

Richard Schmitt, *Alienation and Class*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1983. 230 pp.

Most Marxist treatments of the concept of alienation have consisted in fairly technical expositions of the meaning of the concept in Marxist texts, in the context of German post-idealist philosophy and the theory of capitalism Marx developed. They rarely discuss alienation as a lived experience, and tend to be rather inaccessible to those not interested or schooled in Marxist theory. Discussion of alienation directed at broader audiences and which focus on experience, on the other hand, tend often to lack conceptual rigor and to individualize or psychologize the experience of alienation. Richard Schmitt's *Alienation and Class* makes an important contribution to literature on alienation because it redresses both these deficiencies.

In basic presuppositions a Marxist, Schmitt argues that the experience of alienation is specific to and caused by the class relations of capitalism. He develops this argument, however, without presupposing specifically Marxist concepts or theory on the part of his readers, writing instead in a language accessible to all readers. While discussing the structural sources of alienation, moreover, Schmitt focuses primarily on alienation as a lived experience. To facilitate such focus, especially early in his analysis, he introduces short narratives describing experiences of particular people in situations or having feelings that he, and some of them, identify as alienating: the author's mother in pre-Nazi Germany, a brilliant law student, blocked from her pursuit by internal and external sexism; the author himself, as a young file clerk at an insurance agency; a young man bored with college, who becomes a conforming lawyer in Indianapolis, and who through these years finds little sense of purpose; a former coal miner put out of work by disability, lacking self-respect and bored; a housewife, feeling isolated and without direction. Glimpses of the lives of these and other characters return several times to anchor Schmitt's conceptual analysis in experience, and to illustrate his claim that alienation has a multitude of experienced forms not reducible to one necessary structure.

Despite the fact that he criticizes existentialist accounts of alienation and inauthenticity at several points in his text, Schmitt's approach to analyzing alienation is rather existentialist. For he conceptualizes alienation primarily as the experience of persons in relation to their sense of freedom and purposiveness. Thus the general definition of alienation he provides is a condition where an individual's "fulfillment is blocked needlessly." He divides this condition of blocked fulfillment into three sub-conditions: lack of self, loneliness and meaninglessness.

The experience of alienation consists in lacking a firm sense of identity or self. "To have a self," Schmitt says, "is to be someone in a world that one has taken some degree of responsibility for by learning to master, if not create it. They know their strengths and can stand calmly by their decisions, once they have been made. Their life has

content and meaning because they stand for something.” (pp. 26–27)

This ideal of autonomous selfhood underlies Schmitt’s entire discussion of the person.

Persons lack such a self, Schmitt asserts, when social conditions produce specialization of tasks and personal attributes, stereotyping of human possibilities and groups, and fragmentation of commitment and energy. These experiences of specialization, stereotyping and fragmentation often produce self-deprecation, self deception and self-distractedness, all forms of fleeing awareness of and responsibility for these alienating conditions of one’s life. Schmitt takes each of these crucial terms usually used in a casual and flimsy way, and rigorously analyzes them in clear, straightforward language.

Schmitt does the same with his other two major aspects of alienation, loneliness and meaninglessness. Loneliness he defines as the absence of relations of community among persons, produced by the fragmentation, specialization and competition of capitalist commodity society. In a revealing discussion Schmitt shows that loneliness does not consist simply in being alone, or isolated or separate from others, but in experiencing any one of these three as negative. Being lonely, he suggests, at the same time entails that we flee one another even in one another’s company.

Perhaps the most interesting conceptual discussion appears in Schmitt’s analysis of the idea of meaninglessness. In line with the definition of self I quoted above, Schmitt defines a meaningful life as one “filled with goals and purposes because it has a direction and inner momentum.” (p. 142) Meaning is objective because it has its foundation in community recognition of goals and a picture of the world. Schmitt takes this understanding of meaning as explicitly opposed to that of the existentialists, who assume, he claims, that individual consciousness confers meaning on the world. While he agrees that meaning arises from the interaction of freedoms with things, he insists that meaning is objective in the sense that only groups found and sustain meaning for individuals.

Alienation is thus fulfillment blocked needlessly, where fulfillment consists in having a sense of personal identity, in a community of others who confer a shared meaning on the world. In defining alienation in this way, however, a paradox arises. If we experience ourselves as alienated because our fulfillment is blocked, then we must have some knowledge of fulfillment. But if we knew what it was like to be fulfilled, then we wouldn’t be alienated. The experience of alienation, Schmitt suggests, is contradictory in just this way, because alienation is the name for the way we experience a basic contradiction the social structures and ideologies of our society impose on us. Alienation is possible only in modern society, Schmitt argues, because its political institutions and values construct the individual as free and offer him or her a promise of fulfillment; but at the same time the institutions and values of capitalist class society frustrate that freedom, channel it in unchosen directions, and block its fulfillment.

No one was alienated in feudal society, Schmitt suggests, or in other traditional societies where persons are born into ascribed statuses, which determine most of one's expected behavior and life prospects, and there is little possibility of social mobility. Alienation is an experience unique to modern society, precisely because it provides people a freedom unknown in traditional societies. Liberal capitalist society released persons from the coercions and legal bonds of tradition, free to choose their residence, their work, their religion and other associations, and the goods they will consume. After centuries of struggle, moreover, the political freedoms of voting, speaking, assembling, etc. have been realized in many countries. Some of the institutions and values of liberal capitalist society thus make individuals free and hold open the promise of an autonomous and fulfilling life.

Other institutions and values in the same society, according to Schmitt, frustrate that promise. Because of class domination of the conditions of working life, and the tendency for the capitalist market to commodify most aspects of life, people do not in fact have very much control over either their working or leisure lives. Instead capitalist commodity society fragments our lives by separating our political freedom from our personal lives and both from our economic activity, and inserting us into a division of labor in which we often do not see the purpose of our work.

Alienation thus is the experienced conflict between our sense of ourselves as free and autonomous in political institutions which express that freedom to a certain degree, and our sense of powerlessness with respect to the conditions within which we act. Alienation can only occur under conditions of freedom, Schmitt argues, and for this reason we are also complicitous in our alienation. Since we are free, we do make choices, and we are complicitous in our alienation to the degree that we give ourselves over to our condition of powerlessness as though it were part of the human condition. Many accounts of alienation, according to Schmitt, do just that.

I find this move to conceptualize alienation as the subjective experience of contradictions among our society's institutions and values very compelling. It provides a convincing way out of the paradox to which Schmitt leads us, of how we can know what freedom and meaning are if we are alienated. It shows clearly grounds for claiming that alienation is a phenomenon historically specific to capitalist society.

It is not clear to me, however, that this account of alienation as the experience of social contradiction requires the earlier definition of alienation as the lack of self and lack of community, and may be better without it. Schmitt does much to clarify our understanding of self as unified, coherent, in control of its world, directed and purposeful. I think this ideal of existence as the attainment of such selfhood, however, should be questioned.

Schmitt emphasizes that alienation consists in fragmentation, and poses the ideal of unalienated existence as integrity, the having of a self that has unity, principled coherence and consistency. It is not dif-

difficult to apply Humean objections to the notion of such a self: since even in my most unalienated state time passes, and I do different things in different situations, where is the unity and consistency that might be my self?

The ideal of a unified, coherent self, moreover, bears the traces of an individualism that Schmitt in other ways clearly wishes to reject. Many writers, including feminist philosophers, critical theorists, and post-structuralists, have argued that if we truly wish to affirm a notion of subjectivity as produced in social relationships, then we must shed any language that conceives the subject as separate and unified. Some, such as Adorno, suggest that the ideal of unified, autonomous selfhood is both a product of and helps perpetuate capitalist institutions.

Schmitt's conception of autonomy and self-realization, moreover, tends to be somewhat rationalistic. Having a self, in his words, means taking responsibility for mastering the world, knowing one's strengths, standing calmly by one's decisions, having a coherent set of principles one stands for. Stern, upright, in control, rational and consistent, this is a person self-sufficient, not in a relation of dependence to others, the freely contracting individual. In the tradition from which we come, I suggest, putting forward a unified self as an ideal of freedom inevitably has such separating and rationalistic overtones.

I think we would do better to conceive of freedom as entailing the dropping of the guard by which we claim to be in control of ourselves, and admitting to the realm of moral reason a primacy for feeling, relationships in context, and play. Much in Schmitt's text indicates that he would be likely to endorse such a conception of freedom. I am suggesting that his account of the self may be incompatible with this conception of freedom, because as soon as we live and conceptualize affectivity and desire as aspects of life not opposed to rationality and choice, the unity of subjectivity must disperse. This implies, moreover, that the conception of freedom as rational autonomy which Schmitt claims liberal political institutions have provided us may not be, as he suggests, a freedom we can build on and expand to its fulfillment. It may be a truncated freedom that represses need, feeling and impulse as much as it allows deliberate actions. In our vision of social structure without alienation we may need a different conception of freedom, that means simply, happiness. Again, much in Schmitt's text seems to endorse such direction of thought, but his language of self as mastery, control, autonomy, coherence, consistency prevents him from giving expression to such a more affective self.

One final set of questions arises in reading this book. Schmitt provides us with a clear, thought provoking and in many respects convincing account of alienation, and gives us some vision of an unalienated condition. He says next to nothing, however, about how we should begin to realize a life without alienation. Is it possible for anyone in this society not to be alienated? If we decide to work to change the capitalist structures that cause the alienation, will this make us less alienated before they are eliminated? Assuming we come to see the

sources of our alienation and seek to change these structures, how should we go about doing so, and what are the priorities in such action? On these and similar questions Schmitt remains silent, leaving his readers feeling a bit more doomed to alienation than he should.

I do not mean these criticisms to detract from the genuine contribution this book represents to reviving a usefulness for the concept of alienation in understanding our experience in modern society. Philosophers, social psychologists and social theorists all will profit from Schmitt's account, and the book can be very useful as a text in undergraduate courses treating the theme of alienation.

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