

Mother Earth and The Volatile Conception of Human Freedom



Course:	Social Theory in Everyday Life
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Assignment:	Final Essay – 2000 words
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Deadline:	18:00 - October 22 nd , 2017, The Hague, The Netherlands

“Antisemitism, (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship) – one after the other, one more than brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.”

- Hannah Arendt, in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*¹

¹ Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: ix.

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt essentially affirms that “vita activa” or “active life,” is the fundamental condition of human existence, which exists of three fundamental categories, being: labor, work and action. Building upon this foundation, she argues that there is an intensifying process of “alienation from the world”, which in turn is caused by ever increasing production and stimulated consumption, fuelled by the globalized world capitalist system.² Now, to contextualize these thoughts to the realms of society and everyday life, Arendt says that the creation (i.e. gradual development) of mass civilizations (i.e. societies), has incrementally shifted the property from the private realm (the household) to the public realm embodied in society itself.³

Here Arendt states: *“Inside [social groups], equality, far from parity, means nothing as equal members against the despotism of the father, except that in society, where the number sufficient to enhance tremendously the natural power of the common and unanimous opinion, it has been possible to dispense with the authority actually exercised by a man representing the common interest, the correct opinion. The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of this final stage of evolution. (...) The point is that society at all levels excludes the possibility of action, which was once ruled the home. Each of its members, on the contrary it requires a certain behaviour, imposing innumerable rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members to make them work right, eliminate spontaneous gestures or extraordinary feats”*⁴

Furthermore, and most essentially before proceeding with the analysis of these thoughts in regard to some key thinkers in social theory and the life of the individual in relation to the notion of ‘society’, it is also crucial to take into account the following. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt argues that the very essence of thinking (i.e. critically reflecting upon ourselves and our surroundings) is crucial for one to be fully human, i.e. in existence, as encapsulated by the following quote:

*“To lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions [would be to] lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.”*⁵

Considering the aforementioned, which I find essential as an introduction to this paper, I will attempt to contextualize these thoughts into a personal contextual framework, through which I can materialize the volatile conceptions and thinkers that I will utilize. In so doing, I will make an attempt to make the following argument: I argue that “the modern” (i.e. the highly industrialized, modernized, regulated and capitalist society that we live in today in large (Western) parts of the world, and in this analysis, The Netherlands), can be embodied as a metaphor in a double-edged sword, for it indeed has provided us with various instruments and resources to exchange with other cultures and cultivate ourselves in a trans-national context. However, the very same ‘modern’ which has facilitated these innovations and (partly) positive developments, has also imposed as much negative – (potentially detrimental) implications and restrictions upon the life of the individual, particularly, on the micro-level dimensions of the individual’s mental wellbeing, feeling of satisfaction and belonging, within the social environment and interplay with other individuals.

² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, xi-xvi.

³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Analysis.

⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22-25.

⁵ Arendt, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

These detrimental consequences can be seen in many forms and dimensions throughout our society, e.g. to name an example is the worrisome increase of (work) and performance-related burnouts, heart-diseases⁶ and stress-levels of individuals, as well as the substantial increase of anti-depressant medication in large Western (capitalist) and industrialized societies.⁷

To provide a contextual framework for analysis and reflection, I will use my own experiences and encounters during one of my internships at Accenture last summer, for which I did research and contributed to the development of the Refugee Talent Hub (RHT).⁸ It is important to note here that Accenture is a large multinational consultancy company based in the Amsterdam Zuid-as, and the Amsterdam Zuid-as (meaning: South Axis), is a business district also known as the 'financial mile', hosting many multi-billion multinationals and companies, one could say, the 'ultimate utopia' for socialist leftists, and something which Karl Marx could have only dreamed of.⁹

I do believe that this reference-framework is relevant for my argument, because I've seen and felt with my own eyes how the masses of people are 'forced' to work in this environment, how it affects their personal lives, (i.e. what they find important to have – designer suits and expensive watches - or to talk about, i.e. fancy holidays or plans to buy boats or cars), and more importantly, how unhappy many of them in fact may be – without them always realizing it themselves. Before elaborating upon my point by providing some examples, the quote by Mills in the *Sociological Imagination*, may explain how it can be that large parts of our society (i.e. here, particularly employees in the labour market) may be strongly affected by certain forces that they are not always necessarily aware of, nor able to define where these 'societal' forces come from.

As Mills says: "[...] The increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces within themselves which they are unable to define." , and he proceeds by explaining how the main danger against man(kind) himself are the "unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination," [...] ,have transformed the "very 'nature' if man and the conditions and aims of his life."¹⁰ To also relate this to the illustrative image of Mother Earth that I've included in this paper, I've attempted to emphasise how important a natural equilibrium is of natural (human) processes (laws) for an individual's viability, for as Arendt and Marx also affirm that the development of sciences has potentially dangerous (alienating) implications for our lives as human beings on this earth, but also on the viability and resilience of Mother Earth herself.¹¹

In accordance with the ambiguity of these volatile forces, Durkheim argues in the *Rules of the Sociological Method*: "[...] If the willingness with which we let ourselves be carried along disguises the pressure we have undergone, it does not eradicate it. Thus air does not cease to have weight, although we no longer feel that weight.." ¹²

⁶ Harvard Medical School, Astounding increase in antidepressant use by Americans, 2017.

⁷ Statista, Stress and burnout - Statistics & Facts, 2017.

⁸ A project which aims to connect well-educated refugees with the job-vacancies of large companies in The Netherlands, as well as to stimulate their development and learning of essential employment-skills.

⁹ City of Amsterdam, Zuidas.

¹⁰ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 13.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Prologue, 3-5.

¹² Durkheim, *What is a Social Fact?*, 53.

Now, an important question to ask ourselves is: how can it be, that while knowing that there are certain volatile forces that affects our lives substantially with potentially detrimental implications, how can it then be that it seems that almost all of us in this society adhere and subjugate ourselves to these forces?

In other words, is our perceived 'true freedom' – i.e. through the protection of our fundamental human rights by strong law enforcement and ability to participate in political and social bodies - not outliving these seemingly obscure forces that are imposing restrictions upon our daily lives? And if so, what motivates people to sustain and 'collectively' reinforce these 'forces' in our society, if they are so harmful and create so many negative externalities?

This can perhaps also be partly answered by the following fundamental thought by Marx, namely that: "*For Labour, Life Activity, Productive life itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need- the need to maintain physical existence.*"¹³ Furthermore, as he states: "*What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal.*" One can wonder then, how this can be compatible with the 'freedoms' we enjoy in the 'free world', while we may no longer be 'fully human' and cultivate ourselves as such according to our own preferences and pace?

To briefly invoke the *Manifesto* by Marx in which the inner contradiction of capitalism are elaborated upon, one must also consider – within the capitalist business environment of the Zuid-as – that not only economic crises are endemic to this social system, but perhaps even more importantly, that it reinforces (as seen in a vicious cycle) the alienating and exploitative conditions as a result of our 'modernity', and imposes certain ways of life upon individuals within a certain society.¹⁴ Here, Tim Ingold asks a key question, being: "*If our behaviour is guided by rules or norms, in what authority are they vested and how are they enforced?*", within the context of the state-organized and regulated societies as we know it today in The Netherlands.¹⁵

Finally, before materializing the aforementioned in the context of my internship at Accenture, Simmel also makes an important point on the perceived 'freedom' (or better said lack thereof) that individuals have in the relation to their clothing as a means of status, cultural and social expression.

As Simmel reaffirms: "*Fashion is a form of imitation and so of social equalization, [...]. It unites those of a social class and segregates them from others. [...] A process that quickens with the increase of wealth.*"¹⁶ Now to relate this to my encounters during my internship at Accenture, I've sensed very problematic processes, which seemed to be collectively sustained and reinforced in this intense, competitive and ultimate capitalists business setting. Not only could one perceive how most labourers were drinking gallons of coffee (drugs) to accomplish their tasks and prove that they were the most hard-working and intelligent, behind their Excel sheets and company-provided state of the art laptops (i.e. capitalism sustains capitalism, i.e. Marx), but especially the social codes and interplay between workers and the hierarchies thereof were striking. For example. You could say that most men were trying to wear good-looking suits, preferably every day another tie and you could see how they compared their own clothing to the rest of their colleagues, i.e. to relate this to Simmel, as a means to distinguish themselves from the rest. If one would follow this logic, a section-manager of communications could not possible wear a lesser designer suits or a cheaper watch, shoes, than the inferior labourers of interns under his supervision? The same did go for the female counter=parts.

¹³ Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844, 90.

¹⁴ Anderson, Marx at the Margins, 10.

¹⁵ Ingold, Introduction to Social Life: Questions of Sociality, 750.

¹⁶ Simmel, Fashion, 541.

Now, perhaps many of them just liked to dress very elegant and nicely, preferably another suit every day, and trying to impress your colleagues with the extraordinary holidays that you've planned. However, from my personal point of view, I also did feel these "social forces" act upon me, which should of course be seen within the larger capitalist, materialist, and consumerist society that we live in today, a system whose viability lies in the very adherence thereof, a process and its rules which are also constructed through an interplay of industries, (governmental) institutions, media, marketing agencies, and more importantly, collectively reinforced by the grassroots masses, i.e. which could be perceived as the ambiguous and volatile forces which heavily impact our lives. I must admit that in the initial days of my internship, I felt quite good in this 'fancy' business environment, especially because I was under the impression that I was doing very important work which would make a positive change in the lives of refugees. However, gradually, I realised how unhappy I became with myself within this environment, how most people were so fake in their actions and behaviour that one could find more personality and sincerity in the cat of my neighbours. Was this the extensive and multi-layered process of alienation that Marx was talking about? I believe so, for not only did I get alienated from my 'true' self, but also did I question in the final stages of my internship if the project that I contributed to was not in as much about the well-being of the highly educated refugees, but rather more about the supply & demand and ever increasing expansion of the capitalist and economic system? In other words, does the highly industrialized, capitalist world economic system have feelings and compassion to those who are being exploited for its own viability and interests? I believe one may ask that to the millions and millions of labourers who have become extremely alienated from their selves and are forced to work to just maintain their 'physical existence' in this world, as aforementioned.

Now, coming back to my argument, this may seem like a too much pessimistic and critical view of the modernity we live in today, and the huge and overwhelming advantages and innovations that it facilitates, so that we can perceive our ultimate freedom by traveling, doing the hobby's and sports we like, and enjoying the foods and flavours from all around the world. However, my argument is that all of this is just superficial, it's just the outer core, the peel of the onion, and only when you dig deeper into this perceived 'freedom', one realizes that this freedom is a) very limited to a privileged group of people in the rich modernized countries; b) that a majority of the middle-class workers is so much manipulated and affected by these 'societal and economic forces' that they seek to attain this ultimate freedom by adhering to certain (imposed) norms and values, and c) that many throughout this destructive process get alienated from their true selves, in various degrees and intensities, but in one way or another, one will be restricted and contained within a system which is highly suffocating and immoral towards the millions of peoples on which exploitation and suffering it thrives. And thus, until the time that every single individual on this world is valued as a dignified human being, and can feel his 'ultimate freedom', until the time that no more millions around the world are chained and incrementally tortured for the perceived 'freedoms' of our modernity in the West, I would argue that in fact we are facing a slow deterioration of our "true" individual freedoms, and that we should not lose sight of the fundamental freedoms embodied in Mother Earth behind the fig leaf of modernity.

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