and Harvey describe—a society that has hollowed out its members and then recoils at the shape of what crawls out of the hollow.

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