Searching for a Self

Identity in Popular Culture, Media and Society

by

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Series in Sociology

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To my grandchildren, Ariel, Kavanna, Seth, and Noah

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Chapter 5
Marxism and Identity

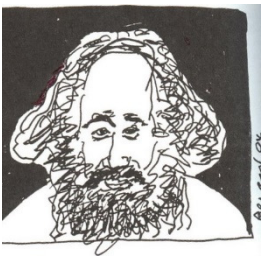
> The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time the dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.
>
> Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in sociology and social philosophy.* (T.B. Bottomore & M. Rubel, Eds. T.B. Bottomore, Transl.). New York: McGraw-Hill. 1964

> The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open, fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.
>
> Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy.* (Transl. T.B. Bottomore). New York: McGraw-Hill. 1964.

> The economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other ideas of a given historical period.
>
> Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* in R. Tucker, Ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader.* New York: W.W. Norton. 1972

If class conflict is basic to society, as Marx argued, then it is reasonable to assume that for Marxists, identity is connected to one's class and to the ideas one has about oneself. These ideas, Marxists argue, are generated by the ruling classes and produce a false consciousness the working classes have about themselves and their possibilities. In bourgeois, capitalist societies, it is not too reductionist to argue that identity is based, in large part, on one's class: a member of the proletariat or the ruling classes and the conceptual ideologists who serve them and persuade them of the righteousness of their behavior.

Figure 5.1: Karl Marx.



Drawing by the Author

Alienated Proles

Marxists, of whom there are many varieties, argue that while capitalism can produce goods, it also generates alienation—a separation of the self that has negative consequences for both members of the proletariat or working classes but also for members of the ruling classes. Karl Marx wrote about this alienation as follows (1964: 169-170):

> The alienation of the worker from his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, takes on its own existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.

This passage is found in Karl Marx, *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy.* (T.B. Bottomore & M. Rubel, Eds. T.B. Bottomore, transl.) New York: McGraw-Hill. 1964.

Figure 5.2: Fritz Pappenheim.



Drawing by the Author.

A Marxist theorist, Fritz Pappenheim, has a useful description of this alienation in his book *The Alienation of Modern Man.* He discusses the writings of Franz Kafka (1967:34):

> Man's alienation and his anonymous way of existing have been described with methodic and terrifying precision by Kafka, who wrote of himself: "I am separated from all things by a hollow space, and I do not even reach to its boundaries." The main characters in the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* are completely depersonalized and reduced to mere masks. This loss of identity leads to a state of radical anonymity, which the author symbolizes by not using a name but merely a letter of the alphabet to refer to them.
>
> American novelists also have described man's fate of alienation and homelessness. We shall mention only Thomas Wolfe, who devotes much of his work to recording the painful experience of the uprooted man, the nostalgic exile and wanderer.

He also discusses Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which portrays its hero, Willy Loman, the "other-directed man" who strived to be popular and liked but remained "absolutely lonesome and irrelevant, forever dreaming that personality always wins the day."

The terms that Pappenheim uses to describe people living in a state of alienation—depersonalized, mere masks, radical anonymity, lonesome and irrelevant—are tied, Pappenheim suggests, directly to "the basic trends of our age," and, among other things, to technology, social structures, and politics. These phenomena are not the result of psychological problems but are structural and are connected to the social structures in which people live. We are, Marx argued, alienated from our work and that leads to alienation from ourselves and others.

Pappenheim quotes Marx on work and alienation. Marx writes that the worker (1967:91):

> Does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself….He therefore only feels at home with himself away from his work while in work he feels estranged from himself. His work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labor.* It is…not the satisfaction of a need but only a means to satisfy needs extraneous to it. Its alienated character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion, it is avoided like a plague.

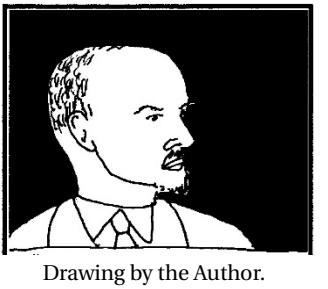
Pappenheim admits that in contemporary societies, there are more possibilities for self-realization but concludes that we can only triumph over the alienation from which people suffer by developing economic systems and social structures that are not dominated by the commodity structure—a process that he argues will take many decades.

Lenin and the Need for Revolution

Vladimir Lenin argued that we cannot escape from alienation by peaceful means but only by having a revolution in which the members of the proletariat take control of the state. As he explains in *State and Revolution*: *The Experience of 1848-51*:

> The overthrow of bourgeois rule can be accomplished only by the proletariat, as the particular class, which, by the economic conditions of its existence, is being prepared for this work and is provided with the opportunity and the power to perform it….The doctrine of the class struggle, as applied by Marx to the question of the state and of the Socialist revolution, leads inevitably to the recognition of the *political rule* of the proletariat, of its dictatorship, *i.e.,* of a power shared with none and relying directly upon the armed force of the masses. The overthrow of the bourgeoisie is realisable only by the transformation of the proletariat into the *ruling class,* able to crush the inevitable and desperate resistance of the bourgeoisie, and to organize, for the new economic order, *all* the toiling and exploited masses.
>
> https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch02.htm

Figure 5.3: Vladimir Lenin.



Drawing by the Author.

As many scholars have pointed out, once a dictatorship is created, it is difficult to escape from it, and the history of Russia after the revolution does not give confidence in the benevolence of the proletariat once it assumes command of a state. We must wonder—is the price of escaping from alienation worth the trauma and chaos involved in staging a revolution and establishing

a society with repressive politics, with gulags, and with the murder of millions of people by leaders such as Stalin?

Some thinkers argue that alienation is a natural condition of mankind and that we find alienation in every society, regardless of its economic order. Thus, one finds alienation in capitalist countries and also in socialist countries because it is a natural phenomenon. What we have to do, it is argued, is find a way to minimize its negative effects of alienation, perhaps by establishing social democracies such as one finds in many Scandinavian countries or by facilitating community organizations, such as were found in the United States before people there started "bowling alone."

If psychoanalytic theory sees identity as connected to individuals and their life stories, Marxism sees identity as connected to their socio-economic class and, in essence, based on a binary opposition: ruling class or proletariat. Marx argues that society determines consciousness, not consciousness society, which means that our identities are shaped by the superstructures in our societies and they are shaped by the base, the economic system, and the class relations found in that system. That is not to say that Marxists are not aware of some of the basic components of identity such as race, religion, and gender, but they are not as important as class.

Erich Fromm on Marx

Marx's goal, according to Erich Fromm, is to free people from the bonds that bind them. As Fromm wrote, quoted in Irving Zeitlin's *Marxism: A Re-Examination* (1967:23):

> Marx's aim was the spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determinism, or restituting him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature. Marx's philosophy was, in secular, non-theistic language a new and radical step forward in the tradition of prophetic messianism; it was aimed at the full realization of individualism, the very aim which has guided Western thinking from the Renaissance and the Reformation fare into the nineteenth century.

Zeitlin points out that the young Marx focused on the problem of alienation and emancipation, which involved escaping from the capitalist mode of production and the binding nature of private property and the servitude which it engendered. One's identity, thus, is primarily connected to one's class and freedom is attained by class conflict and the elimination of classes, which then enables people to realize their true identities. Achieving this state is the goal of post-Marxism, which focuses not on class conflict but on the complexities of

identity and the demographic elements that play such an important role in shaping identity.

We have to make a distinction between saying that the base determines the superstructure (vulgar Marxism) and that it helps shape the superstructure. That is because, as Marx pointed out, individuals do play a role in determining how societies evolve. But there can be little doubt that class is of fundamental importance in the way people perceive themselves and obtain an identity. And the arts play an important role in shaping people's consciousness.

As John Berger points out in *Ways of Seeing* (1972:86-87):

> The art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class. If we were simply saying that European art, between 1600 and 1900 served the interest of the successive ruling classes, all of whom depended in different ways on the new power of capital, we should not be saying anything very new. What is being proposed is a little more precise: that a way of seeing the world which was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange, found its visual expression in the oil painting and could not have found it in any other visual art form. Oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects.

We can expand Berger's notion of "art" to the media, popular culture, and all entertainments which work to mold public opinion and shape people's perceptions of their societies and themselves. When it is implicitly ideological, we can think of it as propaganda or, as it was known in Soviet Russia, Agitprop.

Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky explain, in *Cultural Theory* how things can be confusing in class societies (1990:149):

> Things are never as they seem in class societies, Marx tells us, because exploitation must be disguised for the social order to be sustained. Since rulers do not like to think of themselves as exploiters, benefiting unjustly from the labor of others, and the exploited must be kept ignorant of their subjection lest they revolt, the truth must be kept from both rulers and ruled alike….n Volume 3 of *Capital,* Marx voiced his belief that "all science would be superfluous if the manifest form and the essence of things directly coincided." Implicit in this statement, as G.A. Cohen has shown in a lovely appendix called "Karl Marx and the Withering Away of Social Science" is the belief that all social science would cease to be necessary in a socialist society, because socialism, unlike capitalism, would not be based on deception.

This deception is necessary to prevent the proletariat from rebelling and challenging the domination of the ruling classes. One reason the masses lack

awareness of their status is that the domination of the ruling classes seems to be the natural order and is all-pervasive.

Figure 5.4: Antonio Gramsci.



Drawing by the Author.

Hegemonic Domination

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemonic domination is one explanation for the lack of revolutionary fervor in the masses. Raymond Williams explains hegemony as follows in his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977:109-110):

> For "hegemony" is a concept which at once includes and goes beyond two powerful earlier concepts, that of "culture" as a "whole social process," in which men define and shape their whole lives; and that of "ideology," in any of its Marxist senses, in which a system of meanings and values is the expression or projection of a particular class interest….It [hegemony] is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives.

People cannot move beyond their sense of reality and if they have nothing to compare their status and identities with, they are caught and will accept their status and identities as natural and thus universal.

When to Leave the Communist Party

In Nigel Dennis's *Cards of Identity,* he has a section called "Secret Agent" in which a priest, Father Orfe, discusses his monastery which was designed to

accommodate fifty ex-Party (Communist Party) men who broke with the Party. As Orfe explains (1955:256):

> Each heretic believes that he alone broke precisely at the moment when the *eau-de-vie* of Communism changed to the ditch-water of absolutism. Those who broke before him he regards as renegades, those who broke after, as charlatans.

He identifies the problem that Utopian theories all eventually face: Dreams and schemes of paradise always, so it seems, turn into nightmares.

Boxed Insert on Marxism and Identity

Marxism and Identity

Christian Fuchs

Beyond Postmodernism: Cultural Materialism

Identity is a major concept in postmodern theory. What is often meant by it in this context are specific social relations and features having to do with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, origin, age, ability, origin, and class? Postmodernists often claim that Marx and Marxists reduce society and individuals to class and the economy and therefore speak of class reductionism and economic reductionism. In turn, postmodernists have however often neglected the analysis of class and capitalism and have advanced an identity politics reductionism while class inequalities have at the same time exploded.

A cultural materialist position as for example advanced by Raymond Williams (1977) or myself argues that the economic and the non-economic are identical and different at the same time (Fuchs 2020a, 2017). Social production is the foundation of all realms of society and has its origin in the economy. There is therefore an economic aspect of all realms of society. Production and reproduction exist everywhere in society. But at the same time, specific realms of society have their own emergent qualities that cannot be reduced to society. Non-economic realms sublate (*aufheben, Aufhebung*), as Hegel says, the economy, which means that they are based on and not reduceable to the economic realm. In respect to identity, this means that economic identity such as class in a class society shapes all aspects of society. All humans produce and do so socially in particular social relations. But class

relations are mediated with other social and power relations, such as gender, racism, nationalism, etc.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Dialectical Philosophy

In Karl Marx's theory, identity is not a major concept. There is however a meaning of identity in Marxist theory that is different from what postmodernists understand by it. And this meaning derives from Hegel's dialectical philosophy, by which Marx was heavily influenced, which is why he is often characterised as a left-wing Hegelian thinker. One of the most important and perhaps one of the most difficult philosophical books is Hegel's (2010) *Science of Logic*. The *Encyclopaedia Logic* is Hegel's (1991) further developed and more systematic version of the *Science of Logic*.

Building on Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself, Hegel understands identity as the "*abstract 'I'*" (Hegel 1991, §45), which means that when we speak of a human individual's identity we abstract from everything surrounding that individual and just focus on that single human being. Each human being has an individual identity, the self. Each individual is unique. Hegel also speaks of being-for-itself or immediacy. Identity is for Hegel the starting point of the dialectical process. A being-for-itself exists only in and through relation to another being. It is what Hegel calls being-for-another (Hegel 1991, §91). Hegel also speaks of contradiction and negation in this context. One human being is different from others but it also cannot exist without others, it, in fact, exists in and through other humans with which it stands in relations. And these relations are productive so that new qualities emerge from the relations between humans. Examples are a friendship that emerges from continuous interaction, a new project, a new social system, a new type of society, etc. In such transformations, the relation between humans is transformed, it is sublated (*aufgehoben*, *Aufhebung*), which means it is at the same time eliminated, transformed, and lifted to a new level. And in doing so, a new identity emerges that stands again in a relation to another being. The result of this process is that being is transformed and is dynamic: "Something becomes an other, but the other is itself a something, so it likewise becomes an other, and so on ad infinitum" (Hegel 1991, §93). Hegel's dialectic is a concept of how identity is transformed through relations that are contradictory, dynamic, and productive.

Marx's Dialectical Concept of Society and the Human Being

How did Marx use Hegel's dialectic and the notion of the identity? He applied Hegel's concept of the dialectic for constructing a critical theory of society. Marx argues that humans are social beings, they exist as individuals only in

and through social relations and they produce inside such social relations. For Marx, there is a dialectic of the individual and society: "in his individual existence is at the same time a social being. […] The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life–-even if they may not appear in the direct form of *communal* manifestations of life carried out in association with others-–*are* therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*" (Marx 1844, 296, 299). Marx is a sociologist in that he argues that everything that exists in society is a social relation. The human being is not a monad but an individual that is a social being.

And the individual's social relations are productive, which means that humans produce and reproduce society and social relations. This is precisely what Marx means by a materialist understanding of society. "The individual is social and societal and society my *own* existence *is* social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being" (Marx 1844, 298).

The Dialectic of the Economic and the Non-Economic

Let us now come back to the question of how the economic and the non-economic are related. That human beings produce and reproduce society and social systems as well as features of society such as goods, services, decisions, meanings, worldviews, reputation, ideologies, etc. is the foundation of any society and social system. For Marx, this is the economic aspect of society. In class societies such as capitalism, the economic relations in which humans produce are class relations between owners and non-owners of private property. The distinction between the working class and the capitalist class derives from this distinction. The capitalist economy compels workers to produce commodities that they do not own in order to obtain a wage from which they can survive. The working class is humanity's largest group (Fuchs 2020a, chapter 7). The capitalist class possesses the vast majority of the world's wealth, but is just made up of 1 percent of the world population (Fuchs 2020a, chapter 7). Class relations shape the lives of all humans in contemporary world society.

Humans also enter into political and cultural relationships. These are also relations of production. In politics, we produce decisions. In culture, we produce meanings of the world. In a capitalist society, the logic of accumulation not just shapes the economy, but also the political system, where decision-power is accumulated, and the cultural system, where reputation is accumulated. The result of the logic of accumulation are inequalities. The identity of an individual is shaped by all the social relations they are part all, the totality of economic, political, and cultural relations.

Class relations are a necessary feature of the contemporary individual's life. Other social relations cannot be reduced to class relations but are always mediated by class relations.

Karl Marx was not an economic reductionist but advanced a dialectical critical theory of society that stresses the role of the human being as a social being, producing being and therefore of social relations, including class relations and other power relations, in society. Based on this foundation, Marx developed a whole critical theory of society that remains highly relevant in a twenty-first-century society that is shaped by the Internet, social media, big data, COVID-19, new forms of nationalism and fascism, etc. (see Fuchs 2021c, 2020b, 2020c, 2019, 2018). Today, in order to save the world from barbarism, we need a particular form of Marxist theory, namely humanist Marxism, and a particular form of socialist politics, namely socialist humanism (see Alderson and Spencer 2017; Fromm 1965; Fuchs 2021a, 2021b)

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