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Alienation and Anomie – the Perverse Effects of Social Empowerment

Rarita MIHAIL[1]*

Abstract

With modernity, artificiality is developed: people become aware of the fact that society does not represent a natural grant, a gift from God, but the product of their own actions. On the one side, as a counterweight of artificiality, the modern individuals have uncovered the strength of the social empowerment. They "put" society "in motion", but their actions and reactions trigger unexpected effects, they multiply, interfere and they develop their own dynamics which contributes inevitably to the empowerment of the processes that they have started. The individuals lose any control they have had over society, and their interventions have unwanted results. Because of its inert artificiality and its structural opacity, society appears to humans as "a second nature" that opposes their plans and that imposes certain constraints. This is the classical theme of alienation: human products become objectified, are dehumanized and end up by opposing their own creators. These alienation phenomena can be connected to the concept of anomie, defined as the distinction between the objective situation generated by the weakening of the normative rules from a certain society and the subjective feeling of confusion and ignorance regarding the means to action, causing thus anxiety. In this article our main focus is to emphasize two well established orientations from which inevitably start all present day approaches related to alienation and anomie in interpreting the effects of the social empowerment. More precisely, we will look on Marx's alienation theory which emphasizes the human's impossibility to control his social relationships, and also his estrangement from society (it appears to him as a foreign and hostile power). Instead, Durkheim – who is the creator of the term anomie – lays emphasis on the fact that society in itself has reduced the means to control the individual and his actions.

Keywords: Modernization; social differentiation; work division, alienated work, anomic suicide.

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1. Introduction

Until recently, the benefits of modernization were not questioned. Moreover, modernization theories are, almost without exception, built on the premise of positive consequences. Progress is irrefutably good, positive, desirable. The fact is that, on the eve of the XXI-th century, through modernization, a state of artificiality has been established resulting in the fragility of societies. And the insecurity of the world extends through the phenomena of social disorder due to which the antagonistic relations between the individual and society deepen.

The findings of Max Weber and Karl Marx on the condition of modernity raised an intrinsic feature of the phenomenon (modernity), that its *ambivalence*, expressed in two contradictory and simultaneously related discourses: "discourse of liberation" and "discourse of discipline" [1]. The ambiguity of modernity is detectable in "three fundamental relationships between individual freedom and the demands of the community, social workers and social structure, local nature of human life and the universality of social rules" [1].

Technological innovations that have accompanied the development process of capitalism, the expansion of industry, cities, migration flows from rural to urban environment, the emigration to America, all gave rise to fundamental *processes* of *displacement* of *individuals* from *traditional contexts*, which in turn have caused anxieties, uncertainties about human destiny and their place in society, the order and stability of society as a whole [2]. Consequently, the need to rethink social order is imposed by the avalanche of perverse effects of modernity. Intellectuals of the late XIX-th century and early XX-th century - M. Weber, E. Durkheim, R. Michels, K. Marx, E. Mosca, V. Pareto – have *questioned the tension* between *individual autonomy*, *rational domination of the world*, on the one hand, and *collective unexpected effects*, on the other hand.

2. Theoretical Background

The state of precariousness of the world in the modernity period has its origins, according to P. Wagner's researches in *A Sociology of Modernity*, in the Ideology of Lights, considered to be fundamentally ambivalent, since it contained countless ways of manifestation of ambiguity. Although the ideologists of the Lights rejected any imposition of the domination of any sort of "god", they admitted however that there are values and rules that precede and succeed the individual existence: the idea of a human nature

that includes natural rights, the idea of reason as a superior instance, the idea of necessity of having the common good in view (which implies the limitation of individual autonomy, the liberation from constraints and the freedom to achieve goals together with others in the community).

As a response to the ambiguous ideology of Illuminists, classical modernists built a "natural order, which they used as a means of reconciling the duality between individual autonomy and "others". But this project proved to be utopian because an unanticipated effect of it was the emergence of the "social issue" that could not be solved by an automatic regulation. Therefore, with the birth and expansion of social problems such as poverty, social disorganization, social diseases, scientific responses to social change have developed. The need to rethink social order in modern society was theorized by Karl Marx, who insisted on the inevitable violence of class conflicts, adding the hope of a profound and definitive change. Instead, Émile Durkheim was interested in the social destruction caused by the division of labour, anticipating a possible harmony between the industrial society and the individual.

3. Argument of the paper

This article will be devoted mainly to a reflection of the phenomena of social disorder, alienation and anomie, which inevitably alter the relationships between the individual and society, which become antagonistic relations, especially with modernity. This article will be divided into three parts. First, we will argue that modernization induces insecurity. The (relative) empowerment paradox of social structures is therefore the following: the more sophisticated a society is, the more it (can become) becomes unsafe for its members. Secondly, we will inquire how far alienation and anomie alter the place the individual occupies in the world, in its relation to society. In interpreting these phenomena of social disorder, both Marx and Durkheim criticize the absence of rules, but starting from very different philosophical and moral points of view. Finally, we will analyze the possibilities of eliminating these social disorder phenomena, indicating, at least outlined, the distinction that should be made between the two sets of factors that generate them: differentiation processes that accompany the modernization and processes inherent to the capitalist system.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

4.1. Antinomies of social empowerment

(Relative) empowerment of social structures constitutes one of the fundamental themes of social and human sciences. This form of social empowerment is paradoxical because it combines the "two antinomies": "People make their society - this is the first antinomy [of the people]; but they do not know what they do or how they do it – this is the second antinomy [the society]" [3]. This paradox is the same as the one which fabricates an automaton, i.e. that of a being which has in itself the principle of its movement; to be the cause of a being who is its own cause. As social objectifications, these *emerging forms of social life* are the result of human actions. They are, so to speak, sedimentation of human action. Nevertheless, they escape human control and oppose it because of their artificiality or plasticity, as a "second nature".

The question whether social order is *physei* or *thesei*, in other words if it reveals the cosmic order or the political order, is one of the important concerns of the ancient philosophers. But modern thinkers have reformulated the issue. Faced with the turmoil caused by the French Revolution - this great experience which taught them that there is a history [4] - and the combined effects of detraditionalization and poverty that accompany the industrial revolution, modern individuals have explained two things at once: people have the capacity to make history (contingency principle) and, however, it escapes them, either because they do not control it (contingency principle), or because it controls them (principle of inertia). As the Third World is seen as a result of human activity, but not of human design [5], modern individuals place the social-historical world between the natural world (intentionally caused by God - G. Vico) and the world of conventions (intentionally produced by humans).

With modernity, people have become more aware of the fact that society is not a natural given, a gift from God, but their work, the product of their actions. This awareness has led not only to conscious social transformation projects, but also to more or less technocratic projects of global planning of society (Saint-Simon, Marx). On the other hand, modern individuals discovered the perverse effects of social empowerment. Although they make (or rather "act") society, their actions and reactions trigger unexpected effects, they multiply, overlap and develop their own dynamics that contribute to the empowerment processes that set them in motion.

In the critical interpretation of the Frankfurt School, (relative) empowerment of society does not appear as a boon, nor as a necessity or as something inevitable. Due to its inert artificiality and structural opacity, society presents itself to people as a "second nature", opposing their plans

and imposing its external constraints. As such, social empowerment is invariably denounced as a form of dehumanization, alienation or anomie.

The great transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* – transition that is characterized, to speak in Hegel's terms, by the progressive "split" between subject and object, between people and their work - can be correlated with the emergence of the *alienation concept*. However, inasmuch as the use of the alienation concept is inseparable from a certain specific "ideological pathos"[2], it should not be confused with the relative autonomy of society [6].

Relative irreducibility of society is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of alienation. Proof, so to speak, is provided by the fact that Durkheim insisted so much on the *sui generis* character of the social field that has developed a theory of alienation. Indeed, even if Durkheim was, like Marx, a radical critic of the institutions and the dominant values of modern society, his normative conceptions on man and society, which are in many ways in opposition to those of Marx, prevented him from building such a theory.

In this regard, it is quite significant that, in *Suicide*, Durkheim only awards a truly marginal place (in a footnote) to fatalistic suicide, i.e. the opposite of anomic suicide, is not induced in error but from an excess of social control [7]. In a somewhat forced, I would say that since the problem of moral anarchy is the central issue to Durkheim, he does not conceive the problem of alienation – temporary understood as domination of the individual through the forms of constraints which are external - both as a problem, and especially as a solution to the problem of anomie.

Certainly, we could reduce the contrast between order and conflict theory, in opposition to the theory of alienation and anomie, involving different axiomatic systems. For this reason, Durkheim never developed a theory of alienation - which demonstrates *a contrario* that the relative autonomy of social structures cannot be simply confused with alienation.

4.2. Alienation versus anomie

To understand the dangers of social empowerment, we do not believe that we should move too much away from the *meaning of alienation term*, as it is shown in the writings of the young Marx, which defines it as the process by which the work created by man appears as a foreign essence

[2] By "pathos" we understand in this context, following Lovejoy's footsteps, a certain metaphysical sensitivity or susceptibility [6]. The adjective "ideological" is not used here in the Marxist sense of the word. Through ideology, I understand all non-empirical assumptions of a political, moral and anthropological nature that inform a social theory.

serving him. This definition has the advantage of highlighting the existence of different phases of the alienation phenomenon: servitude - which defines it, while objectivity and renunciation represent its prior conditions [8].

The disintegration of traditional social bonds between people - family and community- separates the individual from his environment. This disintegration can lead, on the one hand, to a crystallization of his personality, and, on the other hand, to a sense of alienation in relationships with peers and loneliness inside the community. However, we speak of *alienation* only when this alienation and solitude are felt as being caused by a hostile power against which there is no escape.

This example highlights the analogy that exists between the first stage of the alienation process - objectification – and the concept of social differentiation - one of the fundamental concepts of modern sociology. This process means, according to the non-Marxist theorists (from Durkheim and Spencer to Parsons), the methods of development of any social system which, during its evolution, suffers internal differentiation. Therefore, there is no doubt that this process of social differentiation - represented by the division of labour and the disintegration of traditional community - constitutes a preamble to the occurrence of alienation.

Another pathological form of division of labour is the class struggle or, in the language of Durkheim, "the antagonism between labour and capital" [9], caused not only by the lack of legal regulations, but also by a too accentuated plotting that Georges Friedmann, in the XX-th century would call "crumbled work". Workers, isolated on plotted tasks, lose sense of their work. The excessive specialization reduces the worker role to a mere appendage of the machine, inevitably becoming an inert mechanism: "Human work is replaced by machines, the work from the small workshop by the work in the manufactory. The worker is conscripted, snatched from the bosom of his family for the duration of the day; he lives separately including from the employer" [9].

Although Durkheim and Marx are humanist thinkers with different beliefs, their opinions meet at alienation level. This proximity, superficial in substance, was due to the sense that the two thinkers have given to the *absence of work signification*. For Karl Marx, alienation means the impossibility of man to realize his own way of being. This helplessness is due to fact that in the capitalist system, which is an exploitation system, the worker does not realize his specific human powers (self-realization in and through work, sociability and refining of senses), which he denies and thus denies himself. Marx opposes the treatment of the worker as a commodity, protesting how the products of work seem to oppose the one who has achieved them: "The worker is reduced to the role of commodity, and even in the case of the

poorest of goods, the misery of the worker is inversely proportional to the force and grandeur of his production" [10]. Thus, people can become slaves of what they produce.

Alienation means that man cannot express its true nature. This is because work, the conscious activity that distinguishes him from animal, is alienated and deformed. Man, losing the means to achieve his own self, being deprived of his creative capabilities, can no longer assert himself in his work, on the contrary he feels renegade. Thus, under the conditions of the capitalist production, "the worker becomes a deformed shell, without the core of a human being" [10]. Which amounts to the alienation of his human essence, essence that is social by definition. Thus, the phenomenon of alienation inevitably alters the relationships between individual and society which acquire an antagonistic character.

Although he doesn't condemn capitalism, Durkheim didn't ignore the phenomena that Marx described in terms of class struggle and alienation. The great modern societies are hardly able to calm the individual and to provide protection against isolation. Compared to the huge mass of people that is the modern nation, one cannot help but feel alone, without ties and without a common dimension with this anonymous and impersonal crowd. The decline of moral values in a society is a source of anomie, which translates into an increase of the suicide numbers. The goals and methods of action become uncertain and culture no longer plays its role as a benchmark and guide for action. This is due to social changes that involve the emergence of new values, thereby creating a gap from the old values.

While Durkheim defines anomie as a weakening of the regulatory system, other sociologists stress instead that one of the main manifestations of anomie in modern society is an excessive submission to social laws, since advertising, fashion and public opinion dictate to the individual his way of life and behaviour, leaving him only a limited field in which to exercise his discretion, independent and autonomous. Therefore, can we include under anomie contradictory phenomena such as the absence of rules and excessive compliance with rules, i.e, blind submission to social laws? Whether we are talking of social alienation, anomie, hyper-conformism or social isolation, we can still identify a common element: the absence of human power on social conditions.

If we talk of reification or fetishism, the emphasis falls on the fact that man doesn't control the conditions of his material life, nor does he control those of spiritual creation; if we talk of alienation in relation to society, we focus on the fact that man is unable to guide or control his own social relations. However, we should not minimize the fact that the concept of anomie can be interpreted in different ways, sometimes contradictory.

Thus Marx, using the term of alienation, highlights man's inability to control his social relations and his alienation from society (which appears as a hostile and foreign power). Instead, using the concept of anomie, Durkheim emphasized that society itself finds its means of control over the individual and their activities reduced.

The conservative vision of Durkheim made him consider anomie as the result of weakening of traditional laws, caused in turn by a weakening of the control methods of society over the individual and his activities. As for Marx, he opposes the assertion that man is enslaved by society (which is only an abstract concept), while, in reality, classes and groups with antagonistic interests govern society; different situations: the absence of rules, anarchy, conflicting rules or coercive rules are the result of the existence of class conflict. The two interpretations of the social disorder phenomena critique the lack of rules, but starting from very different philosophical and moral points of view.

Both Marx and Durkheim support the same concatenation: the economic produces the social, but what separates them concerns the division of labour consequences. The German philosopher believes that the division of labour has negative social consequences: exploitation of employees, social inequality, oppression. In other words, Marx division of labour is synonymous with alienation. However, Durkheim believes that "the division of labour does not produce such undesirable consequences due to its design, but only in exceptional and abnormal circumstances" [9].

Analyzing the two concepts, Raymond Boudon and F. Bourricaud have nuanced the interpretation, stating that anomie could be considered in the non-Marxist sociology what alienation is in the Marxist sociology: "alienation and anomie describe in two different theoretical frameworks the idea of fundamental disorder of the relationships between the individual and his society"[11]. But these disorder phenomena cannot be considered as resulting solely from the class struggle, as Marx argued.

Despite the relative closeness, the distance between Durkheim and Marx is considerable in terms of interpretation of phenomena of disorder specific to modern societies. Although some commentators consider that the alienation generated by the absence of work significance is equivalent to anomie, Philippe Besnard has a different view. Anomie differs from alienation, he argues, since, for Durkheim, excessive overcoming of the limits of specialized work, not limiting the workers' horizon, generates the anomic situation [12].

For Marx, worker alienation and fetishization of goods ("A determined social relation between people becomes for them a fantastic relations between things" [10]) are historically determined phenomena and,

therefore, transient. Therefore, Marx is convinced that worker's situation can be overcome only through the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, while Durkheim suggests rather a collaboration between employers and employees modeled after the corporations of the Middle Ages. The remedy for the excessive specialization isn't "general instruction" [9] of workers, but progressive widening of their horizon, purpose that overcomes the immediate work duties.

4.3. Possibilities of eliminating *the social disorder phenomena*

Alienation is inherent in the process of industrialization and modernization. But is the phenomenon specific only to the capitalist system? In fact, the risk of social alienation accompanies any social organization and institutionalization process which create a gap between citizens and social institutions in different areas, as society requires more or less formal rules from citizens.

Assuming that there is a link between the process of social differentiation and the phenomenon of alienation, we find that any process of differentiation, as a result of increased social units size and their internal complexity, generates a separation between the individual and his production, since the first loses power over the object produced.

Modernization, industrialization, urbanization etc. involve a greater social differentiation and therefore facilitate the development of alienation. But this is only a potential, and the degree of concretization of this risk depends on the social system.

Social empowerment process, resulting from the shift from rural traditional to the busy city provides another example of social differentiation. As a consequence of this phenomenon, it was impossible to avoid the phenomenon of anomie accompanying the dismantling of the traditional family framework. But avoiding anomie is actually impossible, in principle? However, there is no doubt that this depends largely on the economic price we are willing to pay to avoid it and the current degree of social planning.

We infer from this that the statement according to which the absence of sufficient financial means to pay the price of human welfare is the cause of alienation can be substantiated. Perhaps this is the reason why hopes of eliminating alienation could not even be materialized in former socialist countries, where the man was extremely alienated from the goals of economic production, while ignoring the ultimate goal of socialism: human happiness, his creative development and satisfaction of his spiritual needs.

Marx lived in a time when the manifestations of alienation resulting from the industrial revolution and modernization occur simultaneously with those from the capitalist system and, without distinguishing between the two, he will insist in his analysis mainly on the accountability of the regime. In the same way, but from an opposite point of view, the founders of modern sociology, without distinguishing more than Marx between the two causes of alienation, will insist on the increased division of labour, on the process of rationalization, bureaucratization, etc., and not on the implications of the capitalist market.

This difference in emphasis has led to different conclusions: on the one hand the one stating that only a regime change can suppress alienation, since private property is the main cause of it; on the other hand, the finding that even a regime change could not suppress the main causes of alienation, since it has its source in the common processes of modern industrial society, regardless of its regime.

Therefore, in the light of past experience, it seems that it is absolutely necessary to make a very precise distinction between the two sets of factors: differentiation processes that accompany the modernization process and the inherent capitalist system.

The specificity of the capitalist system lies primarily in the fact that the law of profit is an obstacle in the face of efforts to avoid fragmentation due to differentiation to become alienation. Moreover, the very foundation of this regime is extreme plotting - separation between worker and means of production, on the one hand, and the product of his labour, on the other hand; separation between opposing classes in the struggle for national income allocation; separation between different social groups, national and racial. However, eliminating the capitalist system does not automatically imply the ability to suppress manifestations of alienation. Until today, abolishing the system in Eastern Europe countries was not able to promote sufficient efforts to eliminate manifestations of alienation caused by modern society.

5. Conclusions

Knowing the "lessons" of history strengthens the self-control of the contemporary man haunted by the uncertainties and anxieties generated by the ambivalence of modernity itself. Max Weber recognized that rationing, expressed by science, industry, bureaucracy, capitalism, does not guarantee the triumph of liberal values. What threatens human dignity, in the eyes of Weber, is enslaving individuals by anonymous organizations [13], increased

organization and rationalization being associated with increased alienation and fragmentation of individual lives and communities.

Even if we accept that certain forms of alienation can only be removed in the near future at the expense of the advantages offered by an increasingly complex social organization, even if we admit that there is no shortcut to eliminate the phenomena of alienation due to modern social life, it does not diminish the need to fight for the establishment of a society that would minimize the existing alienation phenomena and would develop maximum conditions for the development of human creativity.

On the other hand, modern society forms a relatively autonomous systemic fabric of functional interconnections always and inevitably requiring the limits of the individual's autonomy. For this reason, isn't alienation simply part of the modern human condition? After all, aren't the separation between the system and the lived world, the functional differentiation of the self-regulated subsystems, including the heteronomy that they entail, actually distinctive features of the advanced modern societies? Therefore, we must abandon the objective idealism and accept the relative irreducibility of the systemic structures of society. This doesn't mean arguing for a reversal of the arrow of time, nor for the abolition of the systemic properties of society itself, but attacking the systemic structures of society that artificially limit the autonomy of the individual.

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