THE CONCEPT OF ALIENATION IN MARX AND MARCUSE

Alienation was a key concept during the early period of critical theory. The theory of alienation tries to identify a specific form of social ill where relations, which ought to be transparent and immediately identifiable to social subjects, become distorted through a problematic separation of self and other, and take on an existence which appears as wholly external – alien – to the subjects. In this paper I explore two theories of alienation: the first formulated by Karl Marx – a central forerunner to critical theory – in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (published posthumously in 1932), and the second formulated by the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse in his seminal One-Dimensional Man (1964).

By Tomod Lie

The objective of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of alienation (Entfremdung) of the working class under capitalism. In so doing I will rely on two major contributions to the theory of alienation, the first being Marx’ “Alienated Labor” from his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (published posthumously in 1932) and the second Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (1964). First, I will present Marx’s theory, and then discuss Marcuse’s in light of this. Here, I will focus on what Marx’s theory says about the alienation of the working class specifically and present the similarities and differences between his and Marx’s account. Second, I will consider two critiques of Marcuse pertaining to his theory of alienation, both put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre. The critiques in question pertain to Marcuse’s account of the role of welfare in alienation and his account of the determination of true and false needs. In the latter case I will – as MacIntyre himself does – connect MacIntyre’s criticism of Marcuse to Marx’s criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach. Last, I will assess whether the two theories give an adequate account of alienation, and argue that both have significant flaws that severely limit their usefulness in describing alienation as a phenomenon.

Introduction

The two texts “Alienated Labor” (belonging to the collection of Marx’s writings called the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844) and One-Dimensional Man deal with the same subject matter (at least in part for the latter), and both texts try to either prove, in Marx’s case, or disprove, in Marcuse’s case, the same claim – that the working class has revolutionary potential, or transcending capabilities. Both try to prove or disprove this claim through the concept of alienation, “[A] distinct kind of psychological or social ill […] involving a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belong together” (Leopold 2018). The alienated relationship between the subject and the other creates a distortion in the subject of how the relationship ought to be. For both Marx and Marcuse this distortion leads to a process through which the given state of affairs are not seen for how they truly are.

For Marx this process of alienation is intimately tied to the production of commodities by the workers and their appropriation by the capitalists. This leads to the workers being alienated from the object of their labor, the process of labor, from themselves as human beings and, lastly, from other humans. In Marx’s case, the order is reversed, and the alienation of the workers does not primarily come from the capitalists’ appropriation of the commodities produced by the workers. Instead, alienation finds its origin in the capitalist system’s ability to return commodities to the workers in the form of consumer goods. Marcuse claims that the working class has been transformed from a state of “entfremdung” to “einem nationalökonomischen, gegenwärtigen Faktum” (Althusser 2011:1160). The value that the workers transfer to the objects confront him as hostile and alien” (Marx 1991:35). Alienation was a key concept during the early period of critical theory. The theory of alienation tries to identify a specific form of social ill where relations, which ought to be transparent and immediately identifiable to social subjects, become distorted through a problematic separation of self and other, and take on an existence which appears as wholly external – alien – to the subjects. In this paper I explore two theories of alienation: the first formulated by Karl Marx – a central forerunner to critical theory – in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (published posthumously in 1932), and the second formulated by the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse in his seminal One-Dimensional Man (1964).

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in the hands of the capitalists; a relationship characterized by oppression, disenfranchisement and hostility.

Marx goes on to claim that when the workers are ali- enated from the objects of their labor, they are at the same time alienated from the process of creating these objects. With the end-result, the production of labor does not belong to the labor- ers, but to the capitalists, the labor which produces the end-result likewise belongs to the capitalists. That is to say, when s/he is working the laborers is not on their own time and their activity is not their own. They both belong to the capitalists (Marx 2011:1162). The specific form and content of the work is determined by the end- result – the production of commodities – and ultimately, by the process in which the human being can fulfill its need for self-realization. Rather, it is according to Marx “coerced, lived labor” and “[l]ife is not the satisfaction of a need but only as a means to satisfy other needs” (Marx 2011:1162).

The ultimate consequence of this, is according to Marx, that the workers are reduced to mere animals:

The result, therefore, is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely in his animal functions – eating, drinking and procreating, or at most in his shelter and finery – while in his human functions he feels only like an animal. The animalistic becomes the human and the human the animalistic.

For Marx, humans are distinguished from other ani- mals in that human beings “practically and theoretically make [their] own species” (Marx 2011:1162). What he means by this is that humans alone can consciously de- termine the content of their life activity. Only by making their own species are humans beings species-beings. The life activity of any species consists in how the species utilizes nature in producing the necessities for life. As such, no animals can separate themselves from their life activity – they are at any time immediately one with it – and cannot do anything by any other standard than what nature has determined and fixed – while in his human functions he feels only like an animal. The animalistic becomes the human and the human the animalistic.

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These needs, which are perpetuated through advertising and mass media, are “superimposed on the individuals by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice” (Marcuse 1991:7). In other words, they are needs that perpetuate capitalism. These needs are superimposed on the individual, and as such needs manufactured by the consumerist demands of capitalism. In the pleasantness of their gratification, the workers come to identify with their needs and their satisfaction: “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment” (Marcuse 1991:11). To Marcuse this separation of human beings from their true needs, and the replacement of these true needs with ‘false’ ones constitutes what I will call alienation from true needs.

One could object to Marcuse’s account by claiming that the superimposition of needs, and the variety of ways they can be satisfied, does not consist in repression, but rather in an expression of the liberty the consumer meets when entering the world of commodities. Surely, one can freely choose to buy this product rather than some other, and claiming that advertising is so thoroughly brainwashing that consumers enter the market without any freedom of choice would be absurd and easily refutable. As for the needs themselves, the consumers have a free choice of which needs to satisfy and how. This would, however, be missing the point of Marcuse’s critique. His point is that, “[U]nder the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination” (Marcuse 1991:9). The ability of free choice with which the consumer enters the market is not a true expression of freedom, but rather an expression of repression, because the framework within which the free choice takes place has been predetermined: “The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual” (Marcuse 1991:9–10).

What is essential for determining whether the needs are true or ‘false’ is whether what is needed to satisfy the needs manage to sustain the social controls of capitalism, that is, if they sustain alienated existence (Marcuse 1991:9–10). The result of the predominance of the satisfaction of ‘false’ needs is that the workers end up identifying themselves with these needs. Marcuse claims that, “[M]ass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual” (Marcuse 1991:12). They remove that inner dimension which is separate from, and potentially in opposition to, the external world. To Marcuse, “[A]ll liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude, and the emergence of this consciousness is always hampered by the predominance of needs and satisfactions which […] have become the individual’s own” (Marcuse 1991:9). The result is mimesis, “an immediate identification of the individual with his society, and through it, with the society as a whole” (1991:12). To Marcuse, there is only one dimension of thought in advanced industrial society, hence the title of his work: the workers “identify with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction” (1991:13). As a result their thoughts will be within the framework of the status quo. In contrast, Marcuse claims that the two-dimensional thought that is lost is one where the workers can separate their rationality from, and see beyond, the given state of affairs. Through the increase in the standard of living, the satisfaction of needs and as a result of mimesis, this second dimension of thought has been lost.

The alienation from true needs, leading to a deterioration of the rational capacity of the subjects, de- teriorates the transcending capabilities of the working class. When their true needs of liberation are alienated from them and replaced with ‘false’ needs of capitalist consumption, the result will not be the development of class consciousness demanding qualitative change. Instead, Marcuse claims, the workers will identify, in the first instance, with the capitalist governing their workplace: The capitalist doing well will – through the purchasing power that he grants them – ensure their doing well. In the second instance, they will identify with the capitalist system as a whole for the same reason (Marcuse 1991:22). Returning to the notion of the forces of liberation developing within the existing society, this immediate identification with capitalism is detrimental to the transcending capability of, and the development of class consciousness in, the working class. Now it is precisely this new consciousness, this ‘space within’, the space for the transcending historical practice, which is being barred by a society in which subjects as well as objects constitute instrumentailities in a whole that has its raison d’être in the accomplishments of its overpowering productivity. Its supreme promise is an ever-more-comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people who […] cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of
The fundamental contradiction under capitalism between labor and capital no longer finds its expression in the unfolding class struggle for political power. It is instead exchanged with the assimilation of the working class. The fundamental contradiction is still present. Its expression is, however, no longer one of demand for qualitative change in the political structure and the mode of production, but however, no longer one of demand for qualitative change in the mode of production, but instead the “qualitative difference of conflicting interest appear as qualitative differences within the established society” (Marcuse 1931:23).

In summary, it is apparent that Marcuse’s theory of alienation begins with the satisfaction of ‘false’ needs, reflecting a consumerist society rather than a need for liberation. This satisfaction in turn leads to alienation begins with the satisfaction of ‘false’ needs, reflecting a consumerist society rather than a need for liberation. This satisfaction in turn leads to alienation which Marcuse claims has existed since the beginning of the working class from the capitalist satisfaction of needs. The importance of this shift in the nature of alienation under capitalism is emphasized by Marcuse in a 1967 lecture. There he comments that the term ‘qualitative change’ is often used in industrial society, his lack of elucidation presents itself as a serious flaw in his theory. Marcuse (1970:69)

MacIntrye operates from the (unfortunately still relevant) assumption that the welfare institutions are being whitewashed away by the same social elites which Marcuse claims have the most to gain from their further development. I contend that MacIntyre’s analysis does somewhat miss the mark. Marcuse never claims that the social elites consciously use the satisfaction of needs and welfare as instruments for social repression. It is not a self-contra-

diction to claim that the current state of affairs has been established by a workers’ struggle, but that the result of this struggle was not repression but a shift in the emphasis of their repression. This is also noted by Marcuse in his cri-

tique of Soviet Marxism, as well as reiterated in his 1967 lecture, where he comments that the term ‘qualitative change’ is more fitting than the term ‘revolution’, “because we know of too many revolutions through which the con-


tinuous of repression has been sustained” (Marcuse 2004:67). Implicit in this statement is a Marxian understanding of revolution, as being the result of a workers’ struggle. It is not impossible that, by giving in to the demands of org-


aped into the consciousness of the working class. The consciousness of the working class is made possible through the indoctrination which affects all others?” (1970:64).

In the last analysis, the question of what are true and ‘false’ needs – in capi-

tival society, and possess some form of absolute knowledge of human affairs, which permits them to look beyond the changing of circumstances and see what no one else sees. This would, of course, not be impossible, but if Marcuse is an adherent of materialism, which there is good reason to think – although I will not make a case for it here – it is strange that this would seem to be an implication of his theory.

Marcus and Marcuse

The main difference between Marx’ and Marcuse’s theo-

dies of alienation is what they take to be the origin and consequences of the alienation of the working class. For Marx, alienation arises from the process of production un-


dered capitalism – the appropriation of the object of labor. This appropriation is the antecedent to private property; solving alienation would therefore require the abolition of private property through class struggle. The consciousness required to undertake this struggle finds its source in the alienation of labor – from alienated labor arises the neces-


tary prerequisites for its eventual and inevitable abolition,
and the establishment of a society in which humans have a free, unalienated relationship to the act of production. On Marx's account, alienation arises from the act of consumption of consumer goods, offered to the workers by the capitalist system. This gratification of their needs turns the workers away from seeing the inherent contradictions of capitalism which they, presumably, once had the power to resolve through political praxis. Further, the satisfaction of needs takes place wholly within the framework of capitalist consumption, which is managed and manufactured by the interests of the capitalists. This in turn leads the working class away from needs for liberation, which would require the abolition of capitalism, and entraps them within the sphere of 'false' needs and un-dimensional thought and behavior.

By virtue of being all-encompassing, Marcuse's theory falls into a series of flaws. Firstly, he does not elucidate on the role of the working class in their own assimilation. If we take Marcuse's theory of total alienation at face value, this still leaves open the question of why and how this present state came into being. The fundamental question of whether this transformation in the pivotal role of the working class in transcending the given is a result of objective factors of capitalism or subjective factors within the labor movement or social elites remains open. Secondly, the theory falls prey to a problem of self-reference. How and why is some subset of society able to resist the all-encompassing indiscrimination of advanced capitalism? According to Marcuse, this indiscrimination is determined by mate-rial factors prevailing to development in productivity and distribution, meaning that the 'enlightened' subset would be able to form their independent of society.

On the contrary, Marx avoids the complications of Marcuse's theory by identifying alienation with the act of production itself. His theory begins with the starting point that “the subject is swallowed up by its alienated existence” (Marcuse 1991:10) and that “the subject is swallowed up by its alienated existence” (Marcuse 1991:13) leaves us with little to determine what this alienated existence is constituted of and how it might be remedied. Ultimately, Marx's account of alienation is strikingly obscurantist and of little value to his overall analysis.

The possibility of the working class attaining rising living conditions under capitalism disproves the consequences Marx drew from his own theory, but leaves its foundation essentially untouched. Behind the claim of the transcen-ding capabilities of the working class is a more fundamen-tal statement on the nature of capitalism. Marx's theory claims something about the fundamental power structure of capitalism – as long as there is private property, there must be appropriation and, by extension, alienation. Whether or not the working class is assimilated into the capitalist system is irrelevant to this claim, it would only determine to what degree the working class self-feels it achieves alienation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Marx's theory of alienation fails to give a satisfying account of the alienation suffered by the working class. By grounding his theory in the dichotomy between true and 'false' needs, leading to a state of total alienation, Marcuse fails to adequately describe – or indicate – the specific content alienation, aside from a vague notion of 'false' needs. His claims that 'false' needs are those that sustain alienation (Marcuse 1991:10) and that the "subject is swallowed up by its alienated existence" (Marcuse 1991:13) leaves us with little to determine what this alienated existence is constituted of and how it might be remedied. Ultimately, Marx's account of alienation is strikingly obscurantist and of little value to his overall analysis of mass consumer culture. In contrast, Marx's theory leaves us with a clear identification of alienation as a social ill, its causes, content and remedy. Marx's theory does, however, have its flaws; primarily the importance of aliena-tion in his theory of social transformation. The notion that alienation necessarily will bring about a social revolution has been falsified both practically in the actual historical development and theoretically through Marcuse's analysis of advanced industrial society. Nevertheless, Marx's analysis ultimately seems more valuable. His theory points to exactly what it is in capitalism which creates alienated re-lationships, without recourse to vague, infinitely interpretable notions of 'false' needs that are obscure even for the subjects possessing them.

LITERATURE


NOTES

1 It should be noted that in One-Dimensional Man Marcuse hardly uses the term "worker." Instead he talks of "individuals." This plays into his larger point that advanced industrial society is estranged beyond the dichotomy between worker and capitalist, and that all of these estrays suffer alienation. He does talk at length about the proletariat, however, indicating that he does not think that this class had disappeared or been incorporated into society or at large. For this reason, I see it as unproblematic to change Marcuse’s talk of ‘individuals’ to ‘workers’ when discussing his theory, and in doing so avoiding any unnecessary confusion.

2 To Marx, a commodity is an object that is produced only to be sold as an exchange value with the goal of accumulating capital. When the production of objects in society is determined by the objects being commodified – as Marx holds in the case under capitalism – it is necessary that the objects are produced by someone other than those who accumulate capital by selling them. It is because Marx holds that surplus value – capital – is produced through the difference between the value added to the object by the laborer and the labor price – wages – the laborer receives for his work, which necessarily must be lower than the total value he adds to the finished product. Therefore, the appropriation of the object of labor is a necessary consequence of the object’s existence as a commodity. Thus, the act of labor is as the laborer sees it as a commodity, it would not be necessary to appropriate it.

3 A contentious issue of human nature is the view that traits of human beings which are unaltered and independent of the specific, historical circumstances in which they find themselves. Marx held that most social facts about human nature, which are separated from the context they would constitute human nature, are really just the result of the specific historical period – the specific historical stage of the social division of labor – in which humans find themselves. He holds the view that the only true universality in man, throughout history, is our capacity for social labor and a social division of labor – the basis upon which all other social facts of human society rest. In this way, color, however, Marx takes an essentialist conception of human nature, where the human essence is constituted and by realized in our creative expressions in the external world through production in a broad sense.

4 Belonging to his early period, the text may not be taken as wholly representative of Marxian theory, which represents a break with several of the concepts he applies here, notably ‘alienation’ and ‘human essence’. Marx would later utilize and develop these concepts in political economy rather than neo-Hegelian philosophy, as is done in this text. In his later works, Marx replaces the concept of ‘alienation’ with concepts such as ‘alienism’ and ‘objectification’, which are adjacent, but not identical to ‘alienation’. I will not elaborate any further on this in this text.

5 In keeping with Marcuse’s terminology I use the term ‘Marxian’ rather than ‘Marxist’. It is conventional use the difference that ‘Marxian’ refers to the doctrine pertaining to Marx himself and his magnum opus, whereas ‘Marxist’ is understood as a complete doctrine and school of thought. E.g. Leninism is understood as a complete doctrine and school of thought.

6 Anything smaller than a degree can still be considered a little further on in the text.