

# "I'm strong...I feel sicker when I'm at home than when I'm working". Man-commodity and health in bricklayers

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Today we have no time other than work time. Work time has become totalized as the only time. We have long since lost the time of celebration.  
**Byung-Chul Han, *Please Close Your Eyes.***

## Abstract

This paper presents the experiences and the meaning that two bricklayers, father and son, give to their bodies, in the context of a capitalist society governed by the trend towards the universalization of commerce. Some of Karl Marx's and Georg Lukács' approaches to the concepts of alienation and reification are taken up. It is considered that

their heuristic scope transcends the space and time of the foundational process of immediate production in such a way that they open up a dialogue between the structural and the experiential, between the material and the emotional, between meanings. It is of particular interest to rescue, through the help of social history and oral history, the perceptions of the workers mentioned in relation to their health-illness process. Key words: alienation, reification, working time, social history, oral history, health-illness, bricklayers.

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**Received:** July 15, 2021.

**Accepted:** November 20, 2021.

**Conflict of interest:** none.

## Introduction

At five o'clock in the morning, Miguel wakes up with a feeling of uneasiness. He must go to work. As he prepares his tool, he wonders: what if I don't go? But then, he remembers: "... when I stay at home, my waist hurts, my head, my feet, I can't find myself, I got used to working non-stop, but in the afternoon, my body hurts, is it because I'm tired?..."

Horacio, his son, shares in a certain way this life experience: "...I feel that here at home, I get sick more or I put more pressure on myself... when I had my eye, I had to rest, I was in a bad mood with my family, I argued with my partner, I felt closed in,

pressured, she told me: 'your health comes first and then your work!'...well, yes, but one is used to working!"

This narrative is part of the experiences of two Mexican bricklayers who relate to their work and their work time in such a way that it has invaded all other spaces and temporalities in their lives. Attitude, an ethic that has been inherited from generation to generation, contributes to naturalize, normalize and reproduce a way of working that exposes their lives, and subordinates their bodies and their health.

This essay is motivated by the intention of illustrating how the tendencies towards alienation and reification, fundamental realities in capitalist mercantile societies, operate by conditioning what we can call the historical forms through which workers live, interpret and dialogue with their corporealities, leading them to adopt an instrumental, reified perception of themselves. This situation is present in all the spatialities and temporalities of their existence. Work time goes beyond its scope, invading "free time", leisure time, the time for laziness, the time for celebrating, as Byung-Chul Han would say (1). In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the phenomena of commercialization and commodification are also present in the events of workers' illnesses, in their experience and in their significance.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first, of a conceptual nature, presents, in a very simple way, the categories of alienation and commodification, and their relationship with the health-illness process. The experiences of Horacio and Miguel, captured through oral history, are gathered in the second section<sup>1</sup>, and the third contains our final reflections.

### **Alienation, reification and health**

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<sup>1</sup>We have omitted, on this occasion, a presentation of the conceptual and methodological characteristics of social history and oral history. For a discussion of these, please refer to the works of Hobsbawm (13) and Garay (14).

<sup>2</sup>In the buying and selling of labor power in the market, a fundamental, paradoxical event has taken place: "the physical and creative capacities that make it possible to work are not alien to the living corporeality of the

In capitalism, the relations of production and the products of human labor assume an external existence, becoming objects outside of themselves and becoming alienated, but, above all, workers experience an estrangement from their own body, as well as from their mental and spiritual life.

In this respect, Erich Fromm points out: "He does not feel himself to be the center of his world, the creator of his own actions, but his actions and their consequences have become his masters, which he obeys [...] the alienated person has no contact with himself" (2, p.105).

In the process of material production, labor unfolds as an alien power<sup>2</sup>: "on the one hand [...] it creates the objectified wealth sucked out of its own being, but put negatively: then labor is capital; in the same act, the individual who works becomes impoverished as a human. His life belongs to capital: the life of the worker feeds the objects that make up capital" (3, p.18).

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx points out that work "does not put individual reality as being for oneself but for another, and therefore also as being-in-another-way" (4, p. 415), in such a way that at first this process is revealed as a social relation with its nucleus in the capital-labor exchange, leading implicitly to the derealization of persons, to the point where "the very existence of one of the contracting parties is called into question" (5, p. 81).

In this situation, the worker "cannot enrich himself [...] since, just as Esau sold his birthright for a plate of lentils, he surrenders his creative force." (4, p. 248).

The material that the capacity of labor elaborates is an alien material; the instrument with which he labors is presented as alien to him, and his labor is objectified in something that does not belong to him; [...] and even living labor itself is presented as alien to the living

worker. This implies that it is not possible to materially separate the labor force from the very existence of its owner. [...] Therefore, in handing over the merchandise sold, he also hands over the surplus of his own materiality as a living being. [...] This seems to be an element excluded from the exchange process. However, it is the element that is truly included. Without life and body there is no labor power (5, p. 80-81).

capacity of labor - whose labor and whose specific vital manifestation it is - since it has been ceded to capital by objectified labor, by the product of labor itself (4, p.424).

Labor returns in two dimensions, first as living labor where it is recognized as a living human being who works, and in the second as an abstract capacity to work that can obtain concrete products to be sold. "The subject of work is constitutively split: a living being as logos matters little, what is relevant is its capacity to work. It is a short-circuit, a parting of the subject with itself, since the only way it can recognize itself is through what it is worth in the market" (3, p.18).

With this the subject loses control over himself; using Fromm's words (2), he becomes an economic atom that dances to the rhythm of the atomic direction, his work makes him thoughtless, denies his life, his creative capacity, his curiosity and his independence of ideas, and as a result he becomes apathetic or destructive; he becomes a man who manipulates himself and others as if they were figures or things.

Commerce imprints its way of being on the whole consciousness of the human being; human properties and faculties cease belonging to the organic unity of the person, instead appearing as "things" that man "possesses" and "externalizes" in the same way as the objects of the external world.

Erich Fromm, once again, illustrates how this phenomenon becomes present:

If things could talk, a typewriter would answer the question "Who are you?" by saying, "I am a typewriter," and an automobile would say, "I am an automobile," or, more, specifically, "I am a Ford," or "a Buick," or "a Cadillac." If you ask a man, "Who are you?" he answers, "I am a manufacturer," "I am an employee," "I am a doctor," or "I am a married man," "I am the father of two children," and his answers make very much the same sense as the thing he is talking about. That is the way he feels himself, not as a man with love, fear, convictions, doubts, but as an abstraction, alienated from his real nature, which plays a certain role in the social system. His sense of worth depends on his success, on

whether he can sell himself favorably, on whether he can make of himself more than he was when he started, on whether he is a success. His body, mind and soul are his capital, and his task in life is to invest it favorably, to make a profit out of himself. Human qualities such as friendship, politeness, kindness, become commodities, personality assets "already in his package", conducive to a higher price in the personality market. If the individual fails to make a favorable investment of himself, he believes that he is a failure; if he succeeds, he is a success. Evidently, his perception of his own value always depends on values foreign to himself, on the fickle valorization of the market, which decides over his value as it decides over that of commodities. He, like all commodities that cannot be sold profitably, is worth nothing as exchange value, although his use value may be considerable." (2, p.122)

The alienated human being is characterized, then, by having as his axis the following dynamic: to get the most out of himself and out of the people with whom he interacts, he seeks higher positions, changing friends, habits and feelings for new ones, and makes of his life, his body and his mind profitable investments of capital.

What must be retained, above all, of this fundamental structural phenomenon, is that it opposes man to his own activity [...] And this occurs both objectively and subjectively. Objectively, a world of finished things and of relations between things (the world of commodities and of their movement in the market) arises [...] subjectively, the activity of man - in a finished mercantile economy - is objectified in relation to man, it becomes a commodity that is subjected to the objectivity, alien to men, of natural social laws, and must perform its action as independently of men as any good destined to the satisfaction of needs turned into a commodity-thing." (6, 1970, p.114).<sup>o</sup>

The logical-historical result of alienation is reification: "the worker has to represent himself as the 'possessor' of his labor power as a commodity.

His specific position lies in the fact that this labor power is the only thing he possesses [...] this self-objectification, this conversion of a human function into merchandise, reveals with the greatest rawness the dehumanized and dehumanizing character of the mercantile relation. (6, p.199).

Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, warns that the phenomenon of reification does not only occur in the socioeconomic behaviors through which men relate to each other, but it is installed in the symbolic reconstruction of their material existence. In this way, human beings relate to each other as things because mercantile rationality underlies human relations as a whole.

The instrumental rationality in which capital develops makes the world of those who experience it present itself in a fragmented way and only in its reified dimension; not as human spiritual exteriorization, but in its de-subjectivized material expression.

Thus, the transformation of labor power into merchandise (the conversion of a human function into merchandise), the reduction of the human being to the level of object, of mere factor, of production, determines a certain conception and experience of man in terms of things, of machines, perfectly rational from the capitalist point of view. The situation does not stop there, but the extension, consolidation and recreation of the social forces of bourgeois production imply the generalization of the social and material base, in support of the development of the instrumental mentality and of reified labor [...] the reified character of labor, in capitalism, imposes on knowledge, both specialized and non-specialized, to consider labor not in its essence and generality, but as a simple labor activity. In any case, this "character of a reified nature" - to follow Lukács - is only coherent with the fact that in capitalist society relations between subjects are determined by the dominant form of exchange corresponding to commerce, "whose structural consequences are capable of influencing the entire life of society, both external and internal" (7, p. 304). (7, p. 304)

Reification involves an ideological process in which workers, as Ricardo Cuellar and Margarita Pulido (7) point out, reproduce a role, a perception, a spirituality of "man-commodity" (8, p. 607), of object, of thing. Capital transcends the economic, material dimension and organizes the entire social life of human beings. The process of capital accumulation is also that of the production and reproduction of the spiritual and ideological life of workers. World views, imaginaries, myths, rituals and symbols do not escape, they are not alien to the tendencies of alienation and reification typical of a capitalist mercantile society.

Living and feeling the body in a reified way affects the health/disease process in different dimensions; in the cultural realm, alienated work is experienced as "certain obligations, prohibitions, repulsions or desires, tastes and aberrations" (9, p.18); another dimension of this is the value that men and women give to "physical strength, to resistance to pain and discomfort", an attitude that, with the passing of time, manifests itself in advanced diseases.

Being strong, as Boltanski (9) points out, expresses a mechanistic, instrumental conception of the body that delineates a particular lifestyle with implications on its functioning during and after the working day, in such a way that "the body will not have any space for tranquility and its dreams will be disturbed and its organs disturbed and with imbalances that will become chronic", at the same time as "the representations and meanings that it has of its person may lead it to abandonment or excess of care" (10, p. 218).

### ***1. Experiences and feelings***

Miguel and Horacio have their roots in a town called "San Javier", in the state of Querétaro, which since the fifties of the last century has concentrated a labor force engaged in the construction industry. The few plots for sowing and the alterations of the rainy season do not allow the harvesting of corn, beans and broad beans; when a production is achieved, it is basically for the basic maintenance of the family members; therefore, many young people have decided to emigrate to the surrounding cities, such as Mexico City. In other cases, they go to the United States of America, in search of the

American dream, with the selfless desire to be "successful" men, men of "money".

**Michael: I feel sicker at home than I do at work!**

Miguel was born in 1946 in a shack made of organ, nopal and soyate, the eldest of five siblings. He grew up in a complicated environment, the crops not being sufficient and timely. His father preferred to get drunk with pulque than to buy food, and for eight years he experienced hunger.

During his childhood, gambling represented a modest escape from misery. He imagined that the "cakes" he made with earth and water, outside his shack, had the richest flavors. In this way, he pretended to mitigate his hunger, while with dissatisfaction he noticed the rickety growth of his body.

As little Miguel "grew up", he began to represent for his family a potential labor force that could be exchanged for corn or money; his father incorporated him into tasks other than those of the fields: *"He took me there, we hauled gravel, earth with percu... cars loaded with shovels and to unload with shovels, he took me there, he told me "they are going to hire people there", at that time, they paid well, they paid fifteen pesos a week too, so we arrived at the house every day and we went there early in the morning. (Miguel, bricklayer, June 15, 2019).*

His first jobs molded his body, made it resistant; he managed to get a job, some time later, in the construction industry where he ended up building a certain experiential perception. On the construction site he was forced to ignore and to "lose" his fear; he knew the disciplinary scoldings of foremen who spoke to him with curses: he learned, he internalized that it was necessary to be active all the time and not to have a rest.

*I was a laborer, and I arrived, and the master told me, "You're going to go with this master; you're going pour him mixture, you're going to give him everything he wants, so he doesn't lack anything, no. I poured him mixture, I filled his mixer, [...] I filled it and gave him everything he needed and, and I stood there, the master was working and working, what was I doing? He already had everything he needed. But then comes*

*the other master. He says - "what are you doing? nothing!". "well the master has everything", I said to him. "No, no, no, no, if you don't have anything to do here with your master, go over there and get me some wood, get me some sawing or whatever you have there". I went over there and finished everything he told me. And he came back to see me standing there and so on, He said, "You son of a bitch!", he said, "Go away, find another place, here we don't want kids who are just standing there, here we pay them to come to work, not to be standing around, he fired me, "you and your master, go find somewhere else!", we left, he fired us! (Miguel, bricklayer, November 03, 2019).*

He will reproduce these experiences, these ways of being, with his friends, children and family. The idea of always working, of not failing, will represent him, identifying him as a good worker, as the one who earns the trust of the contractors. Not being *lazy!* acquires, thus, a definitive presence - we could almost say structural - typical of a daily utilitarian practice.

For some time now he has been suffering from diabetes and certain muscular pains; however, he intends to continue working for as long as he can. He mentions that he gets sick more often when he is at home, where the pressure of his narrow conditions of life and consumption place him in a state of anxiety and desperation. He does not know himself as anything other than a worker, although he recognizes that work in the fields is his fascination and joy.

*I feel strong! But not when I'm in the heights. because I have high blood pressure. That is to say that if I walk up there, my nerves betray me, and I feel like I'm falling. Or I push myself up to grab the mixture and I feel that my head pulls me down.*

*That's why I know that if I don't work, there's nothing to eat, so I have to work, I tell you I work slowly, and I tell you the master doesn't, he doesn't tell me anything and I tell you it's because of my age, I say, but I'm there with that guy, I'm happy [...]. I feel calm, I feel happy, no, I don't think anything, but being here in my house: "oh, now I have no money to*

*spend, oh, Sunday is coming! I think that's what kills me. (Miguel, bricklayer, June 15, 2019).*

*Pus sí, sí me siento fuerte, me siento más, más, más enfermo cuando estoy en mi casa que no trabajo, que trabajando. When I am here, in my house, when I do nothing, my waist hurts, my head hurts, my feet hurt (Miguel, Albañil, June 15, 2019).*

For him, staying at home "doing nothing" is unhealthy; he notices that he has a headache, but all he needs is a drink of "Coca-Cola" and he can go on. For members of the working class, the body is seen mainly as a tool, from which it is possible to demand constant performance. Thus, "any disease manifests itself brutally because they have not observed its initial signs or because they have refused to perceive them and, most of the time, they consider it an unforeseeable and sudden accident" (9, p.72-73).

*My body, I already feel that really hard work, I can't stand it, but I have to put up with it, that, yes, when I started, we used to pour every day, every day.*

*I, what I liked the most was just shoveling, with the shovel to fill the cans [...] No yes, yes, it is a big hustle, once we cast two slabs, I even got a fever! [silence] but those days when I started, but now I have been working for a year, my body feels like it can do it! And now, it's got me again, but it's like my body isn't the same anymore, maybe because I've stopped shoveling for a long time, maybe it's because my body, like, feels it. (Miguel, bricklayer, November 03, 2019).*

Miguel speaks of his body as something alien and independent of him; a thing, something that, nevertheless, can get "angry" when he exposes it to a lot of work; he experiences it through an instrumental rationality, as a machine that is deteriorating with age.

*The body is no longer the same, no! I remember when we were in Mexico, two, three, four stairs up, you climbed it with your pail full and running. No, I remember, a pail once in a while and that is possible, if not, no, here in my work I prefer another job. Day by day the body can no longer resist, I am thinking of*

*retiring from work because the body, I already feel that the body is no longer, it is no longer for working. And I will have to dedicate myself to my planting again. (Miguel, bricklayer, November 3, 2019).*

**Horacio: One is obliged to work no matter how one is feeling!**

Horacio, as we have already seen, is one of Miguel's sons. He is the one who inherited his trade, since he no longer wanted to study because he saw that there were shortages at home and preferred to work rather than spend what he did not have. His father taught him how to use the shovel, the correct position to propel the tool towards the pile of marble stone and the way to throw it into the back of the trucks, which he filled every morning together with him.

He knew, from what his father told him, that when he was not in town, it was because he was going to work in a place they called "Mexico". His older cousins also told him about that place. Thus, he constructed an imaginary where working in construction could help him to satisfy his needs. From a very young age, he understood that in order to get ahead he had to work hard. He began as a bricklayer's laborer. It was not a long time that he lived single; in the same year he started working, he met the woman who was to become his wife, and they had their first child.

Now with the obligation to support a family, he went to work in the city of Querétaro, at the invitation of a childhood friend. The work consisted of flattening the facade of a building. Horacio accepted, but there he would come to know his fear of heights.

*It was a building, "we are going to flatten it there", he said; no, I told him: "it looks easy, it looks like, as I have already worked, work is normal". But no, when we went up to a certain floor, I got scared, I was really scared to tell the truth [small silence]. And then, I was talking to another guy, yes, his brother of the one who invited me, I told him: "I'm really scared", I said; "no, just get a grip", he said, "no, nothing's wrong", and no, I tell you, sometimes even the next day, I didn't even want to go, because of that fear, because I was afraid, of heights more*

*than anything, as I had never worked at heights like that before, and [silence]. Yes, for about two months I didn't even want to go to work in the morning. Then he even told me, he says: "tell my brother to change you", he says: "he can change you to another place", [short silence], "but where?" "I tell him, "but I have to do it anyway", I tell him, "can you imagine because right now I am with your brother, he is going to change me to an easy job, but the time will come when maybe I won't, I will go somewhere else where I don't know anyone and it will be the same and I will be afraid", I tell him. But yes, I say yes, sometimes it takes courage to walk [...]. There were thirteen floors, yes, and when you get to the fourth, fifth floor, that's when the fear starts, then I tell you, they put us in these so-called baskets and they shake, and yes, the truth is that that's where it was scarier, and I tell you, maybe it's just the fear that you bring because you are not, you are not used to those jobs, you have never practiced there [...]. Well, no, the truth is, well, I didn't, I said, well, I have to do it, if not, when will I get over my fear, and that was also the reason why I didn't say anything, I have to get used to heights and that's what's normal. (Horacio, bricklayer, June 16, 2019).*

As a construction worker he participated in a masculine socialization, where courage, daring, exposure to risk, direct action, silence, obedience, mean strength, and responsibility, constitute manhood. One should not and cannot experience fear; real men endure any adversity. That was the thinking he had grown up with, the one that now allowed him to work as a bricklayer; a social norm constituted his way of emotion, of seeing and feeling his body.<sup>3</sup>

Moments of pressure are also part of his experiences; given the high workloads, he loses track of time. When he is called to work on weekends, he wants to refuse; but, because he may be criticized and labeled as a slacker, he accepts.

*I used to worry a lot that I was working too much and so on, and then sometimes I felt like I was getting sick, and no, now I say "whatever comes is fine [...]". But more than anything else, then there are worries, that one is already under more pressure at work, like, here the truth is that I have never lacked work and then they even talk to me on the weekends, "hey, help me to work, give me a hand on Saturday and Sunday", then one says: "well, it's work", or then if I don't help him he will tell me: "no, this kid doesn't want to work anymore", and then one goes. And, pretend you no longer have a day off, and you feel more pressure and you get desperate, and you say, "damn! I'm not going to rest this weekend", by the middle of the week you're already thinking about other things, like the weekend is going to come again and work again, and you feel more pressure, and the pressure of so much work, I understand that you get sick (Horacio, bricklayer, November 3, 2019).*

He has internalized the job to such an extent that in his free time he doesn't know what to do; just like his father, he gets sick and puts more pressure on himself at home.

*I feel that being here at home I, I get sick more or I put more pressure on myself, and that is why I have to, one has to go out to work because, well I have always, as far as I have realized I have always done so, and then, sometimes I have been sick, in fact when I was resting when I had surgery, I felt that I got sick more here at home, I was in a bad mood with my family. There were times when I even argued with my partner, because I felt pressured here, as if I was locked up, I felt as if I was locked up. And she would tell me: "no, no, it's your health first and then work!", but yes, but one is used to working, I tell her, and no, no, no, I don't like being here, the truth is, I don't like being here, and no, I tell her no, like no, no, I didn't impose myself here at home.*

<sup>3</sup>Labor activity, according to Keijzer, implies "a complex and detailed cultural process of incorporation of ways of representing, valuing and acting in the world [...] in which the male is presented as essentially dominant,

subordinating women and other men who do not adapt to this model (15, p. 3).

*And the truth is, any little thing bothered me, I felt like I was too closed in, and no, I said. But I did continue, during the time of rest I had about three months and I tell you the truth is that I couldn't stand it, because **one is forced to work no matter how one is feeling** (Horacio, bricklayer, November 3, 2019)*

### By way of conclusion

In Miguel's and Horacio's family, the lives of three generations have been determined by the fundamental characteristics of the society of production and capitalist exchange. Although they are, in some sense, semi-proletarian workers (11), both their material and spiritual lives are subject to the phenomena of alienation and reification. They inherit not only trades and empirical labor activities - that is, ways of earning a living - but also ways of being, of speaking, and of reasoning. Their world views, their myths, and their rituals will be lived in the context of an everyday life, in "a world in whose regular rhythm man moves with an instinctive mechanicity, and with a feeling of familiarity." (12, p.100)

The time and space of work will displace that of leisure, of laziness, of free time, and of celebration. These workers have internalized to such an extent the ideology of work and performance, that they feel strange in its absence. What is relevant in the case we have dealt with here is that, in spite of Marx's famous *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, even outside of work, they do not feel happy... but unhappy... they mortify their bodies and ruin their spirits.<sup>4</sup>

E Alien, strange, but also sick. Therefore, not only the space and time of production will be pathological, but also that of private life, of so-called everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Sickness, then, constitutes a sort of response and adaptation, but, above all, of protest, of resistance to an alienating and reifying reality.<sup>6</sup> The instrumental rationality characteristic of the production process will be present in all other temporalities and places, material and ideological, of the life of human beings (the workers).

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<sup>4</sup>The worker, says Marx, "... does not affirm himself in his work, but denies himself in it, does not feel happy, but unhappy, does not develop in working his free physical and spiritual energies, but, on the contrary, mortifies his body and ruins his spirit. The worker, therefore, only feels himself outside of work, and in work he finds himself outside of himself. When he works

he is not himself, and only when he does not work does he take on his personality." (8, p. 598)

<sup>5</sup>On these concepts see (16, pp. 9-11) and (17, pp. 11-16).

<sup>6</sup>The significance of this is especially great. Without the workers themselves realizing it, there is the possibility of finding a way out: transforming protest, resistance into political praxis.



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