

# Is there a place for affect in studying alienation?

YUILL, C.

2018

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Political Power on 05.02.2018, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/2158379X.2018.1433761>*

### **Title of review**

Is there a place for affect in studying alienation?

### **Book reviewed**

**Alienation and affect**, by Warren D. TenHouten, Routledge, 2016, 214 pp., ISBN 9781138777705, £88.00 (hardback).

### **Author of review**

Chris Yuill, School of Applied Social Studies, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

### **Postal Address**

### **Email**

c.yuill@rgu.ac.uk

### **Introduction**

During the 1960s and 1970s alienation was, in the parlance of Nisbet (1966), one of the core units of sociological study. A quick trawl through the literature of the time easily identifies a burgeoning and expansive field that drew on material mainly from North America and Europe. Weighty philosophical tracts explored the theoretical dimensions of alienation in a capitalist society, while a raft of empirical work sought to investigate levels of alienation in workplaces

and wider society. From the 1980s onwards however interest in the concept of alienation waned for reasons external and internal to the academy. The decline of what can be seen as the wider Marxist project after the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s signalled closing time for those taking the writings of Marx as their reference point for alienation, whilst the linguistic turn ushered in by followers of the likes of Foucault and Derrida witnessed a rejection of many ideas – and not just alienation – that had been a core part of the sociological tradition prior to the 1980s.

Recently, though, there has been a rekindling of interest in alienation. In the United States, Wendling's (2011) work has examined the relationship between technology and alienation, while Langman and Kalekin-Fishman's (2006) edited collection has gathered together a wide range of contemporary studies into alienation. In the United Kingdom my own work has explored how alienation can negatively impact on health and wellbeing (Yuill 2005, 2009, 2010). Warren TenHouten's new book *Alienation and affect* can therefore be regarded as furthering renewed interest in alienation. He chooses emotions or affect as his point of departure, arguing that it is through emotions that we can unlock how alienation creates a series of negative states of being. Of equal importance is that he positions his work in the tradition of Melvin Seeman, a central figure in the North American empirical wing of alienation research in the 1960s and 1970s. The contribution of Melvin Seeman to alienation studies is undeniable. He wrote a multitude of papers on the subject, and his classic article 'On the meaning of alienation' (1959) has been cited 2,673 times according to Google Scholar. In that work he outlined five forms of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, cultural estrangement and normlessness. His aim in developing this five-dimensional approach was, he argued, that there could be no single measure of alienation, and that a one-dimensional approach lacked rigour and

could only ever produce vague indications of separation or discontent. Better then to explore specific instances of alienation that exist in distinct spheres of social experience. Those five expressions of alienation set much of the empirical research agenda in the 1960s and 1970s.

It is TenHouten's focus on Seeman that is ultimately problematic for the success of book as a whole, and, in particular, how he treats Seeman's work as axiomatic. Trans-Atlantic differences in regards to studying alienation are part of the issue here. Seeman was an influential figure in North America but little known in other territories. In Europe for example his profile is low. Goldthorpe *et al's* (1969) work that was contemporary with Seeman's provides a useful illustration of this point. Their classic study of English car-line production workers in Luton was a milestone in British sociology, which set the research and theoretical agenda for decades to come. As part of their analysis they discuss alienation in depth concluding that it was not evident in this group of workers. Though they touch on the work of other theorists, such as the French Marxist Mallet, Seeman is notably absent. I am not making claims that their analysis was better or worse for this omission, merely to make the point that he did not inform debate in the United Kingdom. So, when TenHouten (p. 54) makes the claim that Seeman is 'the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's premier alienation theorist and researcher', many readers on this side of the Atlantic would dispute this assertion and point to the influential theoretical work of a host of German, French and British writers on the topic.

Taking Seeman's work as a given creates another problem. Many readers, especially those outside North America, will have had no previous contact with the work of Seeman, my own experience being a case in point. I was well into my post-doctoral studies on alienation before I discovered Seeman. Up until then alienation was the territory of Marx, Goldthrope and the Frankfurt school. I still find when I present at conferences that framing my research raises

many quizzical eyebrows as to what alienation is, and that's aside from the lack of familiarity with the main contributors to this field of enquiry from the middle of last century. Given the importance of Seeman it is therefore strange that there is no sustained discussion of what Seeman uniquely contributed to the study of alienation. There are some concise remarks in the introduction, but so much more is needed. TenHouten also shies away from engaging with criticism in the United States directed at Seeman's work during that peak period of the 1960s and 1970s. Whether it was Ollman's (1976) pithy dismissal of Seeman as being a naïve empiricist, or Archibald's point that in attempting to measure so much, Seeman measures nothing. These arguments need to be taken on as justification for revisiting Seeman.

Possibly even more pressing is that before even getting into what Seeman has to say about alienation, a case needs to be made as to why studying alienation today is relevant. As TenHouten notes, interest in alienation has been on the decline for some time now, but he does not expound on why it is important to make a return to the concept. There has been so much intellectual water under the bridge since the 1960s and 1970s that offers alternative explanations as to how society can damage social agents. For those sociologists who entered the discipline after the linguistic turn, and who draw from post-modernism and post-structuralism, alienation can be dismissed as an essentialising discourse based on reductionist notions of power and subjectivity. Why should an idea associated with a discredited grand narrative be worth bothering about? I believe that alienation should be reconsidered and I shall comment on why in the main body and in the conclusion. What this book needs is therefore some form of clear manifesto as to why it is still relevant.

Many of the great political and social shocks of recent years could be explained with the aid of alienation theory. In the United States the rise of Trump could be interpreted as some form

of normlessness, cultural estrangement or social meaninglessness, as Hochschild's (2016) ethnography of disaffected white working-class Americans could be read as indicating. In Britain one of the many reasons for the Brexit vote to leave the European Union is – again, or so it could be argued – that same sense of displacement on the part of working-class communities in former Northern industrial heartlands, that is, of being left behind, ignored and misunderstood by a cultural elite in metropolitan London. Or one could turn to the workplace and witness the rise of new forms of work that are located in what Baldry *et al* (1998) amusingly terms 'Bright Satanic Offices' as opposed to the dark satanic mills of Marx's day. The form of labour may be less physically demanding, and it may also lack the threat of instant amputation that was commonplace for Victorian cotton workers as they laboured in the new factories, but it remains subjectively alienating. Woodcock's (2016) work on call centres in the United Kingdom also provides insights into how powerless many social agents are in the new economies that have transformed how people work today.

The above comments are general observations, but there are a number of more specific issues too. TenHouten's book is structured in two sections. The first deals with the historical and contemporary literature on alienation. The second with how Seeman's fivefold typology of alienation can be extended to address emotions and the role they play in subjective experiences of alienation. I shall take each part in turn.

## I

The first part of the book provides a summarised history of alienation as a theory/concept, visiting many of the key texts *en route* through an intellectual journey from the middle ages to the middle part of last century. Just about all the main literature is present and a clear narrative of

the conceptual genesis of alienation within Europe is deftly conveyed. The reader is introduced to the religious roots of alienation and how this fared in the hands and minds of Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau, Romantic artists and, of course, Hegel and Marx. As with any attempt to capture a wide ranging literature in a relatively small amount of space, one could quibble with what has been included and excluded. Hegel's work on alienation, for example, extends well beyond than his famous Master-Servant dialectic, to which TenHouten attends. There is a seam of work from his Jena period evident in the *Realphilosophie* that outlines a view of workplace alienation that he developed from his reading of Adam Smith, and which is very similar to what Marx would famously develop in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. To adequately capture the diverse roots and many traditions that have approached alienation, a substantial volume would be required, and so by necessity not everything can be covered in a single monograph.

As mentioned earlier the book does exhibit signs of its North American focus and a dialogue with a body of European scholarship on alienation is notably absent. From the French literature, there is no engagement with the substantial contribution of Lefebvre (1968) or Debord (1967). Their work explored alienation in different domains of society. Lefebvre's classic work on alienation in everyday life illuminates how fractured human existence can be in modern society, while Debord's analysis of the spectacle of modern consumerism captures the alienation of living in a society where all real meaning has become reduced to mere representation. The vast *oeuvre* of the Frankfurt School is similarly passed over. If there was a body of thought that at least deserves a mention – if not critical engagement – in an overview of alienation, then the collected output of Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer surely qualifies. As with their French contemporaries, they produced radical thinking on alienation and its connection to the

consumerist society emerging in the post-war period. And not to forget the landmark contribution made by Goldthorpe *et al* (1969) in the United Kingdom.

I also think that more needs to be said as to why interest in alienation research declined so sharply from the early 1980s onwards. As I have discussed elsewhere (2015) the reasons are multi-faceted. In neglecting to comment on why alienation research went into a tailspin glosses over critical debates about the subject itself. Some ideas are sketched out and a graph on page 52 is particularly effective in charting the rise and fall of alienation research. Usefully annotated with key papers and historical events, it charts the ratio of abstracts and abstract titles that reference alienation against the number of journal articles in the field of sociology. A rapid peak is reached between 1960 and 1969 with an equally rapid decline thereafter. Some minimal interest in alienation still continues in the following decades. If ever an example of a Kuhnian paradigm shift was required, then this one image provides it. However, useful as that bibliographic history is, more is required.

## II

For those *au fait* with Seeman and sympathetic to his interpretation of alienation, then part two of the book is a stimulating and refreshing read. A dizzying array of sources, theories and research is called upon by TenHouten. One is left with no doubt that he is a master of this material. The detail is immense and he is deft at moving between the archaic linguistic roots of a concept, the twists and turns of nineteenth-century philosophy and the social psychology of emotions in a few sentences.



TenHouten really does establish an interesting point that we need to appreciate how emotions and affect are integral to the *experience* of alienation. Much of the previous research in the 1960s and 1970s touched on emotion but at a distance, and did not really pursue its importance in any great depth. With TenHouten's intervention a distinct omission with the wider body of alienation scholarship is therefore addressed with his rigorous approach to affect. After reading this book I revisited some of that earlier material. I noted the extent to which that alienation was presented as a rather instrumental and neutral state of being revealed in a series of dry measurable cognitive perceptions, for example, to what extent participants regarded themselves as being engaged with work, or to what extent participants experienced isolation. We never get an insight into alienation as a form of social suffering and how that suffering occurs within an embodied social agent. By bringing in affect, as TenHouten does, that vital element of experiencing alienation is now present. Doing so gives permission, as he suggests, to explore how alienation can spill into other spheres of life, such as health and wellbeing.

Even if you do not agree with Seeman's perspective on alienation, there is still much to be gained from this section. A good case for the role of affect in alienation is made and there is a wealth of resources upon which to draw. TenHouten is clear that he does not intend to focus on the structural causes of alienation but I think that emotions can act as part of the middle point, a meditating element between objective structures and individual subjective experience. That direction will be worth pursuing in the future in order to build a more comprehensive analysis of the totality of alienation.

For those, however, not up to speed with Seeman, and with the groundwork in terms of the relevance of alienation and the work of Seeman not laid in sufficient depth in the part one, then this part of the book comes out of the blue and is a sudden break with the previous section. The break between parts one and two is too sharp. An interested but new reader to alienation research suddenly finds herself immersed in a very rich feast but without knowing why they were invited and what is on the menu.

### **Closing remarks**

I am glad this book has been written. Alienation should be returned to being one of the core concepts of sociology, as it was during the 1960s and 1970s. As I noted earlier so many contemporary issues could be fruitfully analysed and understood through the prism of alienation. As a concept, whether it takes its cue from Marx or Seeman, alienation is concerned with suffering and separation and we can witness the effects of which in so many parts of contemporary society. To borrow from Bhaskar (1979), just because transitive aspects of human knowledge change does not entail that the intransitive aspects of human existence disappear. A combative Seeman writing in the early 1980s noted something similar. He argued that we should not give up on alienation and that researching alienation is a 'hidden continuity' within much research, even though it is not recognised as such (Seeman 1983, p. 172). The greater the momentum of scholarship the better in trying to re-establish alienation in the twenty-first century.

TenHouten's point that emotions are an important element of alienation research is well made. He presents a treasure trove of ideas that can provide a springboard into studying alienation, but does not provide the final word. No one ever will, but the more alienation can be

studied the more answers we can find that can tell us why society fails to deliver for so many people.

## References

- Archibald, W.P., 1978. Using Marx's theory of alienation empirically. *Theory and Society* 6 (1), 119-132.
- Baldry, C., Bain, P. and Taylor, P., 1998. "Bright Satanic offices": intensification, control and team Taylorism. In P. Thompson and C. Warhurst, eds. *Workplaces of the future: critical perspectives on work and organisations*. London: Palgrave, pp 163-183.
- Bhaskar, R., 1975. *The realist theory of science*. London: Verso.
- Debord, G., 1967 *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Éditions Buchet-Chastel.
- Hochschild, A., 2016. *Strangers in their own land: anger and mourning on the American right*. New York: The New Press.
- Langman, L., and Kalekin-Fishman, D., eds., 2006. *The evolution of alienation: trauma, promise and the millennium*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lefebvre, H., 1961. *Critique de la vie quotidienne II, fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*. Paris: L'Arche.
- Lefebvre, H., 1968. *Dialectical materialism*. London: Cape.
- Nisbet, R. A., 1966. *The sociological tradition*. Heineman: London
- Ollman, B., 1976. *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seeman, M., 1959. On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review* 24, 783-791
- Seeman, M., 1983. Alienation motifs in contemporary theorizing: the hidden continuity of the classic themes. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 46 (3), 171-184.

- Wendling, A., 2011. *Karl Marx on technology and alienation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woodcock, J., 2016. *Working the phones: control and resistance in call centres*. London: Pluto.
- Yuill, C., 2005. Marx: capitalism, alienation and health. *Social Theory and Health* 3, 126-143.
- Yuill, C., 2009. Health and the workplace: thinking about sickness, hierarchy and workplace. *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy*, 3 (3), pp. 239-256.
- Yuill, C., 2010. The Spirit Level, health inequalities and economic democracy. *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy* 4 (2), 177-193.
- Yuill, C., 2011. Forgetting and remembering alienation. *The History of Human Sciences* 24 (2), 103–119.