

ALIENATION

Beth Roy

Just as power is a concept which is central to the theory and practice of Radical Psychiatry, so is its opposite, alienation. To move toward power in a new and humanized sense, we believe we must first understand how we have come to be without it. Change, we believe, is not simply a state of mind; before we can attain our ideals — what “might be” — we must understand “what is.”

ALIENATION IN THE RADICAL PSYCHIATRY “FORMULA”

As we use the term in Radical Psychiatry, “alienation” is an opposite for “taking power,” “liberation” — we have, in fact, debated over the years exactly what its opposite would be, for we are talking both about improvements in the quality of personal life, and about social transformation. We believe that personal and political change are interconnected: personal “growth” cannot occur without changes that transcend the individual, and social change is a drama of real people, actors in an historical play which is written by those who perform.

We sought the components of alienation in our own actual experience and that of the people with whom we work, and we came up with a formula: **Alienation = Oppression + Mystification + Isolation.**¹ What historically was useful about this formula is that it suggested, again, a list of opposites: **Liberation** (or Power in the World — we've experimented with various expressions here) = **Awareness + Contact + Action.** Each of the terms to the right of the equal sign does, in fact, describe a part of our practice. We work in groups so that people can have contact with supportive peers. We use the concept of Internalized Oppression, or the Pig, to counter mystification. We help people to take real action in their lives and in the world, on the theory that inner realities are altered when outer ones are, too.

The relationships between mystification, oppression and isolation are highly illuminating. There is something essentially modern about the juxtaposition of those three conditions. A feudal peasant, for instance, was seriously oppressed, working exhaustively for a master to whom he was irretrievably tied. Yet the nature of that tie was very clear; no movies offered the promise that, by dint of hard work and superior smartness, the peasant might become a lord. No TV commercials suggested that life would be bearable if only the peasant could obtain a racy automobile and a skinny woman. Nor was the peasant left to bear his troubles alone. According to a new breed of social historians, he did, in fact, complain to his fellows, periodically rebelled, was helped by his neighbors, and so on. He *was* very seriously oppressed; his fate was not better than a modern person's. But it was different in some ways that are important to understand if we are working toward change, especially psychological change.

MARK'S CONCEPT OF ALIENATION

To understand those differences, let us first look at Marx's conception of alienation. Marxist scholars sometimes chastise us for using a Marxist concept in a way that differs from Marx's understanding of it. We must plead guilty. Marx's formulation of the concept of alienation is certainly a major inspiration for our own ideas. But no body of ideas can (or should) be static. We (as well as many Marxist scholars) have continued to elaborate those ideas in the light of history.

¹ A number of articles have been written about Radical Psychiatry and alienation. See “Alienation” by Hogie Wycoff and Claude Steiner, in *Readings in Radical Psychiatry*, ed. By Claude Steiner; and the various versions of Radical Psychiatry Principles written by Claude in *Issues in Radical Psychiatry* over the years.

What Marx saw so clearly was a process by which humankind becomes separated from a sense of our unity — what Marx called our “species-being.” His creative vision of a world undivided by class or other categories provided an alternative against which to describe alienation in the present. Recognizing that an alienated state of existence seemed “natural,” as it still does today, he sought to describe its absence when he spun visions of “communism”: “...the positive abolition of...human self-alienation and...the real reappropriation of the human essence by and for man.”²

For Marx, alienation was a function of the work process. He believed that labor is a crucial factor in determining how people feel about themselves and about the world, both because so much of life is spent working, but also because life itself depends on our collective ability to transform nature in ways that make it sustain survival:

...the first premiss of all human existence (is)...that men must be in a position to live....But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.³

The primary way in which modern people are alienated, thus, derives from the organization of work, and the fact that labor itself is alienated. What people produce is not for their own use, but is merely a means to an end, a way to earn wages with which to purchase what is needed for survival. Nor does she receive full benefit from what she produces; someone else profits, while the worker merely survives:

Labour produces works of wonder for the rich, but nakedness for the worker. It produces palaces, but only hovels for the worker; it produces beauty, but cripples the worker; it replaces labour by machines but throws a part of the workers back to a barbaric labour and turns the other part into machines. It produces culture, but also imbecility and cretinism for the worker.⁴

To be sure, Marx's passionate prose seems overdone in a day of workers' TV sets, Toyotas and mortgages. Nor is it altogether clear anymore who exactly the workers are. But the sense of working for purposes not directly one's own is still common. How many people spend their weekdays at tasks which have little significance except to bring in a paycheck.

The effect of alienated labor is profound: “While alienated labour alienates (1) nature from man, and (2) man from himself, his own active function, his vital activity, it also alienates the species from man....”⁵ The revolution Marx sought, then, was at heart not about economics or politics, but about the quality of life. To him, quality meant putting the parts back together.

ALIENATION IN THE EIGHTIES

That Marx concentrated on work made sense in his day. The nature of work was becoming radically restructured by industrialization and capitalism. Not only were the new factories alienating and atomizing people in the ways Marx described, but they were, paradoxically, also bringing workers together. Never before had so many people been concentrated under a single factory roof, each dependent on the others for survival. Marx understood clearly that capitalism divided workers, but also created massive opportunities for cooperation among them, and that concentration of workers was ripe with revolutionary potential. Marx was, above all, a revolutionary, looking for the sources of humanizing change; nowhere were they more dramatically apparent in his day than in the industrial workplace.

² “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” *Selected Works*, p. 89.

³ “The German Ideology,” *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴ “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” *Ibid.*, pp.79-80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Oppression

For us, however, work has become a far more complicated and confusing proposition. It is still a primary source of oppression. That is to say, many, many people still are without power in the realm of work. Unemployment confronts whole sections of the population, especially black men and teenagers, with little evident chance for change. The '80s have seen a decline of labor unions and new salary rollbacks. Even executives fear for their futures; job security, except for tenured college professors, has become a thing of the past. Among the most common complaints in therapy, moreover, are boredom and conflict at work; the task of finding meaningful work is ongoing and extraordinarily difficult.

Oppression, in addition, takes newly recognized forms outside the workplace. People of color, women, children, lesbians, gays, the disabled, the elderly, all have brought to our attention in the last two decades the particular ways in which they are prevented from exercising power. Economics are clearly (or not so clearly) involved in all these stories, but the ways in which people are separated from their powers are varied.

How we are kept from being powerful only becomes fully evident, however, when we try to change. When we do, the psychological nature of our oppression begins to emerge. What the Radical Psychiatry formula suggests (Alienation = Oppression + Mystification + Isolation), in fact, is a form of alienation that relies heavily on culture — how our lives are presented to us in images, language, art and religion — and on the structure of personal life. Because lies and isolation affect us on a most intimate level, oppression comes to penetrate the individual psychologically. We are not only oppressed economically, but we also blame ourselves for our oppression, suffer in our relationships with those nearest to us, and in the process become agents of our own oppression.

Isolation

Each of us encounters numbers of forces that act to isolate us in the course of daily life. The ways in which lives, both private and public, are organized tend to keep us separate from others. In particular, the form of family life, the absence of communities, and the hierarchical organization of work help to isolate us.

Family: In the nineteenth century, as a major reorganization of work occurred around the creation of large-scale industries, so also was the family restructured in very fundamental ways. Extended families, living for generations in close proximity to other families, broke up. Gradually, generation by generation, family units became smaller and smaller. In the 1950s, when social scientists began writing frequently about the new “nuclear” family, they meant a heterosexual couple and children. Today, even that reduced institution, living separately from grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, not to mention friends and neighbors, is diminishing further. Now many children are raised in single-parent families, almost always by a woman alone⁶. Households consisting of one person living alone have increased hugely. The atomization of private life seems to be proceeding toward the ultimate: a family of one.

Nonetheless, the idea that couples are a “natural” unit around which to organize private living continues to hold sway. In the search for mates (a project well worth pursuing) many people overlook friendships. Even when friends are important, they tend to be excluded from the most important parts of living, called on for “socializing” but not for help at basic levels. And too often busy lives force choices between time spent with lovers and time spent with friends. Lovers generally win, and so couples are nurtured at the expense of friendships. In turn, the lack of friends overburdens lover-relationships with needs, both emotional and material; many a couple has floundered on the rock of isolation.

⁶ In 1991, 1/4 of all children, or 16.6 million children, double the percentage of 1970. “New Realities of the American Family,” by Dennis A. Ahlburg and Carol J. DeVita, *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 47, No. 2, August 1992.

Lack of Community: One important reason why people rely so on families and couples is that more widespread resources are scarce. The natural communities of even a generation ago are now hard to find. The obvious ways in which communities have vanished are well documented: Social mobility dilutes neighborhood life. Dense urban living under bad conditions encourages violence in the cities, and fear keeps people imprisoned in small apartments. Church life, while still an avenue of community for many, is not for many others. Political movements are transitory, and not sufficiently compelling to help people forge strong bonds. The next chapter returns to the problems of community in our times.

Hierarchy: Work, another potential source of human contact and community, tends too often to be divisive. Most work organizations rank employees in an intricately graded scale of power and authority. Hierarchy spawns competition; attitudes of suspicion and hostility rather than friendliness and cooperation are promoted. Real job scarcities also help to create a feeling of “every man for himself” at work.

Hierarchy, and the competitiveness which is its psychological and behavioral accompaniment, permeates our lives (see the next chapter). Hierarchy is not new; in older, more rural settings, the village contained clear rankings of authority. But those rankings of an earlier age were based on position — on your gender, age, possessions, titles and so on. Today, places on the ladder are very personal. How high you rise, according to the mythology at least, is a function of how smart you are, how hard you work, and so on. These ideas (most often lies) combine with the real divisions of life to isolate us.

And the divisions are endless. Men and women, races, generations, all are divided and arrayed against each other. People who in other ages were accorded service and protection, now must take care of themselves: the disabled fight for their rights; the elderly organize Grey Panthers. People are shunned because of their sexual preferences, their religion, their politics. Some of these divisions are age-old; others are peculiarly modern. But over time they tend to multiply. Ethnic wars, religious wars, racial wars bring tragedy all over the globe. Our age, unique in giving birth to the economic reality of a single world, has also paradoxically produced a greater array of divisions and hostilities than ever before.

Mystification

Lies, as we've already suggested, are an important element in perpetuating isolation. They are one form of the mystification of our oppression. Each system of oppression — inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexual identity, age — produces, and is produced by, certain crucial lies. Paradoxically, these lies are often called “self-evident truths.”

Class: “If you work hard enough, you can be successful.” “Any American (boy) can grow up to be president.” “If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?” Messages about the individual's capacity to succeed in America are many — and, to those of us on the left, relatively accessible.

Like most successful mystification, these statements are not ungrounded falsehoods; they rest on a kernel of truth. We all know of real rags-to-riches stories. My own grandfather rose from the ghettos of New York to become a movie mogul. What is a lie, however, is that anybody can do it. White men have substantially greater chances of rising from poverty to plenty than do people of color or women. Even if everyone had equal opportunity, places at the top are strictly limited. Only a certain (small) proportion of those who work hard can in fact succeed. On the other side, how many at the top got there through honest hard work, and how many through other, less uplifting means? The scoundrel who wheels and deals and charms his way to the top is a sort of folk hero in America; his counterpart in real life is more likely to be a ruthless, one-track dynamo — with a fair amount of luck as well.

New mystifications mark the world of work in the '80s. One important theme is about workers' relationships to business. Import competition fuels the idea that unionism has not worked. Workers' demands for high wages and job security, goes the new myth-in-the-making, have undermined American productivity, and caused us to falter in the international race for markets. Better to do it the Japanese way, to rely on benign capitalism to provide workers with everything they need. After all, workers and capitalists ultimately share the same interests: to sell the goods and to make money. So identified are their interests, in fact, that workers can get shares in the company and become owners. Indeed, it is a great boon to them to receive stock in lieu of those undermining raises.

Again, it is important to analyze the lies and mystifications contained in this picture. For it is true, in one frame of reference, that international competition challenges the well-being of American workers. The lie which contributes to people's alienation, however, is that employees should depend on the superior goodness and wisdom of those with more power, that to insist on one's own rights and to negotiate from a position of unity is a mistake, is, indeed, the ultimate reason for the economic bind in which American business finds itself. That idea, of submerging oneself in the general and common interest, easily extends to personal life, where we are already taught to submerge our own wants and needs in the ocean of greater necessity: not to dream, not to demand, but to be obedient and quiet.

Race: Another offshoot of these '80s myths about work is a newly heightened racism, especially toward Asian people. Japanese are at once held in contempt as worker-ants, lacking individuality, prepared to labor ceaselessly to steal the American advantage. At the same time, they are held up as the model of "good workers." Other Asian immigrants are seen as thieves arrived on American shores to steal jobs. No wonder that battery of Asian-Americans is on the rise. Friends pass on racist jokes with no self-consciousness, in a national atmosphere of tolerance for contempt.

Lies about race affect all Americans, whether directly or indirectly. The black power movement of the last few decades revealed popular "truths" about black people to be the lies they clearly were: lies about beauty, about work abilities, about sexuality, and so on. In the '80s, social scientists promote a new layer of mystification with the quantity of writings about the demise of the black family. Based on realities of the hardships experienced in the black community because of unemployment, these studies mystify by omission. They fail to mention the many durable black families which do no better, no worse than families in the white community. They suggest that the absence of fathers is responsible for drug and crime problems in the ghettos, failing to mention obvious economic problems on the one hand, or on the other hand, the power of black women to band together and to rear children competently, as they have done for many generations.

What is less well understood than the oppressive effects of racist mystification on those who are oppressed is the power of racist lies to undermine those of other races. White people lose potential sources of unity with allies, most obviously. But they also are imbued with an idea about "human nature" that affects their own sources of inner power. "If Asians are docile, blacks are lazy, Jews are greedy, then what are we?" Such iron-clad attributions cannot be contained out there; they must come home to roost. They feed directly into a form of thinking which afflicts us all, because they establish the legitimacy of such judgmental thinking, of such unyielding absolutes and deadening conclusions, however different the content may be when they are applied to ourselves. If people of one skin color can be described as lazy, those of another can believe themselves to be weak if they do not earn a high salary, or stupid if they are passed over for promotion, or cruel if they are angry at their husband, or bad if they are lusty. Racism is a major vehicle for carrying oppression inward (see Chapter 5 on Internalized Oppression).

Gender: Gender-based mystifications have been well-documented by feminist writers.⁷ As we watch films of Marilyn Monroe from the vantage point of the '80s, for instance, it is clear that women of her generation were taught to believe

⁷ For example: Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Second Sex* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1952); Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex* (Cape, 1971); Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics* (Simon & Schuster, 1969).

that they would be cared for in the world if they were demure, non-threatening, sweet and cute. All Monroe's body language, her voice, and her message presented her as a child, a totally innocent vehicle for a woman's sexuality. Today we know that Monroe had a powerful intellect and was a person of considerable depth and anguish. How hard she worked to present herself as simple and dumb! Today we also know how dramatically those beliefs in woman's role failed. Monroe died tragically, and millions of less renowned women suffered, continue to suffer, equally dramatic disappointment.

Today's teenage girls live with different messages. Women are now decisively integrated into the labor market. To be sure, even in the '50s the notion that good women would be cared for economically by a man was often an outright falsehood; many blue-collar women and women of color always worked. But today women of all classes accept the notion that they will work, that they cannot depend on Prince Charming to carry them off into the sunset. Yet young women and men are still imbued with old lies, however new their '80s garb. Popular music sings that a "crying man is half a man," and that women should use "what she's got to get what she wants." Girls know that, to be safe, they must take care of themselves, but to be happy they must have a man, and to have a man they must be skinny.

The mystified ideas that accompany each system of oppression can be similarly discerned. All through history, the reality of people's lives has been at variance with ideas socially accepted about those lives. Think, as one example among many, of the differences between the chivalrous idea of womankind in the Europe of the Middle Ages, and the actual restrictions on women's activities. Or consider the accepted truths during American slavery about the sub-human nature of black people, and the realities of endurance, ingenious alliances and courageous resistances of the slaves.

Modern life, however, sees a proliferation of the means of carrying ideology into the homes, and indeed the souls, of every individual. Television, newspapers, movies — all the various cultural forms with which we have daily contact — promote pictures in our heads of how the world is, and how we ought to be. The individualized and moralistic fashion in which disinformation is accomplished is peculiarly modern. So also is the elaborate complex of institutions which promote ideology to the individual.

There is a lively debate about the nature and role of ideology in forming our world. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian intellectual and Marxist, launched a school of thinking about the ways in which institutions — schools, churches, literature, media — all become effective instruments of the state, promoting a body of ideas which supports and protects power. "Hegemony" was the word Gramsci used to describe the process by which these institutions come to set the terms within which we think. Controversy is contained within invisible limits. We think we have "freedom of thought", but in fact certain ideas never occur to us, and so we do not think them. For many years doctors debated the proper conditions under which women should be permitted to abort fetuses. It took the Women's Movement to introduce the idea that abortion decisions were no business of doctors at all; the woman herself was the one to decide. The concept of insanity was assumed to be a medical (or, in an earlier age, a religious) fact until R.D. Laing, Thomas Szasz and other thinkers introduced the idea that madness was socially constructed. Today, politicians debate the size of the defense budget in proportion to social welfare spending. But because premises of anti-communism are so widely accepted, no one of national prominence seriously proposes that we not arm ourselves at all.

Through the concept of mystification, especially in its relationship to Internalized Oppression (see Chapter 5), Radical Psychiatrists seek to understand the ways in which ideology becomes a psychological force, elaborating notions of Gramsci's on a personal level.

Alienation Four Ways

What results from oppression, isolation and mystification is alienation of four levels:

- ◆ We are alienated *from ourselves*, from knowledge of our bodies, confidence in our minds, the power of our hearts. Shame and self-doubt still our tongues, while lies and secrets render powerless our eyes and ears.
- ◆ We are alienated *from each other*. Human connection becomes a lost art form. Books are written to teach us how to mate. Therapy becomes a “normal” avenue for “making relationships work.” Classified advertisements offer love in among the automobiles, computers and garage sales. Those working for genuine social progress call each other ugly names and fail to notice the personal anguish of their fellows.
- ◆ We are alienated *from the world*, believing that our vote doesn't count, that our desires don't matter. We wake in the dark to terror of nuclear holocaust. With moral anguish we watch our own “representatives” support the toppling of other peoples' democracies. Helplessly, we see flash across our TV screens images of South African children beaten and brutalized time after time after time.
- ◆ We are alienated *from the Earth*. Our lives are lived out in cities of concrete and steel. Food comes from the grocery store wrapped in plastic. Water comes from a tap; its only connection to the rhythms of weather and seasons is announced on the evening TV news. Not even air can be taken for granted. Chemicals pollute what we breathe; layers of brown smog cloud the horizon. We cover our faces with more chemicals to protect ourselves from skin cancer, and we are so at risk because we have lost the protection of the ozone layer. We watch daily the destruction of our environment, and we are convinced we can do nothing.

But can we? The work of Radical Psychiatry is no political panacea. But we do believe that we have much more power than we know, in the small but vital corner of the universe called “our own lives.” We can connect, heal each other, cooperate and make powerful changes.