Introduction

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Old Philosophical Themes: Marx, Value, and Alienation

In spite of its clear and distinguished pedigree in European political philosophy and theology, the concept of alienation is now associated, almost exclusively, with Marxian critical theory and analysis. Yet, even within the orbit of Marxian thought the meaning and function of the concept of alienation has not always had a comfortable or stable position. Pointing to polysemic and intermittent use in the *Paris Manuscripts*, and the absence of explicit formation in *Capital*, Louis Althusser advised discarding alienation like other "old philosophical themes" (Althusser 2005:10). Granted, there is a degree to which Marx's own deployment of alienation has several different conceptions and connotations, but the *Grundrisse* and other textual sources provide evidence that alienation, its semantic elasticity notwithstanding, remained central to Marx's political economic analysis and his theory of history, even while it appeared to 'go underground,' so to speak, in his late thought.

Part of the confusion around this concept arises from the fact that Marx appears to use alienation as a kind of normative foundation, one which informs his various critiques. A central historical rendering tends to describe workers' inability to fully realize their inner life in capitalist society outside of market forces, hence they are separated from their "species-being."

Adopted from Feuerbach, and initially developed in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx tends to understand species-being as comprising the distinctive features of human being which when expressed facilitate the conditions for human life to flourish. The ability to freely make and create is central to this conception. But under capitalism the majority of people are unable to exercise their capabilities. In this respect, alienation is a normative assessment of the conditions of life and the potential possibility to fulfill necessary elements of them themselves. One can see residue elements of this sentiment in the language in and around the ideas associated with dignity, humanity, and human flourishing.

In terms of the analysis of capitalist social relations, Marx's conception of alienation is narrower and is applied to studies of exploitation in the labour process. Alienation in this respect refers to how workers are separated or estranged from their products. As a social system, capitalism is structurally dependent upon separating workers from their products and therefore requires dominating means to force workers to comply in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Thus separation implies subordination. Additionally, there is a reconstructed rendering of alienation wherein Marx's concept of alienation can be reduced to "the notion that people

create the structures that dominate them" (Postone and Brennan 2009:316). Herein, alienation is a process by which persons are co-opted to reproduce their subordinate conditions.

While the idea of alienation has never quite disappeared from popular and scholarly consciousness, in recent years the impetus to understand these structures seems more urgent than it did only a decade ago. Indeed, when Leo Panitch, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber argue that, for many, "crisis is the new normal" (2012:ix), they articulate the conditions under which people both struggle to eke out the means of existence and make sense of the world today as well as the structural constraints which rigorously intercede and perpetuate social misery.

Increasingly, capitalism is at the center of critical attention. This is evidenced by the fact that Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which details the inequalities generated under capitalism (hardly a revelation), seems to have struck a chord in the popular press, so to speak. So too have Milanovic's *The Haves and the Have-Nots* and Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality*. Unfortunately, these analyses, while detailing economic developments more broadly, are silent on issues of labour, working conditions, and the prospects for people to cultivate their inner life under contemporary capitalism. For this reason, alienation still nevertheless provides a useful focus to explore contemporary social thought. There is a need for old philosophical themes.

This special issue of *New Proposals* has three main objectives. The first is to collect recent scholarship primarily concerned with using, refining, or deploying the concept of alienation, showcasing the concept's utility across a range of case studies and disciplines. Following this, the second objective is to highlight the philosophical methodology that underwrote Marx's materialism, thus ensuring that it is not left off the agenda as the New Materialist turn unfolds. Third and finally, given the diverse expressions of alienation each paper in this collection of essays explores the historical, analytical, and practical underpinnings of the concept, its contemporary fate, and speculations on the trajectory of this idea. We hope the results will push readers to undertake a

similar revisiting of the concept and using it in their own extensions of Marxian thought and analysis.

Opening this collection is Geoff Mann's essay which strongly advocates for a renewed concern with value theory. Given capitalism's reality of class antagonism, "as long as these problems persist," Mann writes, "the problem of value is inescapable." The reason for this is clear: Although taking on many different appearances, politics in capitalism concerns the struggle over extraction and exploitation, distribution and allocation of surplus value. Mann captures this with the line, "value theory is always the theory of stakes." But further to this point, and following Postone, value is not value-neutral; so conditioned by capital, a simple redistribution thereof may be ameliorative of some selected aspects of capitalism's harms, but it still maintains the existing social form in which persons are alienated. As Mann writes, value's most important function "is to reproduce capital's hegemony." This provocation to the reform wing of Marxian thought frames the series of treatments and analysis of particular cases of alienated social life in fully functioning capitalism that follow.

The first of these analyses comes from Graham Mackenzie. Exploring some of the materialist elements of rhetoric as a constitutive element of consciousness, Mackenzie engages with First Generation Frankfurt School thinkers to trace the lineage of Western individualism. Bringing Walter Benjamin and Franz Borkenau into conversation with one another, Mackenzie attempts to re-situate Borkenau's argument concerning the materialist basis on which individualism, as a form of consciousness, emerges and circulates. In doing so he explores some of the ways that experience mutates, becoming story and theory, ideology and history. It is tempting to find fault in Mackenzie's exploration, but what appears to be a mere gesturing toward the manner in which consciousness might return to itself, can overcome alienation, to effect material change at the level of the political economy. So Mackenzie nevertheless does correctly identify politics as the arena in which contemporary forms of alienation (i.e. neoliberal individualism) might be overcome: This is one of the paper's strengths, as he builds a compelling case to support the claim that the politics of individualism,

such as they are, probably have their most productive years behind them.

Drawing upon recent developments in mobilities theory, Daniel Newman examines how the legacies of urban transportation design contribute toward the experience of alienation insofar as the priority of the "car system," by which he means individual ownership and collective infrastructure, over other kinds of sustainable options is a structural contradiction to the extent that it has a cumulative detrimental effect on nature while also dislocating people. Drawing upon Marx and Debord, Newman substantiates this claim through a comparative treatment of car systems in Indonesia and Scotland, pointing out that in spite of these places' geographic, developmental, policy, and cultural differences, a prevailing logic of capitalist commodified travel subordinates individual features to consumerism, thus forestalling locally tailored sustainable developmental goals. As alternatives, he looks to better regulation in Finland and to transport collectives in Wales as possible methods that might lead to the replacement of the car system, but still finds some elements wanting. As opposed to being yet another item that "prioritizes products over people," Newman reasserts the use value of cars but argues that the "car system" needs to be better organized through what he calls the "commons of shared community assets." He concludes, "if victories can be won against the might of the car system, other areas in which social alienation operates may follow."

Also drawing upon Guy Debord, by contrast Ailesha Ringer and Marco Briziarelli direct their attention to Web 2.0 social media platforms. Prompted by the tradition of communication and media research on alienation, which examines "media audiences and the paradoxical ambivalent understanding of agency that emerges," they point to a kind of 'double movement' in neo-liberalism. On the one hand users of social media platforms are further removed from "the means, tools, and ownership of production," yet on the other hand these platforms do offer increased "sociability and control over the production of media content." Describing this feature as the "*dilemma of ambivalent spectacle*" Ringer and Briziarelli argue that this is simultaneously a radical escalation and de-escalation of selected elements of alienation. Herein, their contribution is to bring attention to the humanistic elements of "worker's consciousness and the concrete ways they experience estrangement." This is a vital preliminary exercise to undertake, especially to assess the likelihood of the formation of a class consciousness 'from below.'

Finally, to close this special issue, Matthew Greaves identifies the concept of alienation as integral to a proper understanding of Marx's reading of technology. He conceptualizes technology as an active social relation, a relation that should, in other words, be understood as a form of class struggle. Having substantiated this argument, Greaves turns his attention and critique to several prominent approaches to technology and alienation in critical theories of Marxian Internet Studies that, in Greaves' hands, are shown to be economistic, and which foreclose on the possibility of class driven politics. To briefly discuss one of these approaches, Greaves identifies similar, but inverse, theoretical difficulties for class politics as it is conceived by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Here, the possibility for effective class politics is foreclosed upon, in Greaves' account, as they fail to fully account for the capitalist context in which the multitude – the autonomist's new subject of history – finds itself. For Greaves, Nick Dyer-Witheford indicates one of the ways that the grandiosity of these aforementioned claims can be mitigated and a valuable path to move beyond crisis being the 'new normal.'

References

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