

Introduction to Alienation Theory and Research in Education and Social Work

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During the past decades in social science, “critical thinking” appeared mainly embedded in theoretical conceptions and research focusing on social inequality and viabilities in social mobility rather than on immanent social critique. Thus, it followed, inter alia, either the premises of “objective sciences”, or the “postmodern” understanding of cultural relativism. However, after the continuing global financial and ecological crisis, questions of state sovereignty and the distribution of income and wealth are back on the agenda. In order to create truly participatory and democratic societies, seemingly forgotten concepts of social critique seem necessary to reveal the irrationalities of contemporary Western society, particularly its hidden oppressive social structures. Among such concepts, we find the notion of “alienation”, a concept that on a broad scale offers approaches in order to understand oppressing and irrational structures of society governing the lifestyle, desires, goals, social position and social relations of the individual. Such issues are of importance regarding politics, social control, marginalization, discrimination as well as the general health and wellbeing of the citizens of Western societies, especially because the values from which people struggle to make sense of everyday life may counteract those of economic growth. After being deemphasized for several decades, alienation theories and research need to re-emerge from a long-lasting sleep. The special issue at hand is exactly such an attempt to revive alienation theory by demonstrating how it can be applied to social work on many levels: From the history of the overall structures of society, through educational policies, to the “man on the floor”. Among the latter, we find those groups of citizens who end up in marginalized positions that seemingly are closely related to alienation from the mainstream society and eventually themselves when alienation reaches its extremes in form of mental sufferings. The main body of articles take departure in the Scandinavian welfare regime in general, and the Danish state in particular, since the latter represents a typical example of a Western democracy, which on one the hand are guided by basic ideals of citizen’s “welfare” and on the other hand are equally guided by global and national goals of economic growth. Within this framework, alienation theory is contested with various contemporary social appearances and phenomena related to knowledge-based organization, institutionalization, agents and recipients of social policies.

The order of the contributions are chosen according to the extent to which the articles suggest historical perspectives to the issues of alienation (Skovlund), general theoretical and applied framework of analysis (Nagbøl, Düker, Michel-Schertges) or theoretical and applied approaches to specific cases such as educational policies and their alienating consequences (Jensen), territorial alienation within specific urban areas (Hansen) and alienation related to specific groups such as young men and their movement into gang related communities as a mean to counteract alienation (Petersen).

Henrik Skovlund explores the paradox that alienation is seemingly a relevant concept in social work with marginalized and vulnerable groups of people, while the interest in alienation theory has declined within social science as a whole, partly due to postmodern turns to discrimination and marginalization. The article deals with this dilemma and its implication to the social worker by revisiting significant theories on alienation to clarify the status of alienation theory in theory and practice within social work. Two main perspectives are suggested to classify alienation theory: the perspective of those to whom alienation is an omnipresent phenomenon that characterizes modern society in general, and those to whom alienation primarily signifies experiences of discrepancy between oneself and society, such as powerlessness, meaninglessness and loneliness. The article introduces an alienation concept from broad characterizations, inspired by theories such as those of Rousseau and Marx, to theories that favour phenomenological and empirical approaches to alienation. At the end of the paper, the two perspectives are discussed in relation to an example of modern usage of alienation theory in social work in order to clarify the status of alienation theory in social work with vulnerable groups in particular.

Based on the official Danish definition of alienation, Søren Peter Nagbøl explores contemporary forms of alienation through the prism of the history of ideas. He outlines the characteristic features of the experience society as the replacement of a society characterised by labour and a scarcity of resources with a society of abundance, defined by psychophysical semantics. This is illustrated through examples of tangible material ‘stagings’. To counteract the representation of the effects of alienation within dualist sociology and subjective idealist philosophy, process-sociological and experience-analytical models are introduced. As theoretical and practical means of orientation, these approaches show how forms of alienation can be deciphered, analysed and verbalised in terms of ‘figurations’, which influence the contexts of people’s lives. Settings for educational sociological practice at Aarhus University are introduced in which students themselves decide on the themes and perform analyses that show how forms of alienation are staged and conducted. At the end of the article, Nagbøl offers a perspective on how the diverse contemporary manifestations of alienation are discussed within interdisciplinary discourses.

Jan Düker explores ‘alienation’, and its inverse ‘appropriation’ as a central category for analysing and normatively orienting social work. Social work is characterised as a context of institutionalised moral regulation, which offers to individuals chances for as well as impediments to appropriation of ‘the social’. A critique of Rahel Jaeggi's and Hartmut Rosa's theories of alienation serves as a frame of reference to clarify the position of this article. The lack of analysis of current social conditions and relationships as well as an overemphasis on transforming subjectivities to ameliorate alienation are identified as major problems pertaining to these theories, necessitating a material account of appropriation to identify which areas of life conduct should be subject to change and in which way subjectivity should change.

In the following article, Dirk Michel-Schertges investigates how the rise of the international neo-liberal agenda ideologies of competition and performativity plays a decisive role, especially within the field of higher education. In modern society, the organization of education and economy has always been deeply interconnected. Transitions in the means of production meant an adjustment of national education in order to fulfil the socio-economical demands. With the ‘emergence’ of international competition in the field of education, altered forms of surveillance and control via administrated reason appeared on the agenda. However, precisely this administrative reason becomes a specific form of alienation propagating

individual activity and freedom while ‘producing’ the opposite, i.e. passivity and alienation and, thus, furthering in the name of freedom an altered form of alienation. Thus, Michel-Schertges carves out specific forms of alienation, that is: societal arbitrariness, social-ignorance, institutional-arbitrariness and social-indifference that are related to present international discourses of competition, performativity and accountability and its administered reasoning.

Niels Rosendal Jensen presents different forms of alienation related to pressures of education policies in Denmark in forms of competitiveness and high performance speed, which permeate the major part of educational thinking and become instruments in the struggle on market shares of global economic competition. The purpose of the article is to assess the explanatory power of a minor selection of theoretical work based on the concept alienation. The first part of the article departs from Marx concept of alienation and its four main aspects, namely: (1) man is alienated from nature; (2) he is alienated from himself (from his own activity); (3) from his "species-being" (from his being as a member of the human species) and (4) man is alienated from man (from other men). This departure is further elaborated with modern interpretations of alienation by drawing on Mészáros, Harvey, Rosa, Collins, De Lissovoy and Jaeggi aiming at establishing a broader analytical base. The second part of the article introduces an analytical description of education policy in Denmark seen through the lenses of this modified concept of alienation. The analysis demonstrates how the modern system of education reproduces the aspects of alienation that in turn expresses the crisis of education and therefore the crisis of society.

Christian Sandbjerg Hansen’s interest of knowledge is how the process of advanced marginality has transformed Copenhagen (Denmark) as a typical example of modern cities. This transformation process has involved a stigmatisation of certain areas of the city in which ‘problem categories’ among the population are concentrated. In Copenhagen, an answer to this territorial stigmatisation, spatial alienation and dissolution of place has been area-based interventions and urban renewal projects. These projects have not just focused on improving the physical environment, but also on the people living there and their relations with each other and with the neighbourhood. Thus, alongside the development of universal pedagogical institutions, these projects intimately intertwine with groups of different social work agencies, forming a veritable pedagogisation of urban marginality.

Kirsten Elisa Petersen’s research deals with the ways in which young men’s movements into gang related street communities associate to feelings of social alienation. The analysis is based on semi-structured research interviews with six young ethnic minority men, all associated with gang related street communities. Based on Safipour et al.’s concept of social alienation described as a sense of not belonging or feelings of exclusion, the article explores how the young men’s life in the ghettos and in school show experiences of exclusion from social communities and a sense of not belonging. The concept of everyday life relates to Holzkamp’s concept of the conduct of everyday life reflected as participation and human actions in specific social contexts. The concept of participation draws the attention to how children and young people develop and learn through their participation in communities, while Mehan et al.’s concept of social skills in the school’s hidden curriculum reveals understandings of difficulties associated with engaging in participation in the school community. Based on this perspective, the article points to how the young men’s everyday life in ghetto areas and school difficulties can lead to movements into gang related street communities that counteract feelings of social alienation.

The articles present a broad variety of theoretical approaches that are related to contemporary relevant problems within the field of social work and education. The relation between theory and social praxis as well as the movement from general to specific perspectives have overlaps and shared issues, which reveal the importance to explicate the notion of alienation in theory and praxis with respect to social work. It is the editors' and the authors' hope that the articles thoroughly demonstrate that theoretical approaches of alienation are inevitable in order to grasp the complexity and social contradictions embedded in the field of social work and education. It seems even more relevant than ever before to deal with global tendencies and the related restrictions for citizens in order to establish a meaningful existence within the global framework of Western Society.

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