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## Alienation. A Challenge for Citizenship Education

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In general, education means preparing for the future. The goal of education is practical, taking into account and thus affirming the present reality, naturally and culturally, individually and socially, economically and technically, politically and morally ... even when the proposed negations may seem very radical and utopian. Today, in our part of the world, educating citizens for modern society means educating human beings politically for governing themselves and their society through a parliamentary democratic system that, from time to time and at certain places, have even allowed itself to be socially responsive. Modern society can thus be conceived of as somehow democratic, having, to a certain degree, realized ideals about political autonomy and social solidarity.

In a political perspective modern society can thus be considered, at least on the way to, a liberal, or even a social, democracy. The former most often being the explicit ideal of democratic educators, at least nowadays and in our part of the world, it is common to emphasize the development of human singularity, stressing the importance of formation (*Bildung*) of human beings through liberal education to become self-conscious and reflective individuals, considering this a necessary condition of human flourishing. Still, democracy must have citizens that want to rule society according to general social norms and not just their own private preferences. Modern democracies have therefore from early on, i.e. already from the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> wanted to educate their citizens to be capable of inhibiting or transgressing selfish agendas, acquiring what has since antiquity been known as civic virtues.

Many 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions of citizenship education have focused on various degrees of social and political freedom, typically praising the emerging freedom of the individual human being and the liberal formation to the collective societal life of such beings. In

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Renouvier 1848 (summarized by Paul Laurent Assoun in Châtelet Duhamel & Pisier, 2001: 946-51)





contrast, the political education to republican citizenship has often been regarded with suspicion, even denouncing the education to political citizenry as idealizing the state and thus being totalitarian. Prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of this line of thought are John Dewey and Dietrich Benner, distancing themselves from, respectively, Plato's *Republic* and the educational legislation of the bygone German Democratic Republic DDR.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the normative goals of democratic education, a crucial choice has thus been assumed to stand between the civic virtues of liberal individualism and those of political or republican citizenship. Economically, however, educating citizens for the real modern society also means preparing them for totalizing societal structures and practices that are still best characterized as capitalist. To put it simply, modern society is a capitalist society, i.e. a class society constituted by social exploitation and inequality. Living in such a society means, I would claim, becoming estranged from one's co-citizens through both injustice and alienation, making one less inclined to make those sacrifices that makes political justice, social cohesion or cultural flourishing possible.

Social determinants thus being estranging and exploitative, the real modern society of today is a capitalist society that can and should be criticized for injustice and alienation. The former shows itself quite clearly in various material aspects of life, most disturbingly by examples of obvious human suffering, but is often thought to be possible to deal with, at least in principle, simply by adhering better to political principles of distributive justice considered fair. The latter, however, i.e. alienation, is less easy to tackle, neither being straightaway definable, nor identifiable. Still, alienation cannot be ignored since it, at least in some interpretations, plays a crucial role in delimiting the group of people who are to be counted as the political subjects of social justice, namely those who are neither aliens nor strangers, but fellow citizens.

Recently critical intellectuals have again – after years of neglect – tried to incorporate consideration about alienation in the normative discussions of social and political philosophy. Recognizing this fortunate turn, the basic idea of the present work is to let philosophy of

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<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Dewey 1916: 81-99 and Benner 2005: 67-89



education benefit from this development and reflect on the possibilities of conceptually understanding citizenship education as, in principle, capable of overcoming alienation, thus insisting simultaneously on both the fact of alienation within modern society and on possible ways of forming subjects to become political citizens in a real social democracy.

Relating this way to existing human reality, educational progress can, I think, be considered one of the most illustrative examples of a process governed by the logic of the so-called determinate negation, i.e. a process where consciousness is taken to deny or negate what is real while at the same time confirming it, thus in the negation subsuming essential moments of what is negated and thus making it an integrated part of a human reality in progress, overcoming itself to become more experienced, mature and self-conscious.<sup>3</sup>

Accepting this Hegelian figure as the basic model for education, the challenge for citizenship education to the modern society is thus the conditions faced by human beings living in a capitalist society where the government is elected by members of a representative parliament. In other words: This being the societal reality, what are the conditions for citizenship education, what should be its goals, what are the available means, and what are the likely results? Or, to paraphrase Kant's famous question of the possibility of science accepting the sceptic arguments of Hume,<sup>4</sup> i.e.: How is democracy and democratic formation possible assuming injustice and alienation?

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This being a general challenge for education in and to a modern society, for the present, I will limit myself to discussing the question of alienation, reflecting more closely on what alienation is, but still assuming that it can be coped with through citizenship education, and assuming further the latter to be a necessary condition for realizing a genuine social democracy. As it is well known, Marx' answer to material challenges of capitalism was the proletarian revolution.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, I will let myself be guided by the hope of achieving

<sup>3</sup> For a little more on this logic, see, e.g., Sørensen 2011: 48-52.

<sup>4</sup> See Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*: B 20.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Marcuse 1941: 287-88 (Marcuse, *Schriften* 4: 254).



something worthwhile for humanity by less radical means, thus opting for the kind of social democratic reformism that guided much of the organized working class movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, assuming, as also Marx did, that the present capitalist society has in fact created the historical conditions for the future realization of a just society, materially as well as in terms of subjective consciousness. Confronted with globalized and accelerated capitalism, this assumption may seem naïve, but as I see it, the alternatives are even less attractive.

Hence, basically I think Marx *et al.* are right that capitalism produce alienation, stimulating selfishness, accumulating dead labor as capital and thus generating social injustice. Still, I would like to insist on the possibility to counter this detrimental influence by some kind of education, forming people to become active human beings and citizens rather than merely producers and consumers. Hence, my idea is to develop a concept of alienation that does not ignore the material challenges of capitalist estrangement and reification, but can nevertheless be conceived of as possible to negate, and thus sublimate, by some kind of citizenship education.

Considering this a rather ambitious project, in order to get things going, I will, for the present, pass lightly over some of the introductory steps and simply assume as relevant the metaphysical anthropology of the Hegel master piece from 1807, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>6</sup> This means in particular, as I have done it elsewhere, discussing the Hegelian reconstruction of the logic of work as a conscious practical activity projecting and integrating an idea into matter, in the process of production thus objectifying and estranging oneself from the resulting product. This is first of all a result of the production as such, but also due to the accentuation of the estrangement by the unequal relation between the master and the slave, the former being ultimately the possessor of both the product of the work and the producer, i.e. the slave.<sup>7</sup> Worth taking into consideration is also, as I have argued in continuation, the Hegelian analysis of the modern society, emphasizing the subject as inescapably in distress, lacerated and alienated, and where formation (*Bildung*) cannot but accentuate this sad

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<sup>6</sup> See Hegel 1807.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Sørensen 2015a: 65-68





situation, ultimately, however, nevertheless providing consciousness with a clear conception of the multiple conflicts and contradictions within society.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned, alienation is fortunately again taken seriously in critical discussions, and as point of departure below I have chosen two contemporary critical theorists, Rahel Jeaggi and Hartmut Rosa. However, recognizing the basic anthropological logic of Hegel, and thus the possibility of raising self-consciousness through the process of experience, I also take for granted that Marx' analysis in the *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts* from 1844 is still relevant to relate to. Accepting thus classical metaphysical presuppositions, my perspective on Jeaggi and Rosa therefore becomes rather critical, thus affirming further that Marx does indeed provide constructive hints as to how the basic detrimental logic of alienation is accentuated and brought to extremes as capitalism matures, bringing alienation to reification and thus to a point where it affects all aspects of human life, ultimately therefore becoming impossible to grasp or at least impossible to think beyond.

This way of reading Marx draws on the first generation of Critical Theory. In particular Marcuse has rather extensive and detailed reflections on alienation spreading over three decades, i.e. from “The Foundation of Historical Materialism” over *Reason and Revolution* to *One-Dimensional Man*, respectively from 1932, 1941 and 1964. The basic Hegelian and Marxist analysis of alienation and reification is traditionally considered the basis of rather depressing conclusions, pointing only to the ideological falsities and dead-ends of modern industrial society. However, when it comes to Marcuse, considering his analysis of late-capitalism more closely, he does in fact provide conceptual resources, or fractures, for developing reasonable hopes for the future of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in various remarks and minor works Marcuse even endorses liberal and social democracy,<sup>10</sup> and in

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<sup>8</sup> See Sørensen 2015a: 69-75

<sup>9</sup> As it is well known, in the famous *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno do not give much reason to rationally hope for any kind of human education to resist the societal reification. That, however, is for me sufficient reason to dispose of it in this context. The assumed practical task is to develop an understanding of citizenship education capable of resisting and overcoming the alienation produced by capitalism, and for that purpose we need a more constructive interpretation of the basic conceptual frame of reference. This I have found in the writings of Marcuse.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Dubiel 1992: 65-73



*Counterrevolution and Revolt* we get the fruitful idea of a “second alienation”<sup>11</sup>, namely the alienation from the alienated society, thus conceptualizing a conscious negation of capitalist alienation. Hence, Marcuse offers in his critical analysis the classical dialectical figure of a negation of a negation, sublating what was negated to be part of a progression. After a short discussion of Rosa’s conception of alienation, stressing non-speculative non-essentialism and offering on concepts for a positivist empirical diagnosis, not a real solution (1.), I will therefore direct my attention to Marcuse, discussing how capitalism violates human substance and how it may be overcome (2.). Ultimately, I will simply remind about the project as such, i.e. creating the conditions for realizing a viable future for humanity (3.).

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These are the conceptual resources that I will presently employ to discuss alienation. Again, the assumption is that such conceptual reflections will not impede the possibility of citizenship education in and for a modern social democracy, and to this I will return in the next phase of this project. I will thus insist on the necessity and possibility to make the subjects of education parts of genuinely human interactions, i.e. influencing them by social, cultural and political activities that stimulate the development of an equally genuine human consciousness, thus counter-acting the currently all too prevalent preoccupation with, and fetishization of, economy, technology and mere entertainment, all of the latter tending to reify both the producer and the consumer. Again, this may seem naïve, but a very good argument for not accepting prematurely the victory of capitalism, is the experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where capitalism was in fact kept in a very short leash by various forms of social democracy and authoritarian socialist regimes.

Restricting myself for now to sketching an analysis of alienation, let me nevertheless remind one last time about the horizon within which this analysis should be understood. Hence, the ultimate goal for citizenship education must be to stimulate societal opinion and will formation to take a genuinely human direction in the sense just indicated, and that means insisting on the essential role of both artistic creation and communicative interaction. This

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<sup>11</sup> Marcuse 1972a: 72



means further, as I have done elsewhere, endorsing also, for instance, part of Habermas' argument from his very early political essays to *Faktizität und Geltung* from 1992,<sup>12</sup> thus insisting on the belief that education can, both conceptually and in fact, overcome capitalist alienation and reification, even when the challenge is conceived of in this radical way. As it has been said: Yes, we can...

### 1. Contemporary perspectives stressing non-speculative non-essentialism

Alienation is not an easy phenomenon to describe. No doubt it signifies not feeling comfortable, but it is by no means clear what kind of discomfort it is, to whom it pertains and what causes it. Adding to the complexity is the origin of the words used to demarcate the subject matter. What we are presently discussing under the heading 'alienation' has its primary roots in a more than 200 years old discussion in German of the heading of '*Entfremdung*'. The word '*Entfremdung*' was chosen by Goethe to translate the French 'alienation' used by Denis Diderot in the novel *Rameau's Nephew*, and the latter is explicitly quoted by Hegel in the reflection on alienation in the said *Phenomenology*.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas 'alienation' in English almost exclusively signifies disposing of, or being deprived of, something unspecific, in French it can also mean being deprived of something very specific, namely being deprived of reason, i.e. being foolish, out of one's mind, or outright insane. This is the scope that we are dealing with in the present analysis.

Being alienated in the emphatic sense thus means being estranged, not just from one's surroundings, but also from oneself. Hence, as an experience, alienation conveys sentiments of diffuse suffering, sometimes even mental pain or anxiety in a very strong sense. It means being confronted with something as alien or strange that was one was supposed to be familiar with, being deprived of something that one thinks of as rightfully possessing, or being deprived of belonging to the community that one assumed to be part of or integrated in. By implication, being alienated can therefore also mean not being satisfied, or able to identify, with one-self.

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Sørensen 2015b.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Heidegren 1995: 226; see also Hegel 1807: 403





In this comprehensive sense, alienation has been a crucial element for various kinds of reflections on the human predicament, typically either focusing on the absurdity of human existence, or being part of a Marxist critique of capitalism. Out of fashion for years, alienation has now again made it to the agenda of critical intellectuals, although that does not mean that there is agreement about what it is supposed to signify, quite the contrary. As indicated, the outset will be contemporary discussions of alienation by Jaeggi and Rosa. However, as also indicated, I do not find these approaches quite convincing, the former thus ignoring capitalism as a crucial factor and the latter for failing to reflect conceptually on the substance of the matter, thus acknowledging that capitalism plays a determinant role, but letting itself be content with experimental and empiricist argument. Both only provide, I would claim, alienated conceptions of alienation. It is for these reasons that I propose to reintroduce some of the classics in this field, i.e. Hegel, Marx and Marcuse.

Starting with Jaeggi's analysis in *Entfremdung*, we get an argument for alienation to stem from the loss of autonomy and self-determination.<sup>14</sup> This seems to me, however, to be a rather narrow and somehow misplaced understanding of alienation, at least when we consider the tradition from Diderot *et al.* Against this Hartmut Rosa can thus argue that being in love or committing oneself to parental obligations surely means losing freedom, control and thus autonomy, but that does not necessarily lead to alienation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Maja Rosengren Ekebjærg argues that Jaeggi's conception of alienation is highly individualistic and psychologized, being therefore less promising when it comes to understanding why capitalist society seems to be especially prone to produce alienation.<sup>16</sup>

More promising is Rosa's approach in *Acceleration and Alienation* that stresses the societal aspects of alienation and provides a broader conception. In the first round his argument concerning alienation proceeds from a sociological analysis of the social acceleration experienced in modern capitalist society,<sup>17</sup> and the claim is that speeding up social life results in alienation in a number of different social relations, e.g. in relation to time

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Rosa 2016: 302; see also Jaeggi 2005

<sup>15</sup> See Rosa 2016: 302-03

<sup>16</sup> See Ekebjærg 2015: 18-19

<sup>17</sup> See Rosa 2005: 483-85





and space, to things and activities, and finally to other human beings and oneself.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, acknowledging the difficulties for 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxists regarding the “‘true meaning’ of ‘alienation’”, Rosa nevertheless affirms the classical charges of Marx, i.e. that alienation and reification are characteristic of not just any society or human relations, but precisely of capitalist society, and that subjects in such a society would be alienated from “the subjective, the objective and the social worlds.”<sup>19</sup>

The social approach to alienation is further developed in Rosa’s most recent work, *Resonanz*. Confronted with what he considers a commonly experienced lack of clarity regarding the concept of alienation, he stresses two aspects. First, as mentioned, it is important to analyze from what “a subject or a society”<sup>20</sup> is alienated, i.e. time, space etc. Second, one must consider what can be regarded as a non-alienated relation, i.e. a way of living or working that can be considered somehow successful or “‘true’”<sup>21</sup>. In other words; if alienation is the challenge or the problem, what is the solution? This is where Jeaggi and Rosa differ; whereas the former would stress the autonomy of the self, for the latter what is important, is resonance and the relation to the world.

According to Rosa, modern capitalist society thus generates a relation to the world without resonance, making the world seems mute and deaf, and this is arguably what constitutes the alienation experienced. The world has no more to say to us; even though we do indeed have plenty of relations, they seem “unimportant, indifferent”, constituting what Jeaggi allegedly calls an “unrelated relationship”<sup>22</sup>. Hence for Rosa alienation is constituted by indifference and repulsion, but the cause is societal rather than a matter of individual psychology, let alone human existence. He thus refers to an empirical study of “personality traits” showing how US college students today have much less capacity for empathy than before, and the cause is

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<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Rosa 2010: 84-97.

<sup>19</sup> Rosa 2010: 83

<sup>20</sup> Rosa 2016: 300

<sup>21</sup> Rosa 2016: 300

<sup>22</sup> Rosa 2016: 305





said to be the increased competitive orientation, the forced acceleration and the time spend looking at screens, all of it implying less “eye contact” with “strangers”<sup>23</sup>.

For Rosa this empirical and experiential approach is supposed to relieve him of such “speculative materialist or social philosophical presuppositions”<sup>24</sup> that can be found in classical characterizations of objectification – or exteriorization – and alienation, first of all in Marx’ *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*.<sup>25</sup> Rosa thus emphasizes his own approach as being “non-essentialist”<sup>26</sup>, meaning that he does not consider the idea of a “true human nature” useful to determine the “Other’ of alienation”, at least not when it is understood “as a substantially conceived concept”<sup>27</sup>. In fact, however, he is also skeptical with regard to individualist and particularistic displacements talking about an “inner core” or a “real identity”. In general he thinks it unlikely that there can be given reasons for accepting such ideas, just as it is unclear what kind of “normative authority”<sup>28</sup> they would have.

As I see it, this last aspect of Rosa’s argument, i.e. his misgivings concerning genuine conceptual reflection and argument, reflects some crucial displacements of contemporary Critical Theory. First of all, we have Habermas’ introduction of communication to supplement, and eventually almost replace, work as the primary human activity.<sup>29</sup> Hence, alienation for Rosa means being confronted with distorted communication with the world rather than being deprived of oneself through work. Secondly, Habermas has for decades argued for a post-metaphysical transformation of the critical project. Accepting this agenda, Honneth has, for instance, transformed Hegel’s conceptual reconstruction of the very idea of recognition to an argument about communication mainly based on empirical inquiries within social and developmental psychology,<sup>30</sup> and these assumptions are shared by both Jeaggi and Rosa.

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<sup>23</sup> Rosa 2016: 311

<sup>24</sup> Rosa 2016: 311

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Rosa 2016: 310-311 and 540-44.

<sup>26</sup> Rosa 2016: 312

<sup>27</sup> Rosa 2016: 301

<sup>28</sup> Rosa 2016: 301

<sup>29</sup> For my discussion of this development, see the Interlude in Sørensen 2017, especially section D.

<sup>30</sup> This is also discussed in the same interlude, section E.



This sequence of displacements, however, makes it difficult to argue normatively and thus critically about subject matters. As Rosa himself often argues, a critical argument presupposes, at least implicitly, positive norms, but such norms are very difficult to provide and justify, if only particular experiences are allowed to count. Norms, by definition, transcend what is merely particular and empirical, and if this is granted, then we are on the way, or on the slippery slope, leading to universal concepts and, I would claim, ultimately metaphysics. Why is it less essentialist when Rosa talks about ‘personality traits’ than to talk about the specific aspects of ‘human nature’? When it is considered interesting that the capacity for empathy has declined, it must be because empathy is considered an essential trait for human beings.

Instead of simply assuming, silently and implicitly, various ideas about human nature, I think it is time to grab the bull by the horns, and once again endorse genuine conceptual speculation and metaphysics, i.e. philosophy as it has been conducted since the beginning of time, blatantly normative in relation to both science and politics, claiming truth, justice and beauty. Moreover, the goal of this critical inquiry being practical, i.e. educating citizens to democracy, in spite of and overcoming the damage inflicted on human being by capitalism, it is not enough simply conduct a theoretical analysis of an empirical phenomenon.

As real human beings in a sometimes all too real world, we want to criticize a dehumanizing societal system and change things for real. Doing education we want to raise people to become better human beings, and therefore we have to assume, both that our experiences do in fact stem from some kind of reality, that we can be in contact with this reality, and that we can direct our actions to realize something more real than the reality we know of. We do not just want to describe societies and human beings as we already know them; we want to help people realize themselves beyond what can already be experienced, and therefore we must trust not just conceptual speculation, i.e. reason, but also phantasy and imagination. An empirical or phenomenological diagnosis can all too easily deteriorate to a positivist mystification, paralyzing the percipients when it comes to thinking through a





practical solution on real substantial problems. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>31</sup> instead of self-consciously modest phenomenism, empiricism or positivism, our relation to the world should be understood through a reflective metaphysical realism.

## 2. Classical understanding of capitalism as violating human substance – and overcoming it

Arguing this way opens up for classical Critical Theory, i.e. for various metaphysical agendas, including dialectical and materialist interpretations of Hegel. In fact, Rosa does discuss alienation with Marx, Lukacs, Marcuse *et al.* However, instead of following further Rosa's post-metaphysical interpretation of alienation and resonance, I will return to a much earlier metaphysical, and also much more practical, interpretation of alienation that Rosa fails to take into consideration, namely Marcuse's analysis of alienation that also explicitly, but in much more detail, discusses Marx' *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*.

As already mentioned, the discussion of alienation is complicated by the original sequence of translations, and this kind of complexities must also be considered in relation to Marcuse. Marcuse thus writes originally in German, latter changes himself into English, and then we have some of his early writings in German translated into English. As an illustration, one can consider the first analysis of the said *Manuscripts* from 1932, written in German and translated into English much later. Here Marcuse points to this subject field that he considers a “well-known element of Marxist theory”<sup>32</sup>, namely exteriorization, estrangement and reification, in German respectively *Entäußerung*, *Entfremdung* and *Verdinglichung*. In the published English translation of this text, ‘*Entäußerung*’ has become ‘alienation’,<sup>33</sup> but, as it will follow from my argument, given the common connotations of ‘alienation’, this rendering will threaten to displace the critique of alienation from being a critique of capitalism to being an existentialist critique of the absurdity of human being *per se*.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Sørensen 2010: 135, 323-24

<sup>32</sup> Marcuse 1932: 512

<sup>33</sup> See Marcuse 1972b: 6



Hence, we have to emphasize some distinctions that are not always clear in Marcuse's texts. Again in *Reason and Revolution* we get an initial definition of alienation as *Entfremdung*,

signifying that the world of objects, originally the product of man's labor and knowledge, becomes independent of man and comes to be governed by uncontrolled forces and laws in which man no longer recognizes his own self. At the same time, thought becomes estranged from reality and the truth becomes an impotent ideal preserved in thought while the actual world is calmly left outside its influence.<sup>34</sup>

In the German translation of the text, however, alienation becomes *Entfremdung* and 'estranged' becomes *entfremdet*.<sup>35</sup> Discussing these matters in English, we have to make some choices. One possibility is to understand alienation as the most general concept, signifying the phenomenon perceived as problematic in its most general sense, and then let exteriorization, estrangement and reification signify various specifications or constitutive elements. This is what I will do in the following.

Marcuse thus emphasizes how Marx employs Hegel's understanding of work as exteriorization, in German *Entäußerung*, the latter in general signifying something rather neutral, i.e. giving away, disposing or renouncing of something. In this anthropology, work is thus the production of a product expressing oneself, exteriorizing oneself through work and giving the result up to the world, leaving it to be by itself. Work in this sense is exteriorization, i.e., according to Marx following Hegel, the "for-it-self-becoming of man", or his "act of self-creation or self-objectification"<sup>36</sup>, in German *Selbstvergegenständlichungsakt*. In work one relates to oneself as something exterior to oneself. It is in this sense that for Hegel one is *for-oneself* in work. The point is then that one can only realize oneself as a human being through the objectification that is part of this work; it is only through work that one can negate oneself and sublimate from being merely an

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<sup>34</sup> Marcuse 1941: 23-24

<sup>35</sup> Marcuse 2004: S 4, 32

<sup>36</sup> Marx 1844 in Marcuse 1932: 519; in the translation the first quote becomes "man's coming-to-be for himself" (Marcuse 1972b: 13) – and with '*Entäußerung*' still consistently translated as 'alienation', the latter, with all of its pathological connotations, becomes the human condition as such, not leaving much hope for politics or historical change.



empirical singular being to become a species of a potentially universal and free being, i.e. a truly human being.

Work is what makes a human being human; as Marcuse quotes Marx, it is the “existential activity”<sup>37</sup> of man. This basic ontology of human being as exteriorizing oneself through the objectification of work constitutes the positive potential of human being. However, due to the English translation of the 1932 text this ontology is already perceived as alienating. Instead, I will insist that alienation only occur as a result of estrangement, *Entfremdung*. Hence, alienation is something threatening to distort human existence and thus approaching the French sense mentioned above, losing oneself pathologically in relation to not just the product produced, but also the activity itself, one’s fellow beings and even oneself: “The worker alienated from his product is at the same time alienated from himself”<sup>38</sup>, as Marcuse resumes it.

This is what makes living under capitalism inhuman. The critique of capitalism is not just about exteriorization, but estrangement and thus alienation in this accentuated sense. It is only this distorted form of exteriorization that we would want to negate and sublimate in a future society; the basic exteriorization belongs as objectification to the “essence of man – as its naturalness”<sup>39</sup>, as Marcuse puts it.

As should be clear by now, Hegel’s metaphysical anthropology is what enables Marx to argue that capitalism is distorting human existence, i.e. estranging and thus alienating human beings from their own creations, from their activities, from each other and even from themselves. Marcuse explains this quite clearly: it is work that gives man the possibility to recognize himself in a world that he himself has created. It is the free creation of reality that constitutes human freedom, and this must be understood collectively or universally; man is only free if all men are free and exist as “universal beings”<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Marx 1844 in Marcuse 1941: 275

<sup>38</sup> Marcuse 1941: 277

<sup>39</sup> Marcuse 1932: 524

<sup>40</sup> Marx 1844 in Marcuse 1941: 275.





This is where it helps to distinguish between ‘work’ and ‘labor’, as Marcuse also does from time to time, most explicitly, or categorically, between “free work” and “alienated labor”<sup>41</sup>. Labor is not a free activity, i.e. not “the natural condition of human existence”. Labor is a forced activity, wage labor, as Marcuse puts it, “forced work” “in the service of the capitalists”<sup>42</sup>, i.e. a “specifically social form of labor”<sup>43</sup>; it is the production of commodities through labor that distorts human being, not the creative and formative activity as such. As he puts it: “Wage labor is a fact, but at the same time it is a restraint on free work that might satisfy human needs.” Or, more in general, emphasizing the dialectical logic that points beyond existing reality: “Every fact is more than a mere fact; it is a negation and restriction of real possibilities.”<sup>44</sup>

That also brings us to the third constitutive specification of alienation, reification, in German *Verdinglichung*.<sup>45</sup> Again, we have to improve a little on the terminology. Marcuse explains how capitalist society make all personal relation take the form of “objective relations between things”<sup>46</sup>. However, as Marcuse himself emphasize, what labor produces is not things, but commodities: “The system of capitalism relates men to each other through the commodities they exchange.”<sup>47</sup> Commodity production has this “mystifying result, that it transforms the social relations of individuals”, reducing them to relations between commodities with a certain exchange value, making money the common denominators of literally every-thing. Being both in the service of the capitalist and bought as work power at the labor market, the worker is reduced to a commodity, and this has detrimental effects on human existence.

In capitalist production human being is reduced to only production and consumption, the former being forced labor and the latter, i.e. “eating, drinking and begetting”, the only feeling of freedom, ultimately reducing human being to just an animal – as Marx phrases it: In the

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<sup>41</sup> Marcuse 1941: 282

<sup>42</sup> Marcuse 1932: 513

<sup>43</sup> Marx in Marcuse 1941: 299.

<sup>44</sup> Marcuse 1941: 282

<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, so far I have not had the time to consult Honneth’s recent work on *Reification* that probably would have been most relevant for this discussion.

<sup>46</sup> Marcuse 1941: 279

<sup>47</sup> Marcuse 1941: 279



functions constitutive of man, he is “‘nothing but an animal. The animal becomes the human and the human the animal.’”<sup>48</sup> Marcuse sums it up neatly in continuation of Marx, stating that “economic conditions appear as the complete negation of humanity”. The “mode of labor perverts all human faculties, accumulation of wealth intensifies poverty, and technological progress leads to the rule of ‘dead matter over the human world’.”<sup>49</sup>

Marcuse points to the way human being is equipped with objective and material powers. Marx thus argues to displace the Hegelian idealism, substituting the ideas of objectification, exteriorization and estrangement as an essential trait of work, stressing instead the material creation of things, products and commodities, the latter produced through wage labor that itself becomes a commodity, and this commodification is what is commonly called reification.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

Outlining thus the concept of alienation, I believe it to be possible to understand more in depth why alienation is especially distorting in a capitalist society. It is not a matter of simply relating to the world and experiencing it as mute and deaf, as Rosa would have it. Commodification is a process characteristic of capitalist society, and this accentuated alienation is only experienced in modern society. Only capitalism totalizes the form of the commodity and thus private property to all aspects of societal life. Here, however I cannot go more in detail. Let me simply round up this short part of the project sketched in the introduction by indicating how the openness of human being may point to viable futures for justice and democracy, making it possible to rationally hope for the possibility of citizenship education and democratic formation.

Of course all of this must be argued more closely and in detail. However, to cut things short, one can say that Marx’ employment of Hegel’s anthropology opens up for understanding human being in reality as an active, but also open material interchange, where work is the fundamental and essential activity for being human. The point is that this

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<sup>48</sup> Marx in Marcuse 1941: 278

<sup>49</sup> Marcuse 1941: 281-82





anthropology provides the conceptual framework for both the creative elaboration of things, but also leaves open human being for detrimental experiences leading to alienation. Hence, man is both influential and vulnerable in relation to the reality encountered, both when it comes to nature and culture.

Here one might introduce an idea of the young Hegel, stressed by both Habermas and Honneth, namely that the essential activity of human beings is not just work, but also communication in some sense. I have criticized the specific ways in which the idea is developed by Habermas and Honneth,<sup>50</sup> but the basic idea I think is sound, and conceived of in another way, it may strengthen the conceptual possibilities already reconstructed above with the help of Marcuse.

This is at least the idea that I hope to develop further; for now I will just conclude that, yes, even now when things may seem rather gloomy, we have reason to maintain rational hopes for humanity. Despite experienced alienation, I will thus insist on the possibility to conceive of citizenship education as stimulating in society what is specifically human, countering in this way the all too real reification that is forced upon us by the mode of production, especially by the dominance of economics, technology and mere entertainment. Citizenship education is not just about learning the basics of the existing constitution, the possibilities of democracy or the idea of human rights. As human beings we are only free as citizens and this freedom we must use as human beings, i.e. striving for the highest achievements within science, politics and fine arts, insisting that these aspects of human life is what really makes life worth living. Only then may citizenship education counter alienation caused by capitalism.

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<sup>50</sup> See the abovementioned sections – i.e. D. and E. – of the interlude in Sørensen 2007.



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