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NICOLE XAVIER CAUVIN

Alienation: The Modern Condition*

Sociologically speaking, one of the chief early sources of the problematics of alienation is found in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. In it, he depicted the natural goodness of men and their corruption by society, stressing the equality which nature established among men and the inequality which men have instituted.¹ He also contemplated the havoc that society had created in its impact upon human nature. All this stimulated his critical views of the fallen condition of man, for the individualism of the *Second Discourse* was followed by the equally defiant collectivism of the *Social Contract*.

Rousseau's indictment of society and its deleterious effect was a common theme also among German thinkers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These thinkers deplored, just as Rousseau did, the torn condition of man in modern society. Schiller, for example, claimed that man was torn asunder by the modern division of labor, and that as a specialized cog in the clockwork of modern society, one could no longer develop one's full potentialities. The theme was that modern man is eternally bound to but a small fraction of the whole, and becomes but a fraction and never develops the harmony of his being.² Instead of representing the totality of mankind in one's own nature, man became but a replica of his business, or his science. Similar indictments of the alienation of modern man are common among other representatives of German idealism. Fichte, for example, characterized the modern age as marked by "breakdowns."

These early thinkers were united in their criticisms of the modern condition as they highlighted the various manifestations of capitalist alienation and as they raised alarm about these manifestations over all spheres of life. As a whole, however, they failed to identify the causes of the manifestations of capitalist alienation. This is why Marx's greatest sociological contribution to the problematics of alienation is to be found in his view that alienation is a function of

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the relationship between human activity and the objects and institutions created through his activity.

Alienation may be described as a condition in which men are dominated by forces of their own creation, forces which confront them as alien powers. This condition creates a feeling of non-involvement and estrangement from one's society and one's culture. Such estrangement renders man incapable of controlling his own destiny and incapable of identifying with a common culture, both of which make him incapable of having any significant effect on the events of the world through his own action. Thus, man has become an object and not the subject of events.³

Modern society has gone through a series of significant changes which resulted in major alterations in the relationships between human activity and the objects and institutions created through this activity. These changes have greatly diminished the individual's role as initiator, the result being a major break in the relations between man and the external world, man and society.

In modern society, alienation partakes of four broad relations which in their distribution cover the whole of human existence. They are:

- 1) Man's relation to his productive activity.
- 2) Man's relation to the product of his activity.
- 3) Man's relation to himself.
- 4) Man's relation to the social community.

I refer to alienation in the first two relations as the *economic form of alienation*, and in the last two relations as the *socio-cultural form of alienation*.

Let us now briefly examine alienation in each of these relations.

Man's relation to his productive activity.

Alienation here is the result of a break between the individual and one's life activity. That is, he is estranged from his productive activity because the aims, means, and methods of his productive

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activity are dictated to him. He has no control over the productive process because his movements and tempos are predetermined, designed in a vacuum in an entirely dehumanized way according to the rhythms of the machinery and/or of the bureaucratic organization.⁴ This is true for the assembly-line worker as well as the college teacher. In this situation, the individual has become the “flesh and blood appendage” of the machine or of the organization where his participation in organizational decision-making is absent or so limited that it is totally irrelevant to the process (e.g., allowing faculty to participate in the budget process of a university in such a limited way that their participation has no impact at all).

Man's relation to his product.

Alienation here is the result of a break between the individual and the object of his creation. This object is turned into a commodity which is impersonal and anonymous. The individual who has created it has no control over it, nor does he control what becomes of it afterwards. The commodity which has been produced obeys the laws of an entity alien to its creation, i.e., the impersonal laws of the market.⁵ The problem here is that the productive activity of the individual no longer fulfills his own goals, nor his personal projects. It fulfills the goals of someone else. In this situation, the individual ceases to be a human being who determines his own needs and becomes a means, a moment in the objective process of production, a means of producing commodities.

The relationship between these first two types of alienation is obvious. The creator is alienated from the result of his alienated productive activity. Alienated activity results in objects to which the individual has no connection and thus from which he is estranged.

Man's relation to himself.

Being alienated from his productive activity and from the objects of this alienated activity, the individual is also alienated from himself. The alienation reflected in this relationship is self-estrangement, that is, the awareness on the part of the individual that he is engaging in activities that are not rewarding in themselves. Productive activity is an important part of one's daily life, often involving more than half of one's waking hours. When work is

meaningless, the individual perceives the self as devoting time and energy to something unrewarding, that is, something alien. One feature that makes the productive activity intrinsically rewarding is variety in the tasks to be performed. Another is that the productive task should give the individual a sense of mastery and self-respect. Monotonous and boring tasks which have no room for an opportunity to exercise judgment and initiative lead to self-estrangement.⁶

By being external to the individual, the productive activity is not part of his nature; consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his activity. In fact, he denies himself, since in this activity he loses his uniqueness, his ability to plan and judge his own behavior. All this is caused by a force outside of him, whether it be a machine or a bureaucratic organization. Assembly-line workers repeating the same specialized task a dozen or a hundred times a day is an example of that self-estrangement. In bureaucratic organizations workers, who have no control over the work process and do not participate in organizational decision-making, experience this type of estrangement and dissatisfaction with their work. Such a worker has even lost the freedom of solving non-routine problems. In summary, the individual is involved in an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him, and not belonging to him.

Man's relations to the social community.

Alienated individuals interacting with other alienated individuals create a situation in which they are all alienated from the human community. What is true of man's relation to his work and to himself is also true of his relationship to other men. The sense of having no control over his work, the product of his work, and himself, leads men to have a sense of powerlessness as a generalized orientation toward the social world. Powerless people feel that they have no influence on the events of the world, either through their own actions or through communal actions. This is a different feeling from that of a lack of control over events in day-to-day life. For example, people who experience powerlessness as a generalized orientation toward the social world strongly feel that it is only wishful thinking to believe that one can really influence what happens in society at large; that it is wishful thinking to believe that the average citizen can have an influence on governmental decisions; that it is also wishful thinking

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to believe that making themselves heard will have an impact on the course of world events. This is reflected in people not voting, which in a democracy is dangerous, for it may lead to Fascism. This form of alienation fragments society, a fragmentation reflected in normlessness, that is, estrangement from the social norms which are a major feature of the social bond.

In addition, the fragmentation of society leads to a sense of meaninglessness, i.e., a sense that what is going on around one is incomprehensible and meaningless because of the absence of a definition of the situation and a lack of a set of meanings that the individual can use as guidelines for behavior. A lack of meaning is the result of estrangement from others, since meanings arise out of interaction with others. Alienation from society is in fact cultural estrangement which promotes the breakdown of the common culture, manifested in a lack of commitment to established cultural factors, such as the cultural code, cultural values, social institutions, and the like.

The fourfold aspects of alienation are interrelated and have been with us since the rise of capitalism. However, I strongly feel that during the different stages of capitalism, some of these aspects seem to dominate over the others. I believe that today we are in a period of transition: from the modern period to another, which some scholars have called either post-industrialism or post-modernism. An understanding of what forms of alienation are likely to dominate in the next period requires an understanding of alienation in the modern period where alienation in the first two relations was dominant, i.e., the economic forms of alienation.

The investigations which have been carried out so far about the transition period point to the emerging dominance of what I have labeled the socio-cultural forms of alienation. Although the socio-cultural forms are connected to the economic ones, they seem to be gaining a momentum of their own during this transition period.

What can be done at this point is to briefly point out some of the consequences of the emergence of the socio-cultural forms of alienation as the dominant ones in the transition period, since a full analysis of the new dominant forms would seem premature at this time.

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Today man's meaninglessness and powerlessness with regard to himself, society, and culture seem to have reached alarming proportions. We are experiencing a situation riddled with a major contradiction between man the individual and man the social being. As an individual, he is the champion of individual freedom, but how can there be individual freedom where man is powerless over the laws, constitutions, customs, and so on that he himself has created? If this is the situation, man's individual freedom becomes meaningless as he offers allegiance to these socio-cultural items and allows himself to be dominated by them.

Because of the increased mechanization and bureaucratization of socio-cultural life in the transition period, all spheres of life appear hyper-real, i.e., exceeding reality. For example, the ultimate degradation—the vicarious living of many individuals through movie or music stars and the like — has never been so widespread. To take pleasure and acquire a form of self-fulfillment through the pleasures of the unreal, paper-doll figures created by publicity is an abject confession of emptiness.⁷

Our fascination today with the image is again a manifestation of the socio-cultural forms of alienation. The fascination with the commodity, which was dominant during the modern period, is coupled with our exaggerated fascination during the transition period with the spectacle. Both commodity and spectacle have excluded us by erasing all traces of productive activity and material support, which is what makes them hyper-real. They have placed man of the transition period in the passive position of spectator and consumer. We have allowed ourselves to be locked in the logic of the spectacle, just as we have been locked in that of the commodity, because the spectacle affects the loss of the real and provides us with the fetishistic images necessary to deny this loss (that is, images which we worship because we impute magical powers to them). With commodity we have a relation between men which assumes the exaggerated form of a relation between things. With the spectacle we have a social relation between men which takes the form of a relation between images. In spectacle, "alienation is turned into an image for the alienated to consume." Baudrillard, in his essay on the "Precession Simulacra," laid out the now-famous successive phases of the image:

- the image reflecting basic reality
- the image masking and perverting reality
- the image marking the absence of a basic reality
- the image bearing no relation to any reality whatsoever, it is its own pure simulacrum.⁸

We have reached a point between the image marking the absence of a basic reality and the image bearing no relation to any reality whatsoever.

These are only some examples of the manifestation of the socio-cultural forms of alienation in the transition period. Many scholars are investigating other manifestations, such as the breakdown of the common culture and the loss of the code, as other characteristics of the socio-cultural form of alienation today. Hopefully, in the near future we will be able to gain greater insight into the full impact of this form of contemporary alienation. However, as opposed to some of these scholars who view these contemporary manifestations of alienation as the death of the social,⁹ I strongly feel that the result of these contemporary investigations will stimulate means by which power and meaning can be regained. Or at least they will provide insights as to how meaninglessness and powerlessness can be attacked and fought.

ENDNOTES

¹Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Completes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), Volume 1.

²Friedrich Schiller, *Schiller: Essays, Aesthetical and Philosophical* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1984).

³Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), pp. 69-71.

⁴Marx, p. 72.

⁵Marx, p. 74.

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⁶Marx, p. 76.

⁷Hal Foster, *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1985).

⁸Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983).

⁹Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983).