

THE CONCEPT OF EXPLOITATION IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the concept of exploitation in sociological theory. Issues examined inter alia are exploitation and commodity fetishism, exploitation as a source of profit and alienation in the work place. From theoretical and empirical evidence, the conclusion reached is that in Marxian theory, when the capitalist has surplus value, exploitation takes place. Yet the capitalist freely legitimizes it as the productivity of capital or machinery.

Introduction

One of the basic tasks of the Marxian labour theory of value is to explain the social categories of exploitation and profit as well as the relationship between them. This is necessitated by the fact that the value form which exploitation takes under capitalism is unique to the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, the original capitalist contradiction is the juridical freedom of the labourer and his concurrent exploitation.

Exploitation, (capitalist exploitation) as shall be used in this paper refers to selfish utilization i.e. to utilize for profit and, or selfishly for one's own end. Just as capital is the general determining power under capitalism, exploitation and profit are indispensable for the accumulation of capital. In sociological theory, exploitation and profit are fundamental to the understanding of the capital-labour relations and of the class division in capitalist society.

The Theory of Exploitation

Any examination of the theory of exploitation will of necessity involve an examination of some basic and interrelated value phenomena under capitalism. These are: the generation of surplus value, the production relations that ensure private appropriation of surplus and the conversion of the rate of exploitation into the rate of profit.

Social relations of production under capitalism for the generation of surplus value and the process of exploitation are summarised in the capital-labour relation. This is why surplus value is created only in the sphere of production and equal to the difference between the exchange value of the product of labour and the exchange value of labour power. The root of the matter is that under capitalism, the worker's freedom is formal and not real. It is not real in the sense that the worker is forced to sell his labour power so that his labour is a form of "forced labour". The compulsion is economic and this economic compulsion on the worker is based on the fact that he has been dispossessed of the means of production by the capitalist's monopoly of them. This negation or non-ownership compels workers to sell their only assets (labour power) as a commodity to the class of capitalists. In this way, the worker's freedom to choose which capitalist to serve is restricted.

At this level, there is a hidden unequal class relation between the class of capitalist and the class of workers. The workers represent the class of the proletariat and offer labour power as a commodity, while the capitalists represent the class of the bourgeoisie and advance money capital as another commodity in exchange for labour power. It is on the basis of this class inequality that the capitalist is able to appropriate the worker's surplus labour. This arises because the labourer's working day consists of two parts viz: "necessary labour time", during which he creates value equal to the value of commodities he gets from the capitalist as "wages" and 'surplus labour time' in which the worker creates surplus value. *The appropriation of this surplus value by the capitalist constitutes exploitation.* It is a situation where the capitalist falsely legitimises it as the productivity of capital or machinery. But the labour theory of value show how surplus value, created by labour is the object of exploitation based on unequal social relations of production and that exploitation is the source of profit.

It is perhaps necessary to distinguish at this point, the difference between “absolute” and “relative” surplus value: The number of hours during which the labourer works per day, or the length of the working day, is the variable that determines the absolute surplus value. This is because the necessary labour for producing the workers’ subsistence basket is usually given at any time while the maximum length of a day is limited to 24 hours. In this situation, the absolute surplus value can, only be increased by lengthening the working day. However, when the length of the working day is fixed, it is then possible only to earn relative surplus value. Therefore, increase in relative surplus value will require a decrease in necessary labour time. This is possible through the effects of factors that lower the exchange value of labour power, or the amount of wage-goods required per worker.

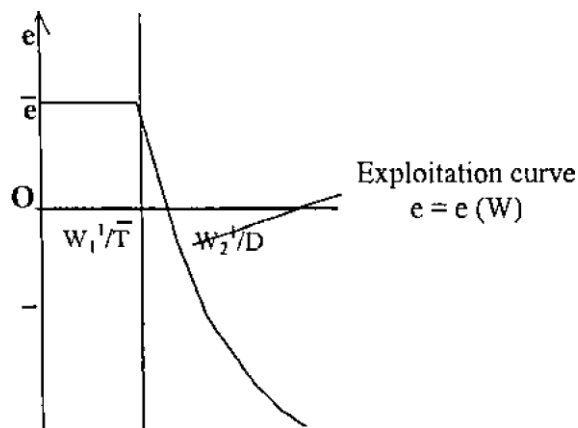
Exploitation and Commodity Fetishism

Commodity fetishism is based on the capital-labour relations. In this commodity fetishism, the capital-labour relation appears as an ordinary relation of exchange of commodities. This appearance leads to illusions, which forms part of the ideological structure of bourgeois society. In this fetish perspective, capital appears as one commodity and labour power appears as another commodity. The relationship between the two commodities in the labour market, therefore appears as one of a simple exchange relation between two commodities. Moreover, their market exchange, like all capitalist exchange, is wrongly regarded as the exchange of equivalents based on the equality between the seller of labour power and the buyer. Under this commodity fetishism therefore, exploitation cannot be observed.

Yet the essence of the capital-labour relation is the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist (this is the source of profit). The unequal social relation between capital and labour makes this exploitation possible. This underlying social relation, is in reality a relationship between the class of capitalists (who monopolise the means of production and buy labour power with money capital) and the dispossessed class of workers who sell their labour power in order to survive.

As a result of this unequal social production relation between capital and labour, the exchange relation between them is also really unequal. While the labourer is ‘forced’ by his relative nonpossession to accept a wage that barely sustains him, he is made to produce value for the capitalist in excess of his wage. The surplus value thus created by the worker is appropriated as profit on his capital. Without this exploitation of the worker, there can be no profit.

Onimode (1985) described this inverse relationship between the rate of exploitation and the wage rate as the “exploitation-rate curve”. It is depicted in the figure below.



e_{-} = maximum rate of exploitation
 T = maximum length of the working day
 D = daily means of subsistence in terms of labour time

The Concept Of Exploitation in Sociological Theory

Exploitation as the Source of Profit

The exploitation of the labourer by the capitalist is his source of profit. His basic motivation is the ever-

expanding accumulation of profit through exploitation or the appropriation of surplus value created by the worker. Thus it can be argued that the rate of exploitation is also positive. This underscores the necessity of exploitation for the maintenance of capitalist society.

A major reason for the necessity of exploitation in order to generate profit is the fact that profit is derived from surplus value. Since exploitation is necessary for the appropriation of surplus value, it is therefore necessary for the generation of capitalist profit. This critical exploitative basis of profit is anchored to the unequal social character of the capital-labour relation. Having monopolised the means of production, the capitalist confronts the depressed worker to sell his labour power. Thereafter, he proceeds to make the labourer produce more value than the wage he is paid. The resulting surplus value is appropriated by the capitalist and falsely justified as the productivity of his capital.

Marx (1970) argued that this exploitation situation can bring about alienation or estrangement particularly in the work place.

Alienation in the Work Place

Seeman (1972) in a summary of research on alienation has proposed that to be alienated means to be characterised by one of the following feelings about one's self and the world:

- a. **A sense of powerlessness:** The feeling that events and outcomes of importance to oneself are controlled and determined by external forces and not one's own efforts. However, this version of powerlessness does not take into account, as a definitional matter, **the** frustration an individual may feel as a consequence of the discrepancy between **the** control **he** may **expect** and the degree of the control he desires. In other words, it takes no direct account of the value of control to the person. In view of this that Blauner (1964) asserts that a person is powerless when he is an object controlled and manipulated by the other person or by an impersonal system such as technology.
- b. **A sense of meaninglessness:** The feeling that the course of event is incomprehensible and that the future cannot be predicted. In this sense, we speak of alienation in the meaningless usage when the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe, that is, when the individual minimum standards for clarity in decision making are not met.
- c. **A sense of normlessness:** The feeling that socially unapproved means are necessary to attain socially approved goals, and that one is therefore not bound by standards of value and morality.
- d. **A feeling of social isolation:** Feeling of loneliness, rejection and exclusion from valued groups or relationship. Social isolation is a feeling a person has that he or she does not belong to a social community. This relates to a worker's feeling that he or she has no sense of belonging and is unable to identify or uninterested in identifying with the organisation and its goals.
- e. **Value isolation:** This entails the rejection of community or organisation-held value.
- f. **Self-estrangement:** Feeling that one is engaged in activities that are not rewarding in themselves and therefore acting in ways that are not true to oneself and one's own need. In other words, self estrangement refers to the activity which is not self expressive, creative, and which damages self-esteem.

Conclusion

Our thrust in this paper has been on the concept of exploitation in sociological theory. From the analysis given, we have been able to establish that in Marxist theory, when the capitalist has surplus value, exploitation takes place. Yet the capitalist freely legitimises it as the productivity of capital or machinery.

In the Nigerian economy however, exploitation takes place in various other forms. For example, the Nigerian people are exploited by the National Electric Power Authority (N.E.P.A) on a daily basis. A classical case in point is the situation where a people will not have power supply for a space of six months and yet, bills are sent to them. The people suffer from this kind of exploitation from virtually all other government parastatals.

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