

# ‘Googleplex Cultures’: A Marxist Analysis of Silicon Valley Workplace Cultures

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## Abstract

This paper takes a Marxist approach to analyze Silicon Valley workplace cultures and how they exploit and alienate their workers. Unlike traditional corporate offices, Silicon Valley workplace cultures offer a range of perks and benefits that attract every office worker; however, it makes them feel a sense of appreciation, known throughout the paper as ‘Googleplex culture’. This culture presents a “decentralized workforce explicitly with integrated units working together to find solutions to problems or failure” (Tran, 2017) while providing employees with a range of unconventional, yet useful amenities. Throughout this paper, it is clear Googleplex culture’s onsite benefits, such as kitchens, free meals, snacks, cafés, private rooms, designated sleep areas, workout facilities, and many more perks the average workers could only wish for, obscure both the absolute and relative surplus labour which lead to exploitation. Googleplex cultures claim to be centred around the worker; however, the concept of crunch depicted in these companies is mainly focused on profits rather than employee health, further providing evidence that these workplace cultures initiate Marx’s four forms of alienation.

## Introduction

When individuals discuss their corporate workplace cultures, it is usually described in a negative tone. From the bad lighting, to the uncomfortable chairs, and not to mention the tasteless coffee. Many idolize the workplace cultures of massive technology-based companies such as Google. The Silicon Valley’s “Googleplex” offices do not resemble the typical corporate environment mentioned above. The dominant culture in many technology-based organizations depends on the market in which the company operates in. The organization’s objectives, the belief system of the employees, and the company’s management style (Tran, 2017), all play a specific role in determining the workplace culture. Unlike traditional corporate offices, Silicon Valley workplace cultures offer a range of perks and benefits, that not only attract every office worker, however, makes them feel a sense of appreciation. For example, Google offers several onsite benefits such as: kitchens, free meals, snacks, cafés, private rooms, designated sleep areas, workout facilities, and many more amenities the average worker

could only wish for. The idea is, if the employees spend more time in the offices, it will increase their productivity; why go home if everything you need is at work?

For the purpose of this paper these workplace cultures will be referred to as the Googleplex culture. This culture specifically presents a “decentralized workforce with integrated units working together to find solutions to problems or failure” (Tran, 2017), while providing employees with a range of unconventional, yet useful amenities. In this paper I will argue, using Karl Marx’s theory on exploitation and alienated labour, the Googleplex culture provides these types of workplaces in order to maximize and disguise the exploitation of their workers, therefore alienating them from their personal lives.

## Understanding Capitalism

Born in Trier, Prussia on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1818, Karl Marx would be known as one of the greatest thinkers of our time, and a foundational thinker to the study of the social sciences. Marx argues that what is unique about

human beings is that we create our own world. Unlike animals, humans can change the natural world and construct bridges, houses, and skyscrapers. For Marx, this is known as our species-being: “our nature as human beings to create; when we do, we invest a portion of nature in the creation and we see ourselves in it” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 64). Capitalism is focused on the advancement of capital, in the form of generating profits through the transfer of commodities. Marx explained that capitalism has two main classes of people: the working class, or proletariat, and the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie. The proletariat are defined by the fact that they do not own the means of production: the materials one needs to use in order to labour and produce goods. The bourgeoisie are defined by the fact that they do own the means of production and the actual commodities which are produced within them.

Every “commodity has at least two different kinds of value: use-value and exchange-value. Use-value refers to the actual function or use of the commodity. Exchange-value on the other hand, refers to the “rate of exchange one commodity bears when compared to other commodities” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 70). Marx explains exploitation arises due to the fact that the significance of all value is human labour; “[l]abour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities” (2017, p. 70). The level of exploitation is the difference between the necessary labor cost and the surplus labor. A worker may receive \$50 a day to produce \$200 worth of goods. The necessary labor in this case would be the \$50, as it is necessary to provide a living wage for the worker. The surplus labour would then be the \$150 left to the capitalist to do as they wish. Surplus labor and exploitation are the sources from where profit comes from, therefore, “the rate of surplus-value is...an exact expression for the degree of exploitation...of the work by the capitalist (p. 70). For Marx, alienation is not exclusively a subjective experience, however, an objective “consequence inherent to capitalism” (p. 80). Alienation exists when work is an estranged activity instead of a true reflection of our species being and is reinforced when workers face exploitation. Marx argues alienation takes four distinct forms in a capitalist mode of production. The first form is alienation from our species-being. Second is alienation from the work process. Third is alienation from the product. The

fourth, and last form is alienation from other workers. Alienation is an intrinsic condition of capitalism, it removes our species-being, forcing workers to live an inauthentic life.

### Unmasking Exploitation

Google, just like any capitalist company, are in the business of profit. In an ever-changing technological market, companies must continue to innovate in order to stay competitive. Technology based companies must innovate in order to increase their profit margin, as a result, they increase their level of surplus labour and the level of exploitation. This is achieved through absolute and relative surplus labour, hence why they are promoted in a positive fashion. Relative surplus labour is “with industrialization, the worker works the same number of hours, but his or her output is increased through the use of machinery” (p. 71). Googleplex cultures boasts their innovation and efficiency not strictly through industrialization, although machines do play a large role, however, through the digitalization of their workplaces. One of Google’s most well-known workplace perk is the idea of twenty percent time. The Googleplex culture encourages employees “to spend 20% of their time working on what they think will most benefit Google” (D’Onfro, 2015), in a creative hub full of technology that can make their work more efficient. Unfortunately, employees are overburdened with current projects and are expected to use technology to be more efficient, when it comes time to take a break, they are expected to use technology to create products for Google.

For Marx, overtime can be viewed as absolute surplus labour; when the capitalist directly increases “the amount of time work is performed by lengthening the workday” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 71). In Googleplex cultures, absolute surplus labour is known as “crunch”. Osama Dorias, a game developer, explained that he works about seven days a week, anywhere from fourteen to sixteen hours per day, moreover, if he had enough energy, he might be able to make it home (Glasner, 2019). According to the International Game Developers Association Developer Satisfaction Survey (2017), 95% of all developers say they have “crunched” or worked overtime, and 80% of those developers reported they were not paid for the extra time. This is due the fact that the Googleplex culture provides state of the art amenities to help their

employees through the crunch period. However, the Googleplex culture is doing the opposite, in fact it is affecting people's health in drastic ways. Some employees of popular developing companies claim, crunch has caused violent tendencies and they have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health disorders (Rivera, 2019). Googleplex cultures are looked to as role models for many corporations, however it is clear they offer amenities to workers in order to maximize their exploitation.

### The False Consciousness of the Googleplex Culture

Alienation is often regarded to as a subjective experience due to the fact it is felt and experienced by the worker. More accurately, alienation is an objective repercussion of the exploitation the worker faces under the capitalist's control. The Googleplex cultures, while substantially improving the working conditions of their offices, when compared to traditional corporate cultures "are *not* structurally *less* alienated... [a]ccording to Marx, workers *are* alienated under *all* forms of capitalism, whether they feel it or not" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 80). Therefore, alienation should be considered a structural condition of capitalism and not a personal one. There are four different forms of alienation that Marx describes, and it is clear that each form further promotes the idea of alienation in the Googleplex culture. The first form of alienation Marx describes is alienation from one's species-being. What makes us distinct human beings is the ability to produce creatively and become aware of our humanity as our nature is reflected back to us from the produced world. Googleplex cultures promote efficiency and in order to produce a profit, must continue to produce new and inventive ideas. However, these commodities are produced only for the reason to be produced for profit; the use-value of a commodity has become irrelevant. Thus, commodities do not reflect true humanity, they are not created as an expression of the "essential human characteristic — free and creative production" (2017, p. 81).

As the Googleplex culture is built on the idea of collaboration, alienation from other workers needs to be thought of more broadly. Rather than claiming workers are estranged from one another within the offices, it is more accurate to say that the Googleplex culture alienates workers from other social beings. This

type of alienation is done in two interconnected ways: through forced crunch and the available amenities. Workers are being exploited to the maximum, having to work twelve to fourteen-hour days in order to keep up with an ever-changing market. The burnout resulting from the crunch, leaves workers with no decision but to spend the night in their office building. Luckily enough, food, beds, showers and many other amenities are provided for the employee, reinforcing the concept of "why go home, if everything I need is here?". Workers become so accustomed to life in the Googleplex culture, they cannot relate to the social world; they are not social beings anymore. Osama Dorias, had a breakdown in a drugstore. In tears, he called his friend and told CBC: "my mind was racing, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to live, and I didn't know how to tell him I'd left the house without asking what size diapers my son wore" (Glasner, 2019). Something even as simple as not knowing your own child's diaper size is a result of the alienation from other social beings caused by the Googleplex culture.

Moreover, in the Googleplex culture, workers are alienated from the work process, and product. This is due to the fact the capitalist owns the means of production. The commodities produced by the Googleplex cultures create a false reality of human nature. In other words, commodities produced by the Googleplex culture, create, "the human we see [who] is rooted in false consciousness" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 81). This is a way to justify the exploitation intrinsic to the social relations between classes, those that own the companies, and those that work for them. When workers do not control "the means of production (the way in which work is performed and for what reason), then the labour process becomes alienated (2017, p. 81)". There are three reasons that the Googleplex culture facilitates alienation from the work process. First, everything produced by workers in the Googleplex culture belongs to that company, whether it be during work hours, or the allotted "twenty percent time". When the worker does not own what they produce, the work "rather than being an extension of the person's inner being... becomes something external and foreign (p. 81). The second reason is the idea that "work is forced" (p. 81). Workers produce, not to be creative and free individuals that the Googleplex culture claims to promote, however, to earn a living

wage in order to feed their families. The last reason is when a new and innovative idea is created by a worker in the Googleplex culture, the worker again does not control the means of production (p. 82). Therefore, what the worker creates belongs to the capitalist. The worker cannot control how the invention will be used or distributed. Any expression of human nature that was in the workers invention is now viewed strictly as a commodity to be sold for profit. It is clear alienation exists since those with power own the means of production, and this is justified though the production of a false consciousness.

### Conclusion

It is clear through the analysis of the Googleplex cultures, onsite benefits such as: kitchens, free meals, snacks, cafes, private rooms, designated sleep areas, workout facilities, and many more perks the average workers could only wish for, obscure both the absolute and relative surplus labour which lead to exploitation. Googleplex cultures claim to be centered around the worker, however, the concept of crunch depicted these companies are mainly focused on profits, rather than employee health. Moreover, the four forms of alienation that Marx describes are prominently present in these workplace cultures. In conclusion, it is clear the Googleplex culture provides these types of workplaces in order to maximize and conceal the exploitation of their workers, therefore, alienating them from their personal lives.

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