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Who Is Alienated From What?

For years alienation has been the favorite catch word of the American literary establishment, as triangulated by the *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and the *New York Review of Books*. What they mean is that since these establishment members lost their jobs in Army Intelligence after the war, the ruling circles of American society have forgotten they exist and no longer ask them out.

On the other hand, there has been growing up in Europe what amounts to a systematic philosophy or sociology of alienation. Several intellectual currents have converged to form what is today a stream of thought that is practically unchallenged. Since the publication of the philosophical notebooks of the young Marx just before the war, people who broke with the Communist Party but remained Marxists have come to emphasize the problem of alienation as fundamental.

From Kierkegaard to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty alienation has been a central concept of the Existentialists. In the tremendous intellectual upsurge in the Catholic Church that has fol-

lowed Pope John's *aggiornamento*, modern Catholics have pointed out what has been obvious to everyone else for a long time, that anyone who tries to model his life on Christ and his apostles is by definition alienated from a predatory society.

Today the dialogue between these groups has begun to be overheard even within the ranks of the European Communist parties, most especially the Italian and Polish. The unorthodox Yugoslavs have been leaders in the movement for a long time. This discussion is where intellectual life is today in Europe, but it has had little influence in America. Even theoretical socialist magazines like *Dissent* or libertarian ones like *Liberation* devote little or no space to the discussion of alienation, and the middlebrow magazines are aggressively unaware of its existence.

Partly this is due to the American theory that general ideas are the exclusive province of college professors, hired to teach them for grades or theses. Partly it is the American, and particularly the American labor movement's lack of interest in anything but bread-and-butter issues, and partly it is due to the fact that in America today even an unfavorable serious discussion of ideas that have any connection with the name of Marx is immediately labelled Communist, and anyone who embarks upon such a discussion is in danger of investigation.

David Herreshoff in *American Disciples of Marx* comments on Earl Browder's farewell to Marxism, "Through Browder's *Marx and America* runs an implicit identification of the level of wages and the level of well-being of the workers. The Marxist concept of alienation is not once alluded to in this work purportedly concerned with the relevance of Marx to American experience." Browder's book is primarily an attack on the theory of progressive impoverishment. It never occurs to him that Marx gave a symbolic "material" existence to a moral critique of his society and that today his categories are deserting their materialist vestures and returning to their old etherealization.

Alas, the same is substantially true of Herreshoff's book itself, although Daniel De Leon, to whom Herreshoff gives most space, was acutely aware that human self-alienation was the very reason for being of the revolt against industrial civilization. Be-

hind his unfortunate addiction to mixed metaphors in the William Jennings Bryan fashion, which apparently the age demanded, De Leon shows a better understanding of the fundamental problems raised by Marxism than Lenin, Kautsky, or Plekhanov. After the Third Congress of the Comintern, Left Communism's very memory has been effectually obliterated.

The present efforts of the American Left to reorganize itself are little influenced by the tremendous Marxist *aggiornamento* which has been sweeping the Iron Curtain countries, the French and Italian Left, and is even beginning to penetrate the sealed minds of the Workers' Fatherland itself. I used the word "*aggiornamento*" advisedly, because there has been a most remarkable convergence with the development of a new philosophy of man in the Roman Catholic Church. These two movements in fact are the most significant and exciting in contemporary Europe. In America there is a considerable number of Catholic thinkers who have launched a dialogue with the Marxist *aggiornamento*. As far as any answers have appeared they have come from across the Atlantic or from Japan. Certainly there has been little response from anybody identified with any Marxist party in America. This is curious indeed, because the entire movement of what has been called the "psychoanalytic Left" is American-based and is quoted constantly by Marxist writers trying to develop a contemporary philosophy of man in Yugoslavia, Poland, Japan, or Italy.

There are several reasons for this. American Marxism has been dominated for over a generation by a mindless, vulgar bureaucracy principally distinguished by a militantly execrable taste in all aspects of life and a scorn for thought of any sort. There is no essential difference in values and manners, between the bureaucrats of American Marxism, the House of Representatives, and any Board of Aldermen. They all represent the American Political Way of Life. It is the system of values known by this name which of course is what makes the alienated alienated.

An American theory of alienation significantly has come from practical clinicians, confronted every day in their practices with patients made profoundly sick by a scale of values which has for its summit the reduction of all things and all men to

commodities. It is the treatment of the mentally ill with manifest moral lesions which has shifted the bases of psychoanalysis in America from the Sixth to the Tenth Commandment. The besetting sin of modern society is certainly not adultery—it is covetousness. In modern America it is so besetting that the average educated person encountering the word in the Bible believes it is some ritual violation peculiar to the ancient Hebrews, like eating crayfish.

The runaway pornography of the American entertainment business—including pseudo-highbrow publishers who concentrate on dope and homosexual prostitution—is not motivated by sex, but by the reduction of sex to a commodity whose advertising lures must be continuously escalated and which can never be satisfied. This is a commonplace. Since all critics of our society say this, it is strange that America has not developed what might be called a systematic philosophy of its own morbidity. Working psychiatrists, even of the psychoanalytic Left, still function in an atmosphere of pandemic pressure, like traumatic surgeons in an air raid. It's the laity who read the theoreticians—whether Erich Fromm, Leslie Farber, or Abraham Maslow.

An important factor in the failure of American socialism to produce any kind of philosophical Marxism is the profoundly uncongenial temper of Hegelianism to the dominant pragmatism and pluralism of American philosophy. There has not been a socially significant Hegelian thinker in America since Josiah Royce. It is interesting that behind his soft and well-bred prose lurk some extraordinarily revolutionary ideas, precisely those so influential in Europe today: his notion of the Absolute as the Beloved Community, and, of course, the doctrine of reification, the idea that the turning of men into things was the essence of alienation or original sin.

These ideas are central to the leaders of political *aggiornamento* in Yugoslavia or Italy, but in America any mass movement of head-on attack on alienation as such is largely confined to the most intelligent members of the notorious Revolt of Youth. The only trouble with the Revolt of Youth or the New Left is that it has been defenseless against its main enemy. It took only a year for that caricature of Big Business and

the Big Business ethic—Organized Vice—to take over the Hippies; and the movement itself, by the pressure of idle youngsters of the upper middle class, was turned into a craze for the conspicuous expenditure of senseless commodities—beads, couch cover serapes, and worn-out squirrel skin chubbies. This is also the general tendency of American literature and art. Where Poland produces Gombrowicz staged by Grotowski, and France and Ireland cooperate in producing Beckett, we come up with Andy Warhol, just a messier variety of chic.

Who is alienated from what? The writings of the young Marx which discuss the subject and which have become so influential today are actually ambiguous and contradictory. At times Marx speaks as Hegel; alienation is the very principle of creativity, the Absolute self-alienates itself in creation. Sometimes he speaks of all work as alienating. Again he speaks of man engaged in what later he would call the commodity production of capitalism as being alienated from his product, from his fellows in work, and from the work itself. What he never mentions, but himself perfectly exemplifies, is the alienation of the intellectual, clerkly caste from the new ruling class. In this he was only the latest of a long line of *alienés* who began to appear contemporaneously with the rise of that class itself. This is an historically unparalleled phenomenon, characteristic only of Western European civilization since the rise of the middle class.

All important works of art, from the middle of the eighteenth century on, have rejected all the distinguishing values of the civilization which produced them. Rousseau, Blake, de Sade, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Byron, Stendhal, these are only the most conspicuous and extreme *révoltés*. Not even the apostles of the middle class's own revolution—Marat, Robespierre, Saint Just—thought they were waging that revolution for the values of that class. If we project this situation back on the Rome of Virgil, the Greece of Sophocles, or the China of Tu Fu, its historical peculiarity is of course apparent. Catullus may be angry and neurotic but he is anything but alienated.

The clerkly caste had been as important in the Middle Ages as ever they had been in Egypt or Babylon. In a commercial, industrial civilization they became "minions," skilled servants

deprived of self-determination, even more of a personal, determinative role in society. It is this sudden loss of power, and of personal autonomy, that has fed the wider concepts of alienation.

It is from literature and art that the alienated personality has spread, first to the technical and professional intelligentsia, the very pets of the society, and from them to an ever deepening stratum of the working class. The shocking exploitation—worse than chattel slavery—characteristic of British business enterprise in its primitive days, which was so well described by Engels and others—did not produce “alienation” in the intellectual sense of the word. The naked child dragging a coal cart in a narrow tunnel did not become alienated; he became dead. The young Marx—and seventy-five years after him, Trotsky, in *Literature and World Revolution*—often speak like William Morris. Creative intellectuals themselves, they imagined that if the work of the industrial worker could be made creative, like that of the artist, he would cease to be alienated.

As a matter of fact, my experience with industrial workers has led me to suspect that most of them do not resent the low level of personal participation in the production process. Charlie Chaplin may have considered a job on the assembly line destructive of the personality. This was not an opinion widely shared in the United Auto Workers Union, and now the assembly-line worker himself is disappearing. In a completely automated and computerized system of production, most of the small number of workers required would in fact be able to participate creatively. In the heaviest, and once most onerous, extractive industries this is already becoming true. But in the automated Western world, and equally in the socialized East, personal alienation increases, even amongst the most favored beneficiaries of the new society. Account executives and commissars mimic Baudelaire. As slavery was a substitute for machinery, Bolshevik “socialism” is a substitute for automation.

On the other hand, immense numbers of people are becoming physically alienated from productive society altogether. The word here should not be alienated, but redundant. As labor power steadily loses its role as the primary source of economic value, whole races and nations become redundant. Except for

the Talented Tenth, the American Negro today is born alienated. His black skin has led him to being sifted down to the bottom of the economic pile where he has nothing to sell but his labor power, and that labor power, which once built railroads and picked cotton, finds no buyers. Africa and the rest of the former colonial world has been liberated because the metropolises, the former imperialist nations, have discovered that imperialism is unprofitable.

Where once the current of rejection of the dominant society flowed from the intellectuals down and out into the common people, today the current is reversed. Dick Gregory, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones, Frantz Fanon, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, the most militant artist spokesman for the alienated black common people, have themselves enjoyed specially favored upbringing and a plethora of endowments from the “power structure.” They participate in modern society far more than most white intellectuals—with a vengeance. At least their vengeance strives to be creative. They are eminently successful and doing creative work. Society has discriminated in their favor. They are black. As black men the current of society’s rejection and reciprocal rejection of society flows up from the unwanted black common people. The child coal picker in 1840 England may have died of overwork, but her work was needed. Nobody needs the thousands and thousands of unskilled workers who are now entering a third generation on welfare, housed, or rather economically embalmed and stowed out of sight, in housing projects and other slums. This is an entirely different kind of alienation from the one Marx diagnosed in the labor process. The conviction that “nobody wants me, nobody needs me, nobody knows I exist” may be the birthright of the ghetto, but it is coming to pervade all levels of modern society, even the most productive and favored.

At the top of the social heap the children of the upper middle class turn on, tune in, and drop out in herds and droves. This is true of the children of factory managers in East Berlin just as much as it is true of the girls from Sweetbriar wrapped in bedspreads and running barefoot in the Haight-Ashbury.

The most fashionable artists strive desperately to invent some new nihilism and sell it to idle rich women. Andy Warhol and

Kenneth Anger are far more fashionable with far richer people than ever was John Singer Sargent. The assumption is that when a rich woman spends \$12,000 for a three-foot square of masonite painted an even coat of solid blue, or on a rusted, pressed automobile body, or on an exact ceramic reproduction of human feces, and puts the thing in her penthouse, it will destroy her. Unfortunately for the neo-Dadaist revolutionaries, she spends \$12,000 or more a year on a psychoanalyst to keep that from happening, and never misses the money for either Dadaist or doctor.

Meanwhile, throughout the society, millions of mute inglorious people, surfeited with commodities and commodity relationships, become ever more divorced from their work, their fellows, their spouses and children, their lives and themselves.

"Why did you set all those fires?" "Why did you shoot thirty people on the university campus?" "Why did you kill those seven nurses?"

"I didn't know who I was." "I wanted to do something so that I could prove to myself I was really existing."

This goes all the way to the top. "Why are you dropping napalm on children?" "Why are you tempting a mighty nation to drop its hydrogen bombs on you?" Almost certainly the answer is, "I have the titles of power but I can't tell who I am."

1967