

# TOM BOTTOMMORE

## “Alienation”

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ALIENATION: In Marx's sense an action through which (or a state in which) a person, a group, an institution, or a society becomes (or remains) alien (1) to the results or products of its own activity (and to the activity itself), and/or (2) to the nature in which it lives, and/or (3) to other human beings, and -- in addition and through any or all of (1) to (3) -- also (4) to itself (to its own historically created human possibilities). Thus conceived, alienation is always self - alienation, i.e. the alienation of man (of his self), from himself (from his human possibilities) through himself (through his own activity). And self - alienation is not just one among the forms of alienation, but the very essence and basic structure of alienation. On the other hand 'self - alienation' is not merely a (descriptive) concept; it is also an appeal, or a call for a revolutionary change of the world (de - alienation).

The concept of alienation, regarded today as one of the central concepts of Marxism. and widely - used by both Marxists and non - Marxists, entered the dictionaries of philosophy only in the second half of the twentieth century. However, before it was recognized as an important philosophical term it was widely used outside philosophy in everyday life, in the sense of turning or keeping away from former friends or associates; in economy and law, as a term for the transfer of property from one person to another (buying and selling, stealing, making a gift); in medicine and psychiatry, as a name for deviation from normality, insanity. And before it was developed as a meta-philosophical (revolutionary) 'concept' in Marx, it was developed as a philosophical concept by Hegel and Feuerbach. In his elaboration of alienation Hegel in turn had a number of precursors. Some of them used the term without coming close to its Hegelian (or Marxian) meaning, some anticipated the idea without using the term, and in some cases there was even a kind of meeting between the idea and the term.

The Christian doctrine of original sin and redemption has been regarded by many as one of the first versions of the story of man's alienation and de - alienation. Some have insisted that the concept of alienation found its first expression in Western thought in the Old Testament concept of idolatry. The relationship of human beings to logos in Heraclitus can also be analyzed in terms of alienation. And some have maintained that the source of Hegel's view of nature as a self-alienated form of the Absolute Spirit can be found in Plato's view of the natural world as an imperfect picture of the noble world of Ideas. In modern times the terminology and problematic of alienation can be found especially in the social contract theorists. Thus Hugo Grotius used

alienation as a name for transfer of sovereign authority over oneself to another person. But regardless of whether they use the term (like Grotius) or not (like Hobbes and Locke), the very idea of the social contract can be interpreted as an attempt at making progress in de - alienation (achieving more freedom, or at least securing) through a deliberate partial alienation. This list of precursors could easily be enlarged. But probably - no thinker before Hegel could be read and understood in terms of alienation and de - alienation better than Rousseau. To mention just two among the many relevant points, the contrast Rousseau draws between the natural man (l'homme de la nature, l'homme naturel, le sauvage) and the social man (l'homme police, l'homme civil, l'homme social) could be compared with the contrast between the non - alienated and the self - -alienated man; and his project of overcoming the contradiction between the *volonte generale* and the *volonte particuliere* could be regarded as a program for abolishing self - -alienation. However, despite all precursors, including Rousseau, the true philosophical history of alienation begins with Hegel.

Although the idea of alienation (under the name of *Positivitat* (positivity)) appears in the early writings of Hegel, its explicit elaboration as a philosophical term begins with his *Phenomenology of Mind*. And although the discussion of alienation is most direct and concentrated in the section entitled 'Mind alienated from itself; Culture', it is really the central concept and the leading idea of the whole book. In the same way, although there is no concentrated, explicit discussion of alienation in his later works, the whole philosophical system of Hegel, as it is briefly presented in his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*, and more extensively in all of his later work, and lectures, was constructed with the help of ideas of alienation and de - alienation.

In one basic sense the concept of self - -alienation is applied in Hegel to the Absolute. The Absolute Idea (Absolute Mind), which is the only reality for Hegel, is a dynamic Self engaged in a circular process of alienation and de - alienation. It becomes alienated from itself in nature (which is the self - alienated form of the Absolute Idea) and returns from its self-alienation in the Finite Mind, man (who is the Absolute in the process of de - alienation). Self - -alienation and de - alienation are in this way the form of Being of the Absolute.

In another basic sense (which follows directly from the first) self - alienation can be applied to the Finite Mind, or man. In so far as he is a natural being, man is a self - alienated spirit. But in so far as he is a historical being, able to achieve an adequate knowledge of the Absolute (which means also of nature and of oneself), he is able to become a de - alienated being, the Finite Mind fulfilling its vocation to accomplish the construction of the Absolute. Thus the basic structure of man can also be described as self - alienation and de - alienation.

There is a further sense in which alienation can be attributed to man. It is an essential characteristic of finite mind (man) to produce things, to express itself in objects, to objectify itself in physical things, social institutions and cultural products; and every objectification is of necessity an instance of alienation: the produced objects become alien to the producer. Alienation in this sense can be over-come only in the sense of being adequately known.

A number of further senses of alienation have been discovered in Hegel, for example by Schacht who has concluded that Hegel uses the term in two quite different senses: 'alienation1' which means 'a separation or discordant relation, such as might obtain between the individual and the social substance, or (as "self - alienation") between one's actual condition and essential nature', and 'alienation2,' which means 'a surrender or sacrifice of particularity and wilfulness, in

connection with the overcoming of alienation<sup>1</sup> and the reattainment of unity' (Schacht 19 - U, p. 35).

In his 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy' (1839), and in further writings (such as *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and *The Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843)) Feuerbach criticized Hegel's view that nature is a self - alienated form of Absolute Mind and that man is Absolute Mind in the process of de - alienation. For Feuerbach man is not a self - alienated God, but God is self - alienated man - he is merely man's essence abstracted, absolutized and estranged from man. Thus man is alienated from himself when he creates, and puts above himself, an imagined alien higher being and bows before him as a slave. The de - alienation of man consists in the abolition of that estranged picture of man which is God.

Feuerbach's concept of alienation was first criticized and extended by Moses Hess, but a criticism along the same lines was carried out more fully and deeply by Hess's younger friend (of that time), Marx (especially in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). Marx praised Hegel for having grasped 'the self - creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and transcendence of this alienation ...' (3rd Manuscript). But he criticized Hegel for having identified objectification with alienation, and for having regarded man as self - consciousness, and the alienation of man as the alienation of his consciousness: 'For Hegel, human life, man is equivalent to self - consciousness. All alienation of human life is therefore nothing but alienation of self - consciousness . . . . All re - appropriation of alienated objective life appears therefore as an incorporation in self - consciousness.' (Ibid.)

Marx agreed with Feuerbach's criticism of religious alienation, but he stressed that religious alienation is only one among the many forms of human self - alienation. Man not only alienates a part of himself in the form of God; he also alienates other products of his spiritual activity in the form of philosophy, common sense, art, morals; he alienates products of his economic activity in the form of the commodity, money, capital; he alienates products of his social activity in the form of the state, law, social institutions. There are many forms in which man alienates the products of his activity from himself and makes of them a separate, independent and powerful world of objects to which he is related as a slave, powerless and dependent. However, he not only alienates his own products from himself, he also alienates himself from the very activity through which these products are produced, from the nature in which he lives and from other men. All these kinds of alienation are in the last analysis one; they are different aspects or forms of man's self - alienation, different forms of the alienation of man from his human 'essence' or 'nature', from his humanity.

Since alienated labour: (1) alienates nature from man, and (2) alienates man from himself, from his own active function, his life activity; so it alienates him from the species . . . ., (3) . . . It alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life . . . . (4) A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species life is that man is alienated from other men . . . . In general, the statement that man is alienated from his species life means that each man is alienated from others and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life . . . . Every self - alienation of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation which he postulates between other men and himself and nature. (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1st Manuscript.)

The criticism (unmasking) of alienation was not an end in itself for Marx. His aim was to pave the way for a radical revolution and for the realization of communism understood as 'the re-integration of man, his return to himself, the supersession of man's self-alienation', as 'the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation of human nature through and for man' (ibid. 3rd Manuscript). Although the terms alienation and de-alienation are not very much used in Marx's later writings, all of them, including *Capital*, present a criticism of the existing alienated man and society and a call for de-alienation. And there is at least one great work of the later Marx, the *Grundrisse*, in which the terminology of alienation is widely used.

The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts were first published in 1932, and the *Grundrisse* (first published in 1939), became accessible in practice only after their re-publication in 1953. These may have been among the main 'theoretical' reasons (there have been practical reasons too) for the neglect of the concepts of alienation and de-alienation in all interpretations of Marx (and in philosophical discussion in general) in the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth. Some important aspects of alienation were discussed for the first time in Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* under the term REIFICATION, but there is no general and explicit discussion of alienation in the book. Thus the discussion only began after the publication of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts in 1932. Marcuse (1932) was among the first to stress the importance of the Manuscripts and to draw attention to the concept of alienation in them, A. Corms (1934) was one of the first to study the 'young Marx' more carefully, and H. Lefebvre (1939) was perhaps the first who tried to introduce the concept of alienation into the then established interpretation of Marxism.

A more widespread and intense discussion of alienation began after the second world war. Those who have taken part in it include not only Marxists but also existentialists and personalists, and not only philosophers but also psychologists (especially psychoanalysts), sociologists, literary critics, writers. Among non-Marxists it was especially Heidegger who gave an important impulse to the discussion of alienation. In *Being and Time* (1967) he used *Entfremdung* to describe one of the basic traits of the inauthentic mode of man's Being, and in 1947 he stressed the importance of alienation. In *Being and Time* (1967) he used concept *Heimatlosigkeit*. Others too have found an analogy between Marx's self-alienation and Heidegger's *Seinsvergessenheit* and also between revolution and Heidegger's *Kehre*. Further important impulses came from Sartre, who used 'alienation' in both his existentialist and his Marxist phase; P. Tillich, in whose combination of Protestant theology, existential philosophy and Marxism the concept of alienation plays a prominent role; A. Kojeve, who interpreted Hegel with the help of insights from the young Marx; J. Hyppolite, who discussed alienation (and especially the relationship between alienation and objectification) in *Hegel and Marx*; J. Y. Calvez, whose criticism of Marx from a Christian standpoint was based on an interpretation of the whole of Marx's thought as a criticism of different forms of alienation; and H. Barth whose analysis of truth and ideology included a detailed discussion of alienation.

Among the Marxists, Lukacs studied alienation in Hegel (especially the young Hegel) and Marx, and tried to specify his own concept of alienation (and its relationship to reification); Bloch, who used the concept without a special insistence on it, tried to draw a clear distinction between *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*; and E. Fromm not only carefully studied the concept of

alienation in Marx, but made it a key tool of analysis in his sociological, psychological and philosophical studies.

Those Marxists who tried to revive and develop Marx's theory of alienation in the 1950s and 1960s have been heavily criticized for idealism and Hegelianism, on one side by the representatives of the established (Stalinist) interpretation of Marx, and on the other by the so called structuralist Marxists (e.g. Althusser). Such opponents of the theory of alienation have insisted that what was called alienation in the early Marx was much more adequately described in later works by scientific terms such as private property, class domination, exploitation, division of labour, etc. But it has been argued in reply that the concepts of alienation and de-alienation cannot be fully reduced to any (or all) of the concepts which have been offered as replacements, and that for a truly revolutionary interpretation of Marx the concept of alienation is indispensable. As a result of these debates the number of Marxists who still oppose any use of alienation has considerably declined.

Many who were ready to accept Marx's concept of alienation did not accept that of self-alienation, which seemed to them unhistorical, because it implied that there is a fixed and unchangeable human essence or nature (see HUMAN NATURE). Against such a view it has been argued that alienation from oneself should be understood not as alienation from a factual or ideal ('normative') human nature, but as alienation from historically created human possibilities, especially from the human capacity for freedom and creativity. Thus instead of supporting a static or unhistorical view of man the idea of self-alienation is a call for a constant renewal and development of man. This point has been strongly argued by Kangra: to be self- - alienated means 'to be self - alienated from oneself as one's own deed (Werk), self- activity, self - production, self - creation; to be alienated from history as human praxis and a human product' (1967, p. Z7). Thus 'a man is alienated or self - alienated, when he is not becoming man', and this occurs when 'that which is and was, is taken as the authentic and only truth', or when one operates 'inside a ready - made world, and is not active practically - critically (in a revolutionary way)' . . . (ibid.).

A further controversial point is whether alienation applies in the first place to individuals, or to society as a whole. According to some of those who see it as applying in the first place to individuals, the non - adjustment of the individual to the society in which he lives is a sign of his alienation. Others (e.g. Fromm in *The Sane Society*) have argued that a society can also be sick or alienated, so that an individual who is not adapted to the existing society is not himself necessarily 'alienated'. Many of those who regard alienation as applicable only to individuals make it even narrower by conceiving of it as a purely psychological concept referring to a feeling or state of mind. Thus according to Eric and Mary Josephson alienation is 'an individual feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others, and from the world at large' (Josephson and Josephson 1962, p. 191). Others have insisted that alienation is not simply a feeling, but in the first place an objective fact, a way of being. Thus A. P. Ogurtsov in the Soviet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines alienation as 'the philosophical and sociological category expressing the objective transformation of the activity of man and of its results into an independent force, dominating him and inimical to him, and also the corresponding transformation of man from an active subject to an object of social process'.

Some of those who characterize 'alienation' as a state of mind regard it as a fact or concept of psychopathology; others insist that, although alienation is not 'good' or desirable, it is not strictly pathological. They often add that one should distinguish alienation from two related but not identical concepts, anomie and personal disorganization. 'Alienation refers to a psychological state of an individual characterized by feelings of estrangement, while anomie refers to a relative normlessness of a social system. Personal disorganization refers to disordered behaviour arising from internal conflict within the individual' (M. Levin in Josephson and Josephson 1962, p. 228).

Most of the theorists of alienation have made a distinction between different forms of alienation. For example, Schaff (1980) finds two basic forms: objective alienation (or simply alienation), and subjective alienation (or self - alienation); E. Schachtel four (the alienation of men from nature, from their fellow - men, from the work of their hands and minds, from themselves); M. Seeman five (powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, normlessness and self - estrangement). Each of these classifications has merits and demerits. Thus instead of trying to compile a full list of such forms, some have tried to clarify the basic criteria according to which such classifications should be (or actually have been) made.

A question which has been particularly widely discussed is whether self - alienation is an essential, imperishable property of man as man, or is characteristic only of one historical stage in human development. Some philosophers (especially existentialists) have maintained that alienation is a permanent structural moment of human existence. Besides his authentic existence, man also leads a non - authentic one, and it is illusory to expect that he will one day live only authentically. The opposed view is that the originally non - self - alienated human being, in the course of development, alienated himself from himself, but will in the future return to himself. This view is to be found in Engels and in many present - day Marxists; Marx himself seems to have thought that man had always been self - alienated thus far, but that he nonetheless could and should come into his own.

Among those who have accepted the view of communism as de - alienation there have been different opinions about the possibilities, limits and forms of de - alienation. Thus according to one answer, an absolute de - alienation is possible; all alienation -- social and individual -- can be once and for all abolished. The most radical representatives of such an optimistic viewpoint have even maintained that all self - alienation has already been eliminated in principle in socialist countries; that it exists there only in the form of individual insanity or as an insignificant 'remnant of capitalism'. It is not difficult to see the problems with such a view. Absolute de - alienation would be possible only if humanity were something given once and for all, and unchangeable. And from a factual standpoint, it is easy to see that in what is called 'socialism' not only 'old', but also many 'new - ' forms of alienation exist. Thus against the advocates of absolute de - alienation it has been maintained that only a relative de - alienation is possible. According to this view it is not possible to eliminate all alienation, but it is possible to create a basically non - alienated society - that would stimulate the development of non self - alienated, really human individuals.

Depending on the view of the essence of self - alienation, the means recommended for overcoming alienation have also differed. Those who regard self - alienation as a 'psychological' fact dispute the importance or even relevance of any external change in 'circumstances' and suggest that the individual's moral effort, 'a revolution within the self', is the only cure. And those who regard self - alienation as a neurotic phenomenon are quite consistent in offering a

psychoanalytical treatment for it. At the other pole stand those philosophers and sociologists who, basing themselves on a degenerate variant of Marxism called 'economic determinism', regard individuals as passive products of social (and especially economic) organization. For such Marxists the problem of de - alienation is reduced to the problem of social transformation, and the problem of social transformation to the problem of the abolition of private property.

As against both the above - mentioned views a third conception has been proposed according to which de - alienation of society and of individuals are closely connected, so that neither can be carried out without the other, nor can one be reduced to the other. It is possible to create a social system that would be favourable to the development of de - alienated individuals, but it is not possible to organize a society which would automatically produce such individuals. An individual can become a non - alienated, free and creative being only through his own activity. But not only can de - alienation not be reduced to de - alienation of society; the de - alienation of society in its turn cannot be conceived simply as a change in the organization of the economy that will be followed automatically by a change in all other spheres or aspects of human life. Far from being an eternal fact of social life, the division of society into mutually independent and conflicting spheres (economy, politics, law, arts, morals, religion, etc.), and the predominance of the economic sphere, are according to Marx characteristics of a self - alienated society. The de - alienation of society is therefore impossible without the abolition of the alienation of the different human activities from each other.

Equally, the problem of de - alienation of economic life cannot be solved by the mere abolition of private property. The transformation of private property into state property does not introduce an essential change in the situation of the worker, or the producer. The de - alienation of economic life also requires the abolition of state property, its transformation into real social property and this cannot be achieved without organizing the whole of social life on the basis of the self - management of the immediate producers. But if the self - management of producers is a necessary condition of the de - alienation of the economic life, it is not of itself a sufficient condition. It does not solve automatically the problem of de - alienation in distribution and consumption, and is not by itself sufficient even for the de-alienation of production. Some forms of alienation in production have their roots in the nature of present - day means of production, so that they cannot be eliminated by a mere change in the form of managing production.

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