

BEYOND ALIENATION.¹

Prof. Dr. Paul Verhaeghe

paul.verhaeghe@ugent.be
Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent

Summary: Alienation is a pivotal concept in critical theory, going back to Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. In his theory on the becoming of the subject, Lacan gave the concept an even more radical and original meaning (there is no original essence whatsoever) and doubled it with a second process: separation. The central argument of this paper is that separation is a key concept for understanding how we can handle our contemporary alienation induced by neoliberalism.

Keywords: Alienation, separation, becoming of the subject, body, neoliberalism

Received: November 19, 2018; **Accepted:** November 19, 2018

In the commentaries on the English translation of the *Écrits*, my contribution is a close reading of Lacan's paper 'On the position of the Unconscious'. I enjoyed the writing of it very much, but I am not sure that the same will apply to the reader. Anyhow, for today, I will focus on one concept that is prominently present in that paper, and that is the concept of alienation. More particularly, I want to discuss the contemporary political importance of this concept, by asking what lies beyond alienation? In Lacanian theory, the obvious answer is separation, but that is less easy than it seems. Before coming to that, we need to take a closer look at alienation as such.

Those of you who are fortunate enough to have enjoyed an education in philosophy, will know that the concept of alienation has a long history in philosophy. Very briefly summarized, it goes back to Wilhelm Hegel and to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, although it was Karl Marx who gave the concept its contemporary weight. We can assume that Lacan learned about it when he was following the courses of Alexandre Kojève, himself a Hegelian Scholar with a special interest in Marx.

1. Paper presented at the 2018 Lacan *Écrits* Conference, Ghent.

If we take a close look at the philosophical kernel of alienation, the concept can be summarized as follows: Society imposes an identity on individual men and women. This identity is not their original identity, on the contrary. What they originally were or could have become, is buried or trunked by an identity that was imposed on them. Hence the denomination as alienation.

Depending on how the original identity is understood, alienation can be considered as a good or a bad thing. If you consider men as fundamentally evil, as in the Christian tradition, then alienation is a good thing. If you consider the nature of men as essentially good, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau did, then alienation is a very bad idea.

A century later, Karl Marx presented the most influential reading of the concept. Alienation, in German *die Entfremdung*, is a result of the unequal relation between capitalist and proletarian, a relation that echoes the Hegelian dialectics between master and slave. The proletarian is alienated from his species-essence, his 'human nature' (*Gattungswesen*) because of the capitalist mode of production. In ideal circumstances, man is able to reflect upon himself, his ideas and his actions, and to choose freely the ends that he wants to pursue. As a proletarian, he is no longer able to determine his own goals and activities because he suffers from a false consciousness.

This interpretation of alienation as determining the identity on a mass scale was accepted in the fifties. There is a beautiful play by the French-Rumanian writer, Eugène Ionesco, called *Rhinocéros*. In a small town a curious thing happens, a couple of rhinos are running through the streets. At first, people find it funny, but when their numbers increase, they become a threat. At the end of the play, there are no people left, only the Rhinos. A mainstream movie of the mid-fifties, the *Invasion of the body snatchers*, presents the same plot. The central character of the movie, a doctor, is confronted with a strange phenomenon. His friends still look the same, but their personality has changed, they think differently. He discovers that an alien force has replaced them by identical looking impostors. At the end of the movie, the whole town is taken over with the exception of the central character, who is running on the highway screaming: 'They're here already! You're next! You're next!' Both the play and the movie warned the audience against the dangers of an ideological alienation; in case of Ionesco by communism, in case of Don Siegel by McCarthyism.

When Lacan was elaborating his own version of alienation during the sixties, the concept had become quite fashionable, even in two versions, a naive popular one and a not so naive political one. The flower power movement and the early ecologists embraced Rousseau's theory about the noble savage and the detrimental effects of an industrialised polluting society. They called for a general back to nature, where love and peace would set the tone. The not so naive political version was put forward by Herbert Marcuse, himself a Freudian-Marxist from the Frankfurt Schule.

Marcuse is interesting in his critique on Freud. It is obvious that Freud belongs to the pessimistic tradition concerning human nature. If it were not for education and morality, man would kill his father and rape his mother and sisters. For Freud, identification is a very important process in the much-needed bridling of the drives, and the most important identifications are the ones that lead to the installation of the Super-Ego. In his famous *Civilization and its Discontents*, the message is quite clear: discontent is something to be expected and accepted, because the advancement of society and culture is based on the repression of the sexual drives. Without the energy that is set free as a consequence of that repression, there would be no advancement whatsoever. Marcuse does not agree and criticizes Freud from a Marxist point of view. Yes, repression shifts sexual energy to higher goals, but no, this does not bring an advancement for society as such. The repression is only obligatory for the members of the working class, whilst the members of the upper class are the only ones that benefit from the cultural advancement. In his book *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse argued that a non-repressive society was possible, based on non-alienated labour. That book was written in 1955. Ten years later, he considers the ongoing revolutionary movements as a failure. Man is turned into a one-dimensional man, focusing on consumerism. The only possible way out of this kind of alienation, is total refusal.

Let us now turn to Lacan, with two questions. First of all, what is the originality of his theory on alienation? Secondly, what is the importance of his theory for the contemporary social and political situation?

In my answer to the first question, I will probably reiterate a number of things that most of you know already. When Lacan elaborated his theory on what he deliberately coined as the advent of the subject (and not: the development of the subject), he preferred the term alienation instead of identification, although it is basically the same process. By itself, this is already a statement: our identity is structurally alienated, there is no escape from that. As a process, it comes down to a choice

that is not really a choice, because the alternative is simply death. The subject acquires an identity on condition that it identifies with the images and signifiers of what he thinks is desired by the Other. The element lost in the process of becoming a human being is being itself, the pure being, the Real, leaving us with a basic lack as a condition for our becoming. Because of alienation, the subject is divided between what it is supposed to become (as an answer to the desire of the Other) and what it never has been.

The latter is the most important part: *what the subject never has been*, the famous ‘manque-à-être’, lack of being. This testifies Lacan’s radical position: there is no original kernel whatsoever. In this respect, he takes his distances from every theory that supposes an original self or whatever it might be called. The subject is a hypokeimenon, a supposed being.

Consequently, we are confronted with a new and at the same time an age-old question: what are our possibilities for change? How can we ever escape the determining effects of the Other?

At first sight, there seems to be no exit, even on the contrary. The advent of the subject is a never-ending process that is at the same time contingent, necessary and impossible. It is *contingent* because alienation comes on top of the real of the organism (in this respect, Lacan prefers the term ‘organism’, probably to differentiate it from the body of the mirror stage), meaning the drives and object (a). It is *necessary*, because without it there would be no human subject whatsoever. It is *impossible*, because there is no final identification or alienation that would present us with an image of who or what we really are.² Hence Lacan’s apt slogan about the advent of the subject: ‘It does not stop not being written’. The result is a divided subject, divided between the real of the drives and the Other.

Such an ontological perspective might very well be interpreted as a very pessimistic one. We are nothing but alienated puppets and to make things worse, sooner or later we become aware of the very fact that we are not original. This explains the feeling that every normal neurotic experiences at a certain moment: I am not real, I am fake, this is not me. This is the everyday clinical experience of what Marx coined as the false consciousness. Lacan must have felt this pessimism at a certain point in his career, in the mid-fifties, hence his reference to T.S. Eliot in his *Discours de Rome*:

2. Lacan, 1975 [1972-73], pp. 85-87, pp. 131-132

*We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men.
Leaning together. Headpiece filled with straw. Alas.*

Compared to this, both Rousseau and Marx are optimists – in their reading, alienation can be replaced by a better original. This is no longer the case with Lacan. The good news is that during the sixties he presents us with both a more realistic and a more optimistic solution when his focus shifted from alienation to separation. Separation is the necessary counterpart of alienation and, in my reading, it provides Lacan's answer to the deadlock where Marcuse ended, i.e. his idea of a total refusal. Separation is the opposite process, inasmuch as it redirects the subject to its lack-of-being, thus opening a possibility of escape from the determining alienation coming from the Other.

In seminar XI Lacan presents us with a description of separation as the concluding part of a process that never concludes. He represents the advent of the subject by two overlapping circles, one for the subject and one for the Other (Sém. XI, 192). Normally, in such an intersection we would expect something substantial, i.e. the common part belonging to the two circles. In this case, it is exactly the opposite. The intersection between the subject and the Other contains two lacks and it is the interaction between them that offers the opportunity for separation.

The first lack belongs to the subject. During the advent of the subject, the subject-to-be loses his being, resulting in the lack of being because of the alienation. The second lack belongs to the Other at the point where it becomes clear that the desire of the Other is never clear. In the intersection of the two overlapping circles, the subject with his own 'manque-à-être' is confronted with the lack of the Other: what does the Other want from me? As there is no final answer, the subject is suddenly experiencing a fundamental indetermination.

The paradoxical result of the combined lacks is that it presents an opening for the subject and a possibility for change, i.e. a possibility to escape from the determining impact of the Other. Even more so, the opening permits the subject to realize itself.³

What this realization of 'oneself' might be, is at first sight not clear, but based on Lacan's reasoning, it is obvious that it is not an original being. Surprisingly enough, he links it to Freud's death drive.⁴ According to Freud, the aim of Thanatos is to undo connections. Here, the death drive means separation from the larger whole, from the Other; to separate oneself from the Other (Latin: *separare*) means to engender

3. (Écrits, 715, 2; Bruce Fink translates 'le sujet se réalise' as 'the subject is actualized', thus losing the active modus as present in the original French).

4. This association with Thanatos becomes clear in the next paragraph (Écrits, 715, 3).

oneself (Latin: *se parere*), as a separate part (Latin: *pars*). Lacan takes care to warn us about the illusion of a whole, as might be evoked by the idea of a part. There is no whole, on the contrary. Playing on the homonymy between partition and parturition, he emphasizes that the subject realizes itself only via its division (Écrits, 715, 4). This realization has nothing to do with giving birth to oneself, even on the contrary; it is the social meaning that counts.⁵

Later in Lacan's work, this possibility for change and the realization of oneself come down to the creation of a particular symptom, that is, particular for a particular subject, written as 'le sinthome', and not for the Other. It is this possibility for change that Lacan sees as the goal of an analysis.

During his analysis, the analysand is confronted with an unbearable truth: that his identity is not an original one, nor an authentic one.

"For in the work he does to reconstruct it for another, he encounters anew the fundamental alienation that made him construct it like another, and that has always destined it to be taken away from him by another" (Écrits, 249).

When he tries to get rid of his imposed identity, he is in for another surprise: there is no final answer in matters of gender identity, sexual relationship and authority. Briefly put: there is no final answer to the question of jouissance. Every answer is a symptomatic one, usually imposed by the oedipal and the social appearances of the Other.

So, what can the analysand do with this knowledge? Apparently, there is no escape from the Other. Well, yes, there is: you can pick your choice, you can choose your own alienation, and that is precisely what separation is about. The goal of an analysis is to create the possibility for a choice between the different possibilities, in the full knowledge that every possibility remains an arbitrary one and engenders yet another alienation. The gain is that this time it is the subject that makes a choice and creates a sinthome of his own, instead of believing in the symptom imposed by the Other.

"In what does this sounding that is an analysis consists? Would it, or would it not be to identify with the symptom, albeit with every guarantee of a kind of distance? To know how to handle, to take care

5. Let us not forget that the title of the first part of the Rome Discourse talks about the 'psychoanalytic realization of the subject' (Écrits, 206).

of, to manipulate... to *know what to do with the symptom, that is the end of the analysis*”⁶

A subject can choose either for an *identification with* or a *belief in* his symptom. As a matter of fact, this choice concerns two radically different forms of alienation. Believing a symptom implies believing in the big Other. Identifying with a symptom of your own means that you have made a choice in the full knowledge that it is a choice and not a final answer. It is your *sinthome*, instead of the symptom of the Other.

In summary, in his theory on the advent of the subject Lacan tells us that our identity is always alienated, there is no original, and that identity formation is a never-ending process. The determination comes from the Other, which is Lacan’s elegant way of combining the oedipal and the social. The escape from this determination has nothing to do with a return to a supposedly original and true nature. The answer that Lacan presents to the determinative effect is based on separation and an accompanying choice.

What is the difference between the kind of choice that is possible according to Lacan and the choice that Marx envisaged? Remember Marx’ hope:

In ideal circumstances, man is able to reflect upon himself, his ideas and his actions, and to choose freely the ends that he wants to pursue.

The idea of a possibility to choose *freely* is certainly not something that you will find in Lacan. At the same time, he does not advocate a total refusal either, as Marcuse did. The choice put forward by Lacan is more limited compared to Marx, but it is still a choice. With this reading, we can now turn to the second question: what is the importance of Lacan’s theory for the contemporary social and political situation?

The first implication is political. There is no original identity as such. A normal identity follows the norm set by the Other. Not so long ago, society was governed by the interaction between at least four discourses: the political, the religious, the economic and the cultural – of which the political and the religious ones were decisive. Today three of these dimensions have disappeared: politicians have lost their credibility, religion is connected with sex scandals and terrorism, and everyone has become an artist. There is only one dominant Other left, namely the economy, in a very particular form: neoliberalism. One of

6. “En quoi consiste ce repérage qu’est l’analyse? Est-ce que ce serait, ou non, s’identifier, tout en prenant ses garanties d’une espèce de distance, à son symptôme? savoir faire avec, savoir le débrouiller, le manipuler ... *savoir y faire avec son symptôme, c’est là la fin de l’analyse.*” J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV, L’insu que sait de l’une bévue, s’aile a mourre, Ornicar ?*, 12/13, 1977, pp. 6-7 (my translation, italics added).

its particularities is that it is presented to us as a political system, which it is not, on the contrary, it has gobbled up politics. We live in a neoliberal world in which everything has become a product.

In this social order, the individual has to identify with a twofold message coming from the Other: he has to make it, and he has the right to enjoy himself almost without limits. The trouble is that he has to make it in a never-ending competition with the other. On top of that, the presumed right to enjoyment has become an obligation. According to Lacan the command of the postmodern Super-Ego reads as follows: 'Jouis', enjoy (Écrits, 696). The only restraint on this command is a financial one, because we have to pay for it, meaning that for most people, the neoliberal enjoyment comes with an installment plan.

The contemporary rhinos from Ionesco or the Pods from Don Siegel are the consumers who live by the motto 'Work hard, play hard'. The media and the pop-up ads invite us to enjoy our unique individuality, even to become a brand of our own. In everyday life, this means that most people buy the same unnecessary things, eat the same junk food, participate in the same kind of entertainment and holidays, making the same kinds of selfies that are subsequently posted on the same kind of Instagram page.

Seemingly we are free, because the religious and moral restrictions of not so long ago have disappeared. Seemingly, because it does not feel that way. Zygmunt Bauman summarized this quite aptly: 'Never have we known so much freedom, and never have we felt so powerless'.

At the start of the new millennium, the lack in the Other became more and more obvious. Enjoyment is synonymous with consumerism, but the more we consume, the less we enjoy. We are left with a new disorder: depressive hedonia. The stock market crash and the crisis in the banking sector in 2008 gave us a wake-up call, but very soon, the neoliberal Other sent us back to sleep with yet another alienation, and that is nationalism.

There is no original identity as such, meaning that every politician or political party that is advocating nationalism as the source for our true identity, is either stupid or a hypocrite, and in both cases dangerous. In the introductory pages of *The World of Yesterday*, Stefan Zweig refers to nationalism as 'the primal plague'. Populism and nationalism invite us to become what we have supposedly always been, referring to a glorious past where, for instance, true Austrians were proud to be Austrian. Closer scrutiny reveals that the image of this supposedly age-old cultural identity is a very contemporary one, because it presents the ideal hard-working person who tries to excel as much as possible. It is

remarkable how nationalism in the different EU-countries advocates the same image of the hard-working individual in spite of supposed cultural differences.

Nationalism is the latest alienation imposed by the neoliberal Other. The irony is that neoliberalism started with destroying the community and advocating individualism – remember M. Thatcher: “There is no such a thing as a society, there are only individuals”.

A second implication is more personal, although the personal is still the political. As there is no original identity for Lacan, alienation as such is inevitable. Separation gives us a possibility to make a choice between different alienations. This means that, both on the personal and the political level, we are confronted with a new question: how to pick our alienation? Which alienation is bad, which one is good? For lack of an original identity, we have to look for another criterion. On the personal level, this criterion concerns the foundation upon which the advent of the subject is constructed, meaning the body as organism. The alienation imposed by the Other firstly affects the body image, but then envelopes the organism and the drives. So what effects do the dominant alienations have on the organism?

The first case study that I can present here is the emancipation of women. In that respect, it seems that the battle has been won. Women can make their choice, e.g. they can choose to wear a bikini, a monokini or a burkini – although in some countries the latter is suspect. In the very same free world, they can choose for breast implants and liposuction. And what about vaginal corrections, the latest hit in so-called aesthetic surgery, as a western variant of genital mutilation, albeit without the protest? All of these are put forward as basic rights and free choices.

You don't need to be a psychoanalyst to see that such choices mirror the anxieties and desires of men. They have nothing to do with a choice, let alone with emancipation. They are the effect of a new alienation that is much less visible because it is disguised as an individual option. Of course, this goes for every contemporary alienation, but these examples present us with a possibility to make a differentiation between alienations that can be undone and the ones who can't. Making a choice for a bikini or a burkini is a choice that can be reversed – it leaves the body intact. Making a choice for a genital mutilation is something that cannot be undone, the organism is literally mutilated. Alienations that are irreversible and damaging to the body are by definition pathological alienations.

The personal is the political. Such choices are presented as individual ones, but of course they are induced by the Other. The same reasoning can be applied to less obvious choices.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, at present we live under the yoke of a moral fiction, namely that of a systematic effectiveness. He refers to it as *moral*, because in order to obtain this effectiveness people are constantly being manipulated to achieve an external objective. He moreover calls it a *fiction* because it is not at all effective, but on the contrary, it is nothing less than a mask for an ever-growing social control (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 73-79). It is not very difficult to discover the external objective behind that mask: more profit.

Since there is no convincing common ethics that expresses the general interest, the new moral standard becomes purely utilitarian. In practical terms, this means that everything is measured, preferably literally, in terms of production, growth and profit. In order to keep this measurement process updated, every organization has to implement frequent evaluations, which before long lead to inspections. Every individual is suspect, because everyone has their own profit in mind.

A neoliberal meritocracy will indeed privilege certain personality traits and reprove others, resulting in an endorsement of its own premises. A competitive attitude is a must; thus, individualism takes the upper hand. Flexibility is in high demand, favoring a superficial and unstable identity. Solidarity becomes an unaffordable luxury and strong personal ties with colleagues are negative for career development. Emotional connections to the job are superficial, and absolutely absent for what concerns the company or the organization. The fact that people can't or don't want to engage themselves anymore, explains a typical contemporary mechanism of defense: cynicism. Under the surface anxiety rules, ranging from fear of failure to a more general social anxiety.

Here, we can make the same analysis as in the case of breast implants and genital mutilation. The 'work hard, play hard' ethic is presented as a choice, whilst it is an imposed rat race in disguise. We have been running in a maze for at least two decades now, and the effects on our bodies, on the organism, is becoming more and more obvious.

On the mental level, never have we seen so many depressed people who usually suffer from anxiety as well. The WHO estimates that by 2030 depression will have become disease number one. The most common problem today is loneliness as a result of the imposed competitive individualism.

On the somatic level, never have we seen so many people who are chronically ill, with medically unexplainable symptoms such as pain, being tired all the time, sleeping problems and the like. Auto-immune diseases are rising everywhere as well. If you look at the most advanced medical research, you will find time and again the same explanation: these diseases are stress related, they are the result of chronic stress induced by the kinds of lives that we are living.

This is yet another illustration of the pathological effects of the contemporary dominant alienation: our body goes on strike or becomes ill. At the same time, we are told that this way of live is our own choice.

It is not. This brings me back to the question in my introduction: what lies beyond alienation? How can we regain a certain autonomy? As I explained, the answer lies in separation. The starting point is to become conscious of the fact that the contemporary free choice and autonomy is an illusion. We are told that we are free, on the political, professional and personal level. This is not the case, and being a psychoanalyst, I will take the personal level as an illustration. More specifically, gender politics and sexual relations. Time and again we are told that our times are liberated in that respect. We have the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual discourse, everybody can follow his or her own orientation, so who's complaining?

And yes, this is true, up to a certain point. Sexuality has been freed, because it has been turned into a commodity, into a product, and you don't want any restrictions on that, in a free market economy. Mid November last year, I was listening to a news broadcast on the radio while driving home. The news of the day was, I quote:

'Australia has approved gay marriage. It is estimated that this will give the Australian economy a boost of 335 million Euro'.

Obviously, the journalist was not aware of the absurdity of this news flash. A tremendous change on the ethical level is reduced to a question of profit. It happens the other way around as well: increasing rates of depression is almost always presented with the financial toll that it takes.

There is no such thing as a sexual relationship, but the contemporary Other has an answer, the same answer it has for every question: you have to invest in your relationship. Love relations are increasingly seen as a kind of product for consumers, and if the return on investment is not what you expected, if the product is not what it promised to be, replace it with a new one.

This is probably the best way of understanding how alienation and separation operate. Alienation, at the level of the social and the Oedipal

has always imposed an answer to the lack in the Symbolic, i.e. that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship and that The Woman does not exist. The alienation of former times imposed holy matrimony in combination with a twofold female position: mother and whore. The alienation of today tells us to look for the best investment in matters of relations, meaning that we are always on the look for a better investment. The net result is that we have never seen so many singles and so many unhappy people in a relationship.

We are becoming increasingly aware of this, just as we are becoming increasingly aware of the effects of our imposed way of life on our bodies. But awareness is not the same thing as consciousness. Once we are conscious of it, there is a possibility of regaining some autonomy, just like the analysand who has become conscious of the imposed choices that he has been making.

This is not a plea for a revolution, because more often than not, revolutionary movements are based on yet another alienation. Separation is first of all about separating oneself from the Other and trying to find out which solution in matters of *jouissance* works for me. As I said earlier, for Lacan this implies that the subject creates a *sinthome* of its own, instead of believing in the symptom imposed by the Other. He does not elaborate this suggestion, so we have to look elsewhere. In this respect, Foucault is my favorite author, especially in his last works. He returns to his beloved classics, in order to study their answers to what is probably the most important question: what is a good life? Mind you, not the best life, a good life is enough. The answers that he has found can be summarized in the concept of *epimeleia*, taking care of oneself and one's body. Of course, such an idea of self-care fits perfectly into this individualistic age where everyone is running from the gym to the yoga class with a psychoanalytic session in between, preferably a short one because we have no time.

This is not what classic philosophy understood by *epimeleia*. For them, somebody can only take care of himself and his body on condition that he takes care of the other and of the community in which he lives, based on continuous attention and consciousness. There is a straight line between self-knowledge and self-care, and in both bases, it implies knowledge of the other and care of the other as well. It is this kind of attention and knowledge that helps us to make choices about what is good for us and for the other, what gives us a good life and what does not.

Today, the awareness of the pathological effects on our bodies and our mental life induced by the Other is almost everywhere. It is my hope

that it will shift towards consciousness, making it possible for people to choose their own alienation.

Bibliography

- Lacan, J. (2006 [1966]) *Écrits*. Translated by B. Fink. New York (NY): Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1973 [1964]). *Le Séminaire, livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (texte établi par J.-A. Miller). Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1975 [1972-73]). *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore* (texte établi par J.-A. Miller). Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Le Séminaire XXIV, L'insu que sait de l'une bévue, s'aile a mourre. Ornicar?*, 12/13, 1977.
- MacIntyre, A. (2007 [1981]). *After Virtue. A study in moral theory*. London: Duckworth.