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Revisiting the Question of Alienation in a Frommesque Perspective

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Abstract

The question of alienation has been one of the key questions within modern continental philosophy but it would be a mistake to assume that it is limited to this tradition alone. On the contrary, various thinkers from different walks of life have reflected upon the question of alienation both as a personal psychological state (subjectively) and a collective social state (objectively). In the context of critical philosophy and reflexive sociological analysis the approach provided by members of the Frankfurt School is one of the most challenging approaches both within and without academia which needs to be revisited in a meaningful fashion. In this paper, the position of Erich Fromm as one of the seminal representatives of the Frankfurt School is the focus of our analysis. It is argued that the Frommesque perspective on human condition could shed light upon aspects of the repressive nature of contemporary oppressive situation of humanity as a globalized dehumanizing reality in an alienating fashion.

Keywords: Alienation, Productive Orientation, Human Existence, Capitalism, Quantification, Abstractification

Introduction

The question of alienation has engaged sociologists since the dawn of modernity in a very profound fashion as it seems the nature of modernism could be defined as how to transform the character of man *qua* human being based on the modern indices. In other words, the project of removing the human person from the universe of the feudal societal canopy with all its corollaries and the outcome of such a transformative sea-change have been at the center of sociological theory and social theory. Alienation in this sense is Janus-faced as it could be seen as a positive and negative process. The positive side in the eyes of pro-modernists lies in the fact that man has been able to leave the narrow world of Feudalism by alienating (i.e. distancing) himself from the societal order of premodern confines. However, the negative side of this relocation may lie in the fact that man has not yet been able to find as well as found his new home in this modern context which seems to fan the flames of anxiety in the heart of contemporary man who seems to be *homeless* rather than being a modern *homeowner*. In sum, in sociology and social philosophy, alienation refers to an individual's estrangement from the traditional community and others in general. It is considered by many that the atomism of modern society means that individuals have shallower relations with other people than they could have in a normal fashion. This, it is argued, leads to difficulties in understanding and adapting to each other's uniqueness. In this article we should take into consideration Fromm's approach to the question of alienation in the context of what he terms as the constitution of human life as it has been realized within the parameters of modern society.

1. The Constitution of Human Life

Fromm by distinguishing between “Productive Orientation” and “Unproductive Orientation” moved toward a normative anthropology based on humanism with strong existentialistic traits which aimed at the idea

... that man had to find an answer to his existence, and this answer was the development of his reason, of his love. [Within the matrix of Frommesque social theory one could discern the idea] that humility and justice were inseparably connected with love and reason. [In other words, to live as you preach and do not] seek power [and do not be] impressed by might and [speak] the truth even if this [leads] to imprisonment, ostracism or death. (Funk, 2000: 37)

Erich Fromm's radical contribution is his understanding of man as the human animal who, by the nature of his existence, must make decisions and choose whether to be genuinely alive or to stagnate. The major thrust of Fromm's theoretical view of man is that man must transform his life- experience to bring himself into life—that adaptive modifications of personality are, in truth, not sufficient to accomplish this serious task. Although not clearly acknowledged, man's search for relatedness and identity comprises the bed-rock of human existence. The biological condition of man provides inadequate instinctive determination for this search.

In his book *The Sane Society*, Fromm (1955: viii) argues that

... the basic passions of man are not rooted in his instinctive needs, but in the specific conditions of human existence, in the need to find a new relatedness to man and nature after having lost the primary relatedness of the pre-human stage.

In other words, the bedrock of human existence has a centre which constitutes the very inner world of the human individual and is in need of deep engagement. Fromm argues that a sane human person is the one who is in touch with his inner world and this inner strength is defined, in contrast to non-productive conditions of being-in-the-world, as

... being able to love, to concentrate, to be tender, joyful and sad, to be sympathetic and to know how to demarcate oneself—all these abilities develop through practice and become stronger if

they are shared. They are psychological growth factors and follow a totally different pattern from the <<having>> orientation. The latter are acquired from outside and are consumed and lost when they are used and shared- they are thus nonproductive.

(Funk, 2000: 158)

2. Alienation or Archaeology of Reversed Being

In a society which is not benevolent to the development of human personality due to the effects of quantification and abstractification we would witness the intensification of a phenomenon which is termed as “alienation” by Fromm. Of course the term was used by Hegel and Marx in reference to a form of self-estrangement,

... which permits the person to act reasonably in practical matters, yet which constitutes one of the most severe socially patterned defects. In Marx's system alienation is called that condition of man where his own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over and against him, instead of being ruled by him.

(Fromm, 1955: 121)

Fromm (1955: 120-1) believes that the concept of alienation is much older than the modern use of the word and by alienation he refers to

... a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts- but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. This alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, are experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively.

If one of the fundamental conditions of human existence is the need for “relatedness” then the alienated person is a crippled entity who has lost the “Being-status” by falling to a reified state of existence. In other words, a person who cannot relate to his own self and to others in a meaningful fashion he has lost one of the essential dimensions of his own being that endows meaning upon the very textures of his life *qua* human being. The personality of such an alienated person who has lost touch with his inner qualities such as relatedness is not of a whole personality but comes across as a divided self. Furthermore it is interesting to note that the distinction Fromm (1955: 121) makes between the concept of alienation and the modern use of the word enables him to argue that

... the concept is a much older [than the modern use]; it is the same to which the prophets of the Old Testament referred as idolatry.

In order to better understand what Fromm (1955: 121) means by conceptual similarity between “idolatry” and “alienation” we need to reconsider the meaning of the former in its pristine sense and not in the fashion that we have accustomed to view, namely

...[t]he essential difference between monotheism and polytheism [in terms of] the number of gods but [rather] in the fact of self-alienation.

In other words, the

... prophets of monotheism did not denounce heathen religions as idolatrous primarily because they worshipped several gods instead of one. The essential difference between monotheism and polytheism is not one of the numbers of gods, but lies in the fact of self-alienation. Man spends his energy, his artistic capacities on building an idol, and then he worships this idol, which is nothing but the result of his own human effort. His life forces have flown into a *thing*, and this thing, having become an idol, is not experienced as a result of his own productive force,

but as something apart from himself, over and against him, which he worships and to which he submits.
(Fromm, 1955: 121-2)

Fromm talks of the peculiar nature of human life that is divided into “artificial life” and “fundamental life” and the role religion may play in awakening the heart of the human being in terms of fundamentals of *leben* as these are deeply related to the question of *alienation*. To put it otherwise; one cannot fully appreciate

... the nature of alienation without considering one specific aspect of modern life: its routinization, and the repression of the awareness of the basic problems of human experience (Fromm, 1955. 144).

In other words, Fromm (1955: 144) believes that the human condition in and by itself is of a paradoxical nature as the human being

... has to take care of time-and energy-consuming tasks of daily life, and he is enmeshed in a certain routine necessary for the fulfillment of these tasks. He builds a social order, conventions, habits and ideas, which help him to perform what is necessary, and to live with this fellow man with a minimum of friction. It is characteristic of all culture that it builds a man-made, artificial world, superimposed on the natural world in which man lives.

This is a paradox that man should deal with and the manner by which every human person or, for that matter, any human culture approaches this paradoxical situation surely reflects the quality of life that is experienced by members of a particular community as the distinction of life into the artificial and natural is of essential significance because

... man can fulfill himself only if he remains in touch with the fundamental facts of his existence, if he can experience the exaltation of love and solidarity, as well as the tragic fact of his aloneness and of the fragmentary character of his existence. If he

is completely enmeshed in the routine and in the artifacts of life, if he cannot see anything but the man-made, common-sense appearance of the world, he loses his touch with and the grasp of himself and the world. We find in every culture the conflict between routine and the attempt to get back to the fundamental realities of existence. To help in this attempt has been one of the functions of art and of religion, even though religion itself has eventually become a new form of routine.

(Fromm, 1955: 144)

3. Alienation and Good Society

Normative Humanism is Fromm's sociological position. In accordance to this position the

... mentally healthy person is the productive and unalienated person; the person who relates himself to the world lovingly, and who uses his reason to grasp reality objectively; who experiences himself as a unique individual entity, and at the same time feels one with his fellow man; who is not subject to irrational authority, and accepts willingly the rational authority of conscience and reason; who is in the process of being born as long as he is alive, and considers the gift of life the most precious chance he has. [It should also be remembered] that these goals of mental health are not ideals which have to be forced upon the person, or which man can attain only if he overcomes his *nature*, and sacrifice his *innate selfishness*. On the contrary, the striving for mental health, for happiness, harmony, love, productiveness, is inherent in every human being who is not born as a mental or moral idiot.

(Fromm, 1955: 275)

In accordance to *Normative Humanism* a sane society is

... a society in which no man is a means toward another's ends, but always and without exception an end in himself; hence, where nobody is used, nor uses himself, for purposes which are not those of the unfolding of his own human powers; where man is the center, and where all economic and political activities are

subordinated to the aim of his growth. A sane society is one in which qualities like greed, exploitativeness, possessiveness, narcissism, have no chance to be used for greater material gain or for the enhancement of one's personal prestige. Where acting according to one's conscience is looked upon as a fundamental and necessary quality and where opportunism and lack of principles is deemed to be asocial; where the individual is concerned with social matters so that they become personal matters, where his relation to his fellow man is not separated from his relationship in the private sphere. A sane society, furthermore, is one which permits man to operate within manageable and observable dimensions, and to be an active and responsible participant in the life of society, as well as the master of his own life ... [and] ... furthers human solidarity and not only permits, but stimulates, its members to relate themselves to each other lovingly; [and also] furthers the productive activity of everybody in his work, stimulates the unfolding of reason and enables man to give expression to his inner needs in collective art and rituals.

(Fromm, 1955: 276)

Fromm distinguishes between a “having mode of existence” and a “being mode of existence” and

... the consequences that the dominance of either mode has for man's well-being.

(Fromm, 1992: 1)

In other words,

... the full humanization of man requires the breakthrough from the possession-centered to the activity-centered orientation, from selfishness and egotism to the solidarity and altruism.

(Fromm, 1992: 1)

Having mode of existence is directed in establishing the

... freedom of whim

(Fromm, 1992: 28)

But the “Being mode of existence,” on the other hand, is based on the

... freedom of will
(Fromm, 1992: 28)

In other words, the former is

... in fact, the result of deep inner passivity blended with a wish to avoid boredom [while the latter, i.e. the will] ... is based on activity
(Fromm, 1992: 28-9)

In sum, one could argue that a good society where man is able to realize his inner possibilities is a community that is based on productivity, love, objectivity, individuation, solidarity, reasonability, rationality, conscientiousness, vitality and *joie de vivre*. The absence of these qualities would surely lead humanity into the brinks of alienation and estrangement in an individual sense as well as communal dimension.

4. Alienation in Modern Society

Fromm is of the opinion that modern society is a dis-eased social organization and modern man suffers from a disease which could be best characterized by the concept of *alienation*. The concept of alienation within the context of philosophy of existentialism refers essentially to the rebellious mode of contemporary man against

... [his] growing alienation in modern society.
(Fromm, 1994: 23)

How does Fromm define alienation? He believes that in western tradition,

... what is meant by alienation has already played a large role ... albeit not as the concept *alienation* but rather as the concept

idolatry, in the sense employed by the prophets. Many people naively assume that the difference between so-called idolatry and the monotheistic belief in one true god is merely a numerical matter [i.e. the] pagans had many gods, while the monotheists believed in only one. This, however, is not the essential difference. ... the essential [difference] is that the idolater is a person who prays to the product of his own hands. He takes a piece of wood. With one part, he builds himself a fire in order, for example, to bake a cake; with the other part of the wood, he craves a figure in order to pray to it. Yet what he prays to are merely things. These *things* have a nose and do not smell, they have ears and do not hear, and that have a mouth and do not speak.

(Fromm, 1994: 23-4)

If one understands idolatry as Fromm (Fromm, 1994: 24) does, then

... what occurs is precisely what ... in psychoanalysis [is considered as] transference. [In other words], transference is a manifestation of idolatry [namely, a] person transfers his own activities or all of what he experiences – of his power of love, of his power of thought- onto an object outside himself. The object can be a person, or a thing made of wood or stone. As soon as a person has set up this transference-relatedness, he enters into relation with himself only by submitting to the object onto which he has transferred his own human functions.

5. Features of Alienation

Fromm considered capitalism as a social order which is not devoid of theological dimensions. Although he seemed to view this spirituality as a twisted kind of consecration of existential inclinations of human aspiration, this did not change the fundamental fact of capitalism and its relation to beingness in the bosom of human person. In other words, capitalism as a social canopy could not regenerate itself in such a successful manner if it had not consecrated itself by touching essential aspects of human existence. But this *existential connection* could be seen in both

negative and *positive* light which could, in respective turn, have constructive and destructive consequences for the well-being of the human individual and their respective communities. For instance, the control over one's self could engender and activate the birth of conscience in the heart of man but its absence could equally have a negative effect and this *negative impact* is what makes capitalism (i.e. the system which turns life so productively into thing) so successful – as man has no choice but to ascend or to descend.

To put it otherwise; capitalism provides a systematic order for a thoroughly comprehensive descent which one cannot find in any other competing systems such as Socialism or Islamism. This brings us to Fromm's (1994: 27) concept of Alienation. In his view, alienation is composed of three components, namely

... man's having become a thing, man's loss of control over himself and his becoming controlled by the things and circumstances that he creates

These salient features of alienation are the most prominent aspects of capitalist organization of society which have paved the way in a comprehensive fashion for the Fall of Man to a point that the very idea of Hope would be futile (i.e. non-applicable). In this sense, modernity is a unique achievement of humanity which has no parallel in the history of mankind and also without any serious rivals either in East or in West – as none of the existing competitors are truly for ascension.

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