



Book Review

Claire Pagès, *Lyotard et l'aliénation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011)

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Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XX, No 1 (2012) pp 134-137.

Vol XX, No 1 (2012)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2012.542
www.jffp.org



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Book Review

Claire Pagès, *Lyotard et l'aliénation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 160 pp.

The concept of alienation took a considerable beating from various quarters in French philosophy from the 1960s to the 1980s. In this light, by mounting a radical Freudo-Nietzschean attack on alienation during the mid-1970s, Jean-François Lyotard did not particularly stand out among his peers. His originality vis-à-vis the concept, however, was nonetheless striking and twofold. First, he arrived at his uncompromising rejection only after having previously defended alienation tenaciously against no less a philosophical rival than leading French Marxist Louis Althusser. What is more, said radical rejection gave way in his later writings to a renewed, if nearly unrecognizable concept of alienation which, while no longer strictly speaking a critical concept, was nonetheless to play a philosophically fascinating role.

So argues Claire Pagès in her recent *Lyotard et l'aliénation*. The publication of her text – an at times too-concise construction of the above interpretation – is overall a happy occasion. Since it is *de rigueur* in Lyotard scholarship to emphasize the astounding ruptures which punctuate his philosophical development, Pagès has contributed to a subtler and, to my mind, underappreciated task of Lyotard scholarship: the patient tracking of guiding conceptual threads through abundant and chaotic source material. Picking up the “fil rouge” of alienation, Pagès’s deft touch produces a version of Lyotard more complex and yet more unitary than is readily accepted. Readers of Lyotard should welcome her text as a worthy and highly informative contribution to the minor Lyotard renaissance which is currently underway on both sides of the Atlantic.

Pagès follows the fortunes of the concept of alienation in Lyotard’s corpus chronologically, from the early phenomenological/Left-Marxist phase to the posthumous writings. She ably if briefly describes his militant engagement with the relatively spontaneist, Left-Marxist *Socialisme ou barbarie* and splinter group *Pouvoir Ouvrier*, both of which cleaved to a more or less classical notion of alienation as something to be overcome via socialist revolution. From here, Pagès goes on to track Lyotard’s increasingly troubled relation to the concept during the years of “drift” away from Marx and Marxist categories, which took place roughly from 1966 until the

paroxysmal (and aporetic) rejection of any and all critical categories by 1974. One area where Pagès could have expanded her account is with respect to Lyotard's dispute with Althusser, as contained in "La place de l'aliénation dans le retournement marxiste." She admits this to be Lyotard's "texte le plus important sur le concept d'aliénation" (36) but devotes a relatively sparse eight pages to it. As Pagès correctly points out, Lyotard attempted therein to preserve alienation from the Althusserian critique by casting it not as a concept of the mature Marx's theory, but rather as a deictic – an index of a possible alternative underneath the social given – thereby preserving it by de-Hegelianising it (for Hegel, by contrast, there is simply "nothing behind the curtain" [39]). Here we see glimmers of a position somewhere between Althusser's structural theory of society on one hand and the comparatively naïve Hegelian-Marxist humanism of a Maximilien Rubel or a Sartre on the other.

In following the subsequent drift from Lyotard's rigorous defense to his uncompromising rejection, one of Pagès's merits is to have rendered highly digestible the substance of Lyotard's notoriously difficult philosophy of the figural – a type of alienation "sans dehors" (43) – as well as his radical critique of alienation (and, paradoxically, of critique itself), as contained in 1974's *Économie libidinale*. This she does in the main by comparing Lyotard's "critique" of alienation with that of Jean Baudrillard. Both thinkers identify a kind of "naturalism" at the bottom of alienation and other critical Marxist concepts; that is, the fantasy of an original, organic body unsullied by alienation, a pure or true "region" from which to mount a critique of capitalist society. Whereas Baudrillard grounds his radical critique of political economy on symbolic exchange and "primitive" societies – precisely, on the fantasy of such a pure or true region – Lyotard attempts a thoroughgoing rejection of alienation by arguing that there are, in fact, no such regions (posing thereby the question, as Pagès is right to point out, of the critical alibi of Lyotard's own discourse). Showing how close the two thinkers start off, and yet how ultimately divergent they travel with respect to alienation, not only sheds light on Lyotard's aforementioned text, but also puts in context early texts of Baudrillard's which are, to my mind, vastly more interesting than the later texts for which he has become widely popular.

When Lyotard shifts registers to the "postmodern" and "post-modernity" (a distinction which the author would have done well to have commented upon), the critique of the alienation of the individual gives way to a critique of modern discourses of the emancipation of humanity, or peoples, or collectives. The longed-for unified *body* of the naturalism implied by classical conceptions of alienation gives way to the longed-for unified *community* as an object of Lyotard's critique. This puts him squarely at odds with the consensus-driven communicational philosophy of Habermas, Rorty, Honneth and others, as Pagès briefly but capably describes.

Finally, Pagès finds operant in the last Lyotard a non- or only quasi-critical notion of an alienation which is both irremediable and constitutive, couched in childhood, the unconscious, and language itself. The subject is always outstripped and at odds with itself (e.g. spoken by language – “*tributaire*” (140) – rather than truly speaking it). It is noteworthy that throughout her reconstruction, Pagès never ceases to be critical of Lyotard where such is due. Her short conclusion states the necessity of retaining a critical notion of alienation, while generously recognizing the merits and partial salvageability of even Lyotard’s later uncritical permutations.

In spite of the many and considerable merits of *Lyotard et l’aliénation*, I am left with two regrets, the first of which is fairly substantial. Despite her excellent grasp of the early and middle period Lyotard, Pagès engages virtually not at all with the later Lyotard’s writings on Kant, the postmodern sublime, and postmodern artistic practices. This she avows in a footnote (11n1), stating that the guiding thread of alienation does not square with these themes. I believe this to be false, and see here a lost opportunity to construct an even farther-reaching global interpretation of Lyotard than Pagès has done. Lyotard’s reading of the sublime is, to my mind, *par excellence* amenable to interpretation in terms of a constitutive and irremediable alienation, since it is the index of an impossible passage between two faculties – reason and imagination – which is felt as a vacillating, irremediable mixture of pleasure and pain. This accounts for why the later Lyotard constantly invokes the sublime alongside childhood, the unconscious, and language itself, precisely to the extent that it functions as an index of effectively the same basic alienation. His writings on artists from this period, notably Barnett Newman, offer additional grist for this interpretation; postmodern artistic practice such as Newman’s – for example his attempts to paint the present moment – may be cashed out in terms of presenting the un-presentable; more precisely, the sublime read in terms of constitutively alienated aesthetic products and gestures.

Secondly, Pagès seems to miss something of the political *raison d’être* of Lyotard’s final figures of alienation. She notes that these are quasi-critical if not critical strictly speaking (e.g. there is a certain critical force in the contrast drawn between the alienated misery/promise of childhood and the colonizing impetus of technoscientific development). She does not, however, expand much upon this claim. Here again, I sense a missed opportunity. It has long been my view that what Pagès reads as figures of an irremediable, constitutive alienation serve a tactical political purpose in the later Lyotard. Wagering that technoscientific development has become hegemonic and the human itself nearly obsolete, Lyotard multiplies testimonies to the intractability or constitutive resistance of the human in the interests of an additive, formally negative, melancholic political strategy (parallels with Adorno being on this count rather striking). All that remains of politics for the later Lyotard is the production, collection and dissemination of

testimonies to Pagès's constitutive alienation, so as to highlight noise or confusion in the system; but even then, this politics is deeply ambivalent. If the system of technoscientific development is what threatens the finitude and contingency of human thought, then evidence to the effect that the human is intrinsically troubled or recalcitrant may be deployed in the name of "its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system."¹ This accounts for Lyotard's claim in *The Inhuman* that "the witness is a traitor."² Hence, Lyotard is laboring under considerable political stakes and in complex, ironical strategic and tactical parameters which Pagès ultimately does not explore. Such an exploration would help to put in better perspective the rather ironic fact that whereas the young Lyotard sought to *overcome* alienation via council communist practice, the later Lyotard sought to *anchor* his politics on an alienation that can never be overcome.

In spite of what I have here identified as certain shortcomings or missed opportunities, it must be remembered that Pagès's text is above all readable as a point of entry into Lyotard, and its concision is therefore on balance a virtue. *Lyotard et l'aliénation* remains an engaging and welcome text on a thinker whose time for critical reappraisal has come.

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¹ Lyotard, Jean-François. *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.99.

² Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p.204.