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How Activists Overcome Alienation through Learning and Collective Action: Considerations from a Recent Case Study

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Abstract: This paper discusses how a recovery of Marx's theory of alienation can prove fruitful in understanding social movement activity. As globalized capitalism continues to fragment human social relations, people are coming together to envision alternatives and reclaim their communities. How can we understand such activity in the context of alienation? I begin with an outline of Marx's method and theory of alienation in the context of social movements, followed by preliminary findings from a recent case study with housing activists engaged in strategies for de-alienation through anti-poverty organizing and learning.

Introduction

Whether trying to understand the wave of food riots in 2008 throughout the global South (Bush, 2010), recent uprisings in Egypt or community efforts against poverty in Toronto, there is a common thread that can be attributed to the participants involved in each instance. Each scenario takes place in a particular context that has estranged people from their basic human needs and, as a part of globalized capitalism, established a degree of dependency on institutions that are significantly alien to the respective communities.

In my study, I recover the theoretical tradition of studies of alienation to demonstrate how participants of a housing campaign in Scarborough, Ontario are engaged in activities to overcome alienation. Expanding beyond the boundaries of studies of alienation, I argue that alienation and responses to it can be developed further when seen as a learning process; that is, to understand the learning processes of one's own estrangement is central to taking positive steps to overcome alienation.

The theoretical tradition on which this research emerges is Marx's theory of alienation in relation to socio-cultural learning theories. The analysis is based on ongoing research in a SSHRC-CURA¹ funded project, Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL).² Building on these APCOL data, I look at how learning influences the activities of residents struggling to overcome forms of alienation in their communities. Focusing on a recently completed APCOL case study on housing activism in a neighbourhood in Scarborough, Ontario, I explore the learning process encountered by participants and how it mediated the specific forms of activity they undertook.

¹ Community University Research Alliance Program of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada

² For more information about the APCOL project: <http://www.apcol.ca>

Recovering Marx's Theory of Alienation in Social Movement Activity

At the centre of questions of *alienation* must be an understanding of an *unalienated* condition.³ For participants of social movements, the drive for collective action is rooted in imaginations of an alternative to existing social conditions. With this in mind, it is important to ground the discussion in a dialectic fashion, with an emphasis on relations (internal and external). Thus, I begin the discussion with an overview of Marx's theory, and specifically, an understanding of his *philosophy of internal relations* as a centrepiece to the development of a theory of alienation that avoids abstraction. Following the theoretical discussion, I present how we may understand social movement activity in relation to alienation.

Dialectics and a Philosophy of Internal Relations

Among the various approaches to understanding Marx's method, Bertell Ollman (1976; 1993; 2003) focused on outlining three key theories that he argues had been least studied; "Marx's philosophy of internal relations, his conception of human nature and the theory of alienation" (1976, p. 239). Beginning with an elaboration of dialectics as a conceptual approach emphasizing a philosophy of internal relations, Ollman demonstrates that "Marx's relational view of reality (which means too, his dialectic), his conceptual framework for dealing with human nature and his theory of alienation, one part of which is the labor theory of value, are extremely useful aids for understanding nature, man and society" (1976, p. 240). Reality, for Marx, can be understood through relations and to isolate parts of this whole would demonstrate an *abstraction*, which Ollman (1976) explains to be "a part of the whole whose ties with the rest are not apparent, it is a part which *appears* to be a whole in itself" and "to hold that the world is actually composed of such 'abstractions' is evidence of alienation" (p. 61). Central to approaching the whole is accepting that a decision must be made on which units to emphasize, their relations to each other as wholes and to a potentially *larger whole*.

One example of Marx's approach is evident in how he outlines his theory of alienation by presenting the relations in capitalism:

[W]e have to grasp the essential connection between private property, avarice, and the separation of labour, capital and landed property; between exchange and competition, value and the devaluation of men, monopoly and competition, etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the *money* system. (Marx, 1961[1844], p. 68, emphasis in original)

As the individual's sense of reality is dominated by the commodity-form and its production/consumption, there is a distancing from her *human needs*, now determined by external, *alien* products; "So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of reality to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for [her] life but for [her] work" (Marx, 1961[1844], p. 69).

The notion of *losing reality* is key to understanding how one may overcome alienation. The conditions of globalized capitalism result in a process of distancing, where our basic needs

³ "Alienation can only be grasped as the absence of unalienation, each state serving as a point of reference for the other" (Ollman, 1976, p. 131-132).

are provided by means that we have progressively less control over. The process for overcoming and regaining control over our everyday activities begins with an understanding of our basic human needs, and the ability to engage with others to regain reality.

The Four Forms of Alienation

Marx's thesis can be summed up as four distinct "breaks" or "separations"; from work (activity), products (material), each other and the "species." The last separation can be interpreted as a separation from oneself or human nature. From the manner in which Marx discusses alienation, these parts, while analytically distinct, are very much related, and there is evidence of his "method of abstraction" within this language;

The results of Marx's method of abstraction are not only such new factors as the relations of production and surplus-value, but as well all the other factors that come into his investigation. They have all been individuated out of the whole which is relationally contained in each. And again, which group of qualities Marx chooses to treat as a unit is determined by the real similarities he sees in reality together with the particular problem under consideration. (Ollman, 1976, p. 62)

Rather than separate and distinct categories, it becomes a question of emphasis within the different parts of a whole, hence a question of *relations*. Furthermore, the alienated condition relates directly to one's relationship to productive activity, and specifically in relation to the commodity-form;

Production does not simply produce man as a *commodity*, the *commodity-man*, man in the role of *commodity*; it produces him in keeping with this role as a *spiritually* and physically *dehumanised* being. (Marx, 1961, p. 85)

It becomes clear that the impacts of the commodity-form and the reproductive nature of such abstractions manifest in the four forms of alienation, affecting people in a variety of ways. If the alienated individual is an "abstraction," who "has lost touch with all human specificity" (Ollman, 1976, p. 134) and capitalism has turned "the life of the species into a means of individual life" (Marx, 1961, p. 75), then how does one overcome such conditions? And, what is necessary to understand such disconnect from our productive activity, each other and ourselves? The opportunity to overcome alienation is precisely how Marx defines the alienated condition, and the existence of an unalienated condition is not necessarily a romantic utopian vision, rather it is the reality that has been continuously interrupted and re-interrupted by capitalism.

With the dominance of commodity fetishism, capitalism attempts to reduce our activities to exchange-value, potentially blurring an understanding of our basic human needs;

Alienation distorts the nature of human beings. Human beings live on and by the products of nature (sunlight, water, plants, animals), including and progressing from the objects of natural science even to objects of art. Productive activity, then, is not just productive activity of the individual, but is the cumulative labor of the human species. (Padgett, 2007, p. 7-8)

It is important to emphasize that this is a *distortion*, rather than reality. While the impacts are real, and at times appear to be inevitable, there is evidence how people are effectively overcoming these abstractions everyday through their collective activity.

After establishing a basic outline of Marx's theory of alienation and his method, I now turn to a discussion of how housing activists in Scarborough, Ontario have engaged in activities that can be considered as steps towards de-alienation.

The Case of Kingston Galloway – Orton Park

As a part of the Anti-Poverty Community Organizing and Learning (APCOL) project, we conducted a case study in Kingston Galloway – Orton Park (KGO), a neighbourhood in Scarborough, Ontario. The case study was conducted using participatory methods, and followed a local campaign to develop an affordable housing strategy. We engaged in various activities from political consultations to community outreach, and participants utilized various tactics to establish an understanding of the conditions facing their community and propose concrete solutions. Furthermore, the participatory nature of the research encouraged a unique learning experience that connected participants to the broader goals of the APCOL project. We completed sixteen interviews with local activists, volunteers and paid staff from organizations engaged in antipoverty activities. The interviews followed a loose structure to understand the various aspects that have encouraged (or discouraged) their community involvement.

In studies of social movement activity it is important to explore how participants engage with several aspects of their work. As in productive activity generally, it is necessary for participants to find opportunity for creative expression and liberation through their activities. One of the key motivations for the case study participants was the opportunity to work for their community, and do something that would improve their lives and the lives of others.

Reclaiming Space in KGO

As a part of the case study interviews and during the various conversation circles and focus groups, participants often discussed the impact of spaces on their everyday activities. Whether discussing changes in physical spaces or reflecting on symbolic spaces, there was a significant emphasis in this area. For one interviewee, the issue of space brought up a variety of concerns and realities that he faces in his community work.

[S]pace may be available, but the policy of that space, and rule and regulation of space hinders people from using it. Then the other thing is the lack of legitimizing spaces that people use, but as an institution do not see those spaces as official. For instance, youth meet in a coffee place, they socialize and talk, but I can't go there to have meetings in a coffee place and decide that these decisions are kind of official, we're suppose to come to a formal place a community centre. That's where decisions are made, but... if people meet in their own homes and talk... you don't legitimize that because it's in people's homes. They have to come to a community centre for those decisions to be kind of seen as [legitimate]...

(KGO14, APCOL KGO Case Study)

The concept of *legitimate spaces* is important to highlight as it demonstrates the ongoing struggle to find space for productive activities.

One resident went so far as to engage in ‘guerrilla gardening’, and she decided to plant daffodils along the median of a main arterial road in KGO. Beyond the act of planting daffodils, she recounts a unique experience that highlights how participants engage in community activity and the extent that this activity is a part of their productive life.

What happened is that we were offered these daffodils from [a foundation]... but they were really adamant about... ‘beautifying’ the priority neighbourhoods, that was their goal. And you know, if you look at a map their idea was well, look there’s a garden here...it’s already got a gardening bed so we can just dump some daffodils... But I kept saying but these are already established parks in neighbourhoods of homeowners. *How does that help the people at Galloway and Kingston Road? They’re not going down to Eastview Park and looking at the daffodils. There’s nothing to bring them down there.* So, how did you help the priority neighbourhood? I didn’t get that. And they were very adamant about doing already established spaces... So we just ordered a ton of daffodils, and unbeknownst to... the [foundation], one of the girls who was doing a placement... she hung out with the basketball team...and these boys...they didn’t know one end of a daffodil, they had no idea, it was the most beautiful thing. To me that is one of the best things that came out of it... I show them a daffodil ball and they were all like, “I’m planting flowers I’m gonna get my shoes dirty these are my cool runners!” And they were just typical teenage boys, and *I said look we’re going to go into the median of the road, who else let’s you plant in the median of the road. I had no permission. We put over 700 daffodils in just over an hour...* All I had to say to these boys was “(gasps) you dug that hole already?” That was it, they would dig the next hole faster... [I]n the Spring if another teenager or kid goes to wreck those daffodils in the middle road, those teenage boys are on them. *They’re proud of what they did. They have a sense...They’re empowered, they did it. And I mean they’re planting them in the fall, they don’t get their reward till the spring.* (KGO10 Interview, APCOL KGO Case Study)

In this account of her work with the young men, there are several key concepts that help us understand her efforts to develop a strategy for overcoming alienation. First, she identified the need in her community (and for herself) to reconnect to their spaces. As development continues in the KGO neighbourhood, she realizes that youth are further alienated from their spaces, and she also sees a disconnect from each other. In another part of the interview she is able to recall the changes in the area from a small rural community to a bustling suburb with rapidly changing demographics. The act of planting daffodils could have been an alienating experience for the young men involved, but their willingness to challenge the organization is what provided an opportunity to reclaim public spaces that were designated differently. This is key when we attempt to understand opportunities for social change, as activities mediated by external organizations and bureaucracy tend to limit their efficacy for overcoming alienation. In this respect, the level of commitment that participants have towards the outcomes of their activity is shown clearly when she explains how protective the teenagers are of their work. This is a clear expression of de-alienation, as the activity and product are *not* abstracted, rather they are a part of their creative expression and liberation. In this sense, the young men developed a sense of

purpose and belonging through their productive activity and relations with other community members.

Central to discussions of activist development and engagement is the question of how activists emerge. As illustrated above, it is crucial to understand how ordinary life provides particular opportunities for extraordinary activities. When attempting to locate de-alienating activities, we must emphasize the *process* that precedes an unalienated condition.

When considering different ways to understand social movement activities, we must be willing to look at the everyday activities that demonstrate the desire to overcome alienation. These are manifested in collective activities like planting daffodils in public spaces, protesting poor public transit or volunteering at a community garden. Furthermore, the means by which we understand such activity, as it is mediated by exchange-value or use-value, can provide insight as to the degree which participants are in fact reclaiming their communities and de-alienating their condition. This resonates most clearly with the work of Lefebvre in his explanation of *la vie quotidienne*;

The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of everyday life... A revolution cannot just change the political personnel or institutions; it must change *la vie quotidienne* which has already been literally colonized by capitalism” (Lefebvre in Sawchuk, 2006, p. 247).

In the case of the daffodils, it is clear that a change in everyday life occurred by reclaiming community activity for themselves, even when the project began with different goals (i.e. property value increase). For them, the goals and motive were driven by use-values (i.e. building community, mutual support, social justice), so they worked outside of the organizations that did not fit their interests and managed to make the changes they saw necessary. This change was driven by a contradiction in goals identified by the community activist quoted above, and communicated to the young men who joined her in the ‘guerrilla gardening’. By establishing *illegitimate* spaces that contradicted capitalism;

Activity systems governed by use-value production are, on the whole, illegitimate under capitalism. Use-values such as comfort, sustenance, social justice, mutual need, and even democracy, to the degree they truly govern (as opposed to merely accompany) an activity system, are illegitimate at either the goal or motive levels of activity. (Sawchuk, 2006, p. 251)

As we consider methods to understand alienation and the everyday activities that are in fact moments of resistance and withdrawal from capitalist domination, the vision of an unalienated condition emerges within the humanizing effect of social relations mediated by use-value. The daffodils are a simple, yet clarifying example of how a community manages to engage in productive activity that challenges capitalism through use-value mediated activity.

The narratives that emerged during the APCOL case study demonstrate various aspects of activist learning and illustrate how artefact production becomes key in strategies for de-alienation. For the guerrilla gardener, it is clear that her efforts to effect change in the everyday lives of youth has provided opportunities to imagine alternatives to existing modes of production through gardening and other forms of community work.

Conclusion

We can continue this downward path toward a society ever more regimented, manipulated, and self-deceived, or we can band together with groups of friends and, looking away from our own comfort and convenience, face the poverty, cruelty, and tyranny that dominate the world. In bestirring ourselves to heal the world, we reassert our humanity and reclaim our lives for ourselves. Protesting our own commodification, we can affirm once again the humanity of each of us. (Schmitt, 2003, p. 134)

As the contradictions of capitalism continue to emerge in various forms, there is a need for communities to develop alternatives that can provide spaces of productive and creative activities. Schmitt's call to action demonstrates what is already happening for many people engaged in activities to reclaim their communities. At the same time, there is a need to consider the learning that must take place for sustained action and positive social change. Methods to facilitate this learning can be explored within popular education. Whether we consider forms of emancipatory learning (Freire, 2000) or other approaches to adult education (Brookfield, 2002), it becomes clear that *learning one's alienation* is a starting point to develop approaches to overcoming alienation. In the case of Freire, much of his work addresses questions of how individuals can overcome alienation through "problem-posing education" as a method that "affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 84).

The notion of collective learning as central to one's "process of becoming" illustrates much of what Marx struggled with in outlining his vision of an unalienable social condition. Furthermore, there is a strong case to consider recovering theories of alienation as a starting point for understanding how to facilitate positive social movement activity.

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