

BOOK REVIEW

Rahel Jaeggi 2005. *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines Sozialphilosophischen Problems.*

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Once used as a vital conception of left social criticism, the notion of alienation has increasingly gone out of style during the last two decades. Particularly its underlying essentialist and transcendental assumptions have been seriously criticized by postmodern theorists, while the poststructuralist critique of the subject has made its anthropological premises seem obsolete. Finally, the substantial consequences concerning “good life” that emerged from diagnoses of alienation, have been challenged by political liberalism, which has gained more and more influence.

In her work “*Entfremdung – zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*”, which was published in 2005 and will soon be appearing in English at Columbia University Press, Rahel Jaeggi has the ambitious goal of rediscovering the almost forgotten concept of alienation. A philosopher teaching at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Jaeggi tries to make the concept applicable to actual living conditions and to create a usable tool for conducting critical analyses of society. Her aim is to reinterpret and transform the concept of alienation in a way that enables the concept to withstand the critiques mentioned above.

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The author feels confident that alienation is an indispensable and prolific notion: It should articulate an unease which is still perceivable in today's flexible capitalism and which cannot be captured by other terms. In social philosophy, this normative as well as descriptive concept is meant to provide criteria for diagnosing social aberrations, i.e. to identify grievances that damage the social conditions of a fulfilling life.

This aim of creating a concept to criticize social and economic living conditions is something Jaeggi has in common with Marxist theories. However, when she concisely but accurately reviews the key thoughts of former concepts of alienation in the first part of her book, she simultaneously dissociates herself from Marx. His definition of alienation as an economically caused contradiction between the existence and nature of human beings, and therewith his historico-philosophical model on the possibility to finally eliminate the state of alienation by reconciliation of both aspects, are based on premises which are no longer reasonable.

At the same time the author adopts and modifies the Marxian idea of active appropriation of the world and the self as a key concept to avoid alienation. While Marx strongly links his concept with his notion of work as a process of relinquishing and in consequence perceives appropriation as re-appropriation of something given, Jaeggi questions this paradigm of expressing oneself in production and retorts that our self-made circumstances may lack transparency and availability as well. More important for Jaeggi's notion of appropriation is Heidegger's existentialist understanding of being-in-the-world, which implies that we always refer to the world practically and just in doing so are able to provide it with meaning. Our perception of the "practical questions" in our environment is the condition for building up a successful relation to ourselves. Following this argument, Jaeggi sees the notion of appropriation as the "capability to adopt one's life, the things one intends and does as one's own, to identify with one's doings, in other words to be able to self-actualize in them" (55).

According to Jaeggi, alienation can be understood as a disruption in the process of appropriation. Focusing on these processes of activity in diagnosing phenomena of alienation breaks with a strong essentialism and is therefore fundamental for the intended formalistic turn in the notion of alienation. In this context the author refers to

Ernst Tugendhat, who states that, in modern societies, philosophical concepts of “good life” can neither stick to a baseless idea of man, nor deny the autonomy of the persons concerned as well as their privilege of interpretation. This is why Jaeggi shifts the focus of attention in diagnosing alienation from a “what” of the living conditions to a “how” of the processes of life. Thus, phenomena of alienation can be reconstructed as concepts of an ability to command oneself, as a defected relation to oneself and the world.

Hence, alienation denotes a “relation of unrelatedness”: Though we are inevitably related to ourselves and our environment, this relation can be flawed; it is inappropriate for a successful self-actualization.

With regard to this concept of alienation, Jaeggi, in the second part of her book, explains in a very ostensive manner how the phenomenon of alienation can be understood when it comes to our everyday life. To make her conception more clear, she uses various fictive examples and thereby briefly consults different important thinkers who have worked on alienation the past two centuries. The first dimension of alienation is described as an “occlusion of practical questions”, which means that people do not *recognize* that they can influence situations by actively taking decisions. Hence, alienation is not identical to a simple form of heteronomy.

A second dimension of alienation is defined as the inability to express oneself properly in social roles. In contrast to Dahrendorf, Jaeggi’s anti-essentialist conception does not imply that the adoption of roles as such leads to alienation. She rather shows that roles are constitutive for building one’s own identity. Roles may have the *potential* to lead to alienation if individuals adopt them deficiently, i.e. if they lose a certain role distance. In that case individuals would be *copying* roles instead of *adopting* them.

Jaeggi points out a third possible manifestation of alienation in everyday life by contrasting her concept with Harry Frankfurt’s conception of the free will. According to Jaeggi, Frankfurt implicitly falls back on an essentialist position as well when he speaks of “volitional limits”, which somehow draws the line between wishes we reasonably can and those we reasonably cannot have. In contrast, Jaeggi focuses on the lack of access to oneself as leading to a feeling of alienation. As an example one can imagine a person rigidly sticking to his or her formerly developed concept of life without allowing for any

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changes or redefinitions in order to satisfy recent desires. In the long run such an attitude can be considered as a certain type of dysfunction which handicaps our everyday action.

Postulating that a successful self-appropriation is only possible through an active being-in-the-world, the author finally points out that total indifference to the world can also be seen as a form of alienation. In line with Hegel, Jaeggi states that a complete retreat from the world must be seen as an illusion. Therefore, the only possibility to reach veritable freedom and prevent individuals from feeling alienated is to actively take charge of one's own life.

In the final part of her book, the author again transfers her ideas to a more abstract level and points out the advantages of her project over two competing approaches of dealing with one's self: social constructionist conceptions, which focus on self-*invention*, and essentialist conceptions, which concentrate on self-*discovery*.

Jaeggi's concept of alienation as flawed appropriation of oneself and the world is coherent with regard to her anti-essentialist project. To evaluate her thoughts one will have to consider if this intended formalistic turn succeeded. This is made even more important because Jaeggi explicitly aims to follow the tradition of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Though she focuses on the individual, she still seeks to develop criteria that can be used for a critical analysis of society. Regarding Jaeggi's shift of perspective from a "what" of the living conditions to a "how" of the processes of life, the latter involves some problematic aspects. Difficulties arise particularly because the disruption in the appropriation process can occur for two reasons: It can either be induced by *social* circumstances or be *individually* caused, for instance by a lack of reflection or by rigidly sticking to a formerly developed concept of life. Hence, social circumstances that avoid successful processes of appropriation can potentially be compensated for by changes in behavior and attitude of individuals in every case. Therefore, it remains unclear which social circumstances are still acceptable, so that people can make them their own, and under which kind of social conditions processes of appropriation are no longer possible or reasonable. To fulfill her own aim of providing criteria that are usable for critical analyses of society, Jaeggi would have to draw a clearer distinction between these two cases.

Imagine a low-skilled and underpaid employee working on the assembly line of a big car company. His tasks as such are not fulfilling,

i.e. they do not support his self-actualization, but due to his low education he has only few employment alternatives. However, he works for a higher purpose: He wants to offer his children a good education. According to Jaeggi, this would exactly be the connotation that enables him to make this life situation his own even though it is primarily dissatisfying. One could argue that these kinds of precarious working conditions can be criticized by means of conventional terms of justice and need not be covered by the notion of alienation. However, if one simultaneously states that the term of alienation is indispensable for critical analyses of society one will have to ask if the critical potential of this conception will suffice for this purpose – particularly because the examples Jaeggi offers immediately suggest individual instead of collective and society-based solutions to alienation.

On the other hand, the reader is intuitively able to relate to the situations Jaeggi describes, because they reflect his or her own experiences in everyday life. Thus, Jaeggi successfully enables the reader to articulate an unease about certain circumstances that seem sound in principle but in contrast to the author's intention, her concept of alienation then rather focuses on questions of good life. However, regarding this ethical dimension, Jaeggi touches on various exciting topics that are relevant for one's personal development, such as the unavailability of the self, the loss or the betrayal of one's self.

Nevertheless, Jaeggi's concept of human acting, which reminds one of Hannah Arendt's anthropology, can be applied on certain social issues in a critical manner. However, in this context it seems that Jaeggi would partly have to give up her anti-essentialist line of argumentation in order to deliver certain criteria that allow for the evaluation of social developments. The central question then would be: Do social conditions enable people to make active use of their positive freedom? A stronger focus on that aspect would also create the chance to relate her concept to political philosophy. This is what the author may have had in mind when she finally poses the question what non-alienating institutions would have to look like. While she does not answer this question in *Alienation*, Jaeggi outlines possible answers in her article "Was ist eine gute Institution?"¹ published in 2009. Here she describes what makes us feel alienated at the collective level. In this article it is made clear that the author's conception, which primarily focuses on individuals, can also be used to evaluate and therefore criticize institutions. The latter will lead to alienation if they present

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themselves as “ontological objective” (Jaeggi 2009: 541). To put it in a nutshell: If institutions are no longer regarded as human-made and therefore changeable, people will start to feel alienated. The recent financial crisis can serve as an example. Politicians do not get tired of presenting their actions as necessary because they accept the situation as a given fact. People ignore that the political decisions actively taken during the Reagan-Thatcher era paved the way for the recent crisis. The dangers for democracy are obvious: Assuming that politics have to react instead of acting, it is not surprising that elections, which are still one of the most important instruments to articulate the political will, seem a farce in the eyes of the demos. Why should one vote when there are no alternatives? Therefore, democratic theory also could and maybe should deal with the problem of alienation at a collective level, since it seems that we will need a vital and functioning democracy if we do not want to feel alienated, and vice versa.

In conclusion, *Alienation* is a book that is very worth reading, although there are certain sections that lead to the problems pointed out above. Jaeggi has an impressive style of writing and her language is inspiring without getting unnecessarily complicated – this fact being especially worthy of mention – given that she stands in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Finally, one has to point out her innovative manner of dealing with the topic of alienation. In our opinion, Jaeggi’s approach will certainly enrich the Anglo-Saxon discourse.

NOTES

1. Jaeggi, Rahel 2009: „Was ist eine gute Institution?“ In Rainer Forst, Martin Hartmann, Rahel Jaeggi and Martin Saar (eds.). *Sozialphilosophie und Kritik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 528-545.