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Working Paper

Behind the Masks of Total Choice: Teaching Alienation in the Age of Inequality

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What hides under the spectacular oppositions is a unity of misery. Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed...[t]he spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil centre of misery.

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

Economic socialism without communist morality does not interest me. We are fighting against poverty, yes, but also against alienation.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

Abstract:

In this article we examine different ways for making the concept of alienation relevant and interesting for undergraduate students in relation to the present-day concerns regarding distributive dynamics and inequality, especially in the United States. We find inspiration for this in the theoretical and practical importance of alienation in Marx’s critique of capitalism and the way it is entwined with distribution. We first look at sources of alienation in contemporary U.S. economy, before deriving an analytical framework for the analysis of the concept using Marx’s characterisation. We then offer different ways for making the concept of alienation accessible to students in the classroom, using examples from popular culture and linking them back to broader capitalist dynamics.

Key Words: Teaching; Inequality; Alienation; Commodity Fetishism; Marxism

1. Introduction

Inequality has bad press these days. A lot of bad press, to be exact. From rallying cries such as Occupy Wall Street’s “We are the 99%” to articles on the widening income gap and the disappearance of the middle class, the issue receives a lot of attention both in the popular media and academic circles (e.g. Florida, 2017; Milanovic, 2016; Piketty, 2014; 2015; Stiglitz, 2013; Temin 2017). This has tended to frame the discussion about capitalism around issues of distribution, the injustices it creates, and the consequences it has on the system itself. For example, some have designated stagnating wages as one of the main causes of the financial crisis

(Dufour and Orhangazi, 2014; Resnick and Wolff, 2010), and an increase in the labour share is touted as a way out of the global slump (Lavoie and Stockhammer, 2012). Discussions around inequality and crisis gave rise to calls for a revamping of economics curricula to include a broader vision of the economic system than that offered by orthodox theory (Bhattacharya and Mukherjee, 2013; Dhondt et al., 2017; Peterson, 2013; 2011; Ward-Perkins, Z. and Earle, J., 2014). Given that current economic times can scarce be understood without a careful analysis of inequality dynamics, their study should definitely be made part of the economics curriculum.

This article focuses on how we teach alienation and inequality in our introductory undergraduate courses (Dhondt et al. 2017; Dufour and Seda-Irizarry, 2017). After some introductory remarks discussing inequality and alienation we will focus on alienation in the contemporary United States. Then, we will elaborate a theoretical framework based on the writings of Marx, Rubin, Pappenheim, Fromm, and Marcuse which connects alienation and inequality. We then delve into details on materials from film and fiction we use to teach this framework of alienation and inequality.

In some ways, the prevalence of inequality in popular discourse makes it relatively easy to bring the topic in the classroom. It's on many students' mind and they understand some of the basic concepts and measurements associated with the phenomenon. At the same time, this familiarity is also a hurdle, as it comes with preconceived notions that are sometimes hard to shake off. A prominent example is the fact that inequality is often disembedded from the larger systemic context and made to be something that could more or less be solved or largely mitigated without fundamentally changing the system, say via the right set of redistributive policies or government programs. For us, this is problematic.

The inequality produced by the system is not incidental, it is one of its core characteristics. What are the profit motive and the drive to accumulate, which are at the centre of the system, if not attempts to increase one's share of the social product? Same with struggles over salaries between workers and firms. The outcomes of such dynamics cannot simply be cancelled at the end (or starting) point through a reshuffling of the cards; the process itself has profound implications for the people in the system. The ways in which we can secure a share of the social product and the search for a constant increase of that share, for instance, shape us as human beings.

The centrality of inequality dynamics in the functioning of the capitalist system lead us to broaden our teaching of inequality to include other facets of the system. One of the concepts we bring forth to enrich the classroom discussion about inequality is alienation, which we take out of the Marxian tradition. The broad idea is to link distributive outcomes and processes with people's sense of self and community, as well as their perception of the world in which they live (Pappenheim, 2009). We argue that the distributive processes in capitalism generate alienation, in that they pit individuals against each one another, foster individualism, and push people to

focus on their material interests in human relations. Conversely, these attitudes also reinforce unequal distributive processes.

Our students, most of whom come from the outer boroughs in New York City have conceptions of inequality which are steeped in the popular discourse on the topic. While the students intuitively understand that many problems in the workplace and their lives go beyond inequality and poverty, our experience has been that they do not have the framework to properly analyze and address the alienation they may be facing. One consequence is a tendency to focus their individual dreams on moving up or leaving the workplace hierarchy instead of creating communal alternatives for their self-realization.

At the same time, popular culture is also filled with representations of the ways in which the modern world is alienating. To make the concept of alienation accessible to our students, we have therefore developed a strategy that uses some of those representations to build a narrative wherein we explain alienation and relate it to the dynamics of the capitalist system. This strategy, with which we've now been experimenting over several semesters, has been very successful, both for the study of alienation and the understanding of phenomena like inequality. In this article, we outline our method and discuss some of the pedagogical outcomes we have witnessed over the years.

The remainder of the article is divided in four parts. First we define the concept of alienation and describe its evolution in the Marxian tradition as well as its linkages with issues of distribution. We then discuss some sources of alienation in contemporary US economy. Next, we present some of the materials we use in class and the way in which they allow for an introduction and a discussion of issues of alienation and we analyse some of the ways in which students have reacted to the exercise, outlining some of the possibilities and limitations they offer. We then offer some concluding remarks in a final section.

2. Alienation in Contemporary U.S. Economy

Prosperity figures prominently amongst the promises of capitalism and on that front, it is hard to dispute that for a large portion of the U.S. population, it delivers. It does so unequally, currently at the cost of an unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, but most Americans experience relative material comfort. This success itself brings up a first problem. The availability of consumer goods and services serves as a palliative for the more destructive sides of the system. Consumption can compensate for and distract from the absence of fulfillment on the job; it potentially provides a source of fantasies wherein the mind can escape to a brighter imagined future. The effect is ephemeral, ever needing renewal, and so it must be for the system to operate in its current form: mass production requires mass consumption. What is more, a consumption fix necessitates money, which is still largely obtainable through the job market, the same place

that fuels consumerist desires. One needs to accept the role of cog in the system in order to be able to have access to goods whose role is largely to compensate the deleterious effects of that position.

The consumerist promise can appear to have been undermined under neo-liberalism, as wages have stagnated over the last few decades (Mishel et al., 2015). However, credit has stepped in to replace foregone revenue for many, enabling the machine to keep going by supporting effective demand and keeping the consumption valve open (Mason and Jayadev, 2015; 2013). Credit also plays a role in integrating individuals even further within the system. While at least a subset of consumption habits must be supported via a regular influx of resources (basic needs, etc.), there is always a latent possibility of exit or retreat from the income-spending cycle. Debt curtails that possibility by requiring constant servicing and putting as collateral a large portion of what insures one's daily livelihood, present and future. This parallels the situation many workers experienced in company towns in earlier times, a reality captured in popular culture through such songs as Merle Travis' Sixteen Tons. Exit is still possible, but it has to be fairly comprehensive and re-entry is very hard, rendering that option fairly unpalatable. For example, it makes any sort of job switching attempts involving periods of low income much more difficult and increases stress and insecurity, reducing further the perceived control people have over their lives. This in turn increases the need for an consumption outlet of some sort, largely obtainable through further credit, thus reinforcing the cycle.

The advent of a consumption-through-credit process can exacerbate the alienation felt by many workers. The disenfranchisement felt at the workplace can, for some, be compounded by a general feeling of being trapped in that system (Clifton 2017). It is a sort of debt peonage on a systemic scale, with little scope for freedom and a compensation that, in effect, ties the individual down further. The widening of inequality in the last few decades adds another layer. While wages have been stable over recent decades, profits are up and a very small minority has been making out handsomely (Piketty 2014; 2015). The promise of progress in living conditions for the masses, a hallmark of the experience of many workers in the 20th century, has been replaced with stagnation and a feeling that all the efforts they are putting in are largely and increasingly appropriated by their employers to end up ultimately in the hands of a select minority.

These different aspects - alienating production processes, the consumption valve, debt as a chain, and unequal distribution - come out in various ways in popular culture, often alongside a fantasy of simpler, more manageable times, illustrative of a yearning to escape. In what follows, we discuss five of these representations, which we use as pedagogical tools to teach about alienation in introductory economics classes, along with some of the reactions expressed by students over the years. Before turning to this, however, let us define further the theoretical framework on which we base that teaching.

3. Theoretical Framework: Alienation and Inequality

One of the pillars of Karl Marx's analysis of modern bourgeois society centred around his *kritik* and deployment of the concept of alienation. His *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are considered by some to be the first coherent exposition of "*a system in statu nascendi*" which explores the connections between different spheres of human life and alienated labour (Mészáros, 2005, p.18). Specifically, Marx explores how institutions like the division of labour, private property, and mercantile exchange combine in modern society to produce a human being that, among various experiences, "feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home" (quoted in Tucker, 1978, p.74). For Marx these institutions, which are based on particular historical social relations, also produce devastating moral, psychological, and physiological harm to human beings (Braverman, 1974; Rubin, 1973). At the same time, he also analyzes how these institutions also contribute to hiding the source of the surplus, i.e. workers are exploited, which provides the basis for the profit of the capitalists. In this sense, it is a mistake to separate exploitation and alienation as exploitation and alienation condition each other. Alienation needs to be traced from the basic structure and development of capitalist society (Pappenheim, 2009). This stands in sharp contrast with most contemporary analysts of exploitation, distribution, and inequality.

In fact, Marx was critiquing this tendency to ignore alienation in the classical political economy analysis of distributive issues.

*"Political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the **direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production.** It is true that labor produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labor by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back into barbarous types of labor and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence – but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism"* (Tucker, (1978) , p. 73).

Ignoring alienation in the analysis leads to an abstraction of human productive activity to its systemic functionality. Many classical economists thus reached the conclusion that what needed to be supported in the proletariat was its ability to work, to sustain it as a factor of production, to pay it a subsistence wage.

*"Political economy can therefore advance the proposition that the proletarian, the same as any horse, must get as much as will enable him to work. It does not consider him when he is not working, as a human being; but leaves such consideration to criminal law, to doctors, to religion, to the statistical tables, to politics and to the poor-house overseer...In political economy *labor* occurs only in the form of *activity* as a *source of livelihood*. But political economy knows the worker only as a working animal — as a beast reduced to the strictest bodily needs"* (Marx, (1988), p. 27).

Such tendencies have been perpetuated over time, so much so that many modern critics of

inequality, such as Temin (2017), have the same blinders on. For example, those who focus their solution to inequality on education still treat workers as factors of production who can improve their lot by becoming more productive or specializing in what is in demand while they study. Many of our students have the same reflex, as they come to school to have a degree to escape the alienating jobs they have had to that point and move up the income hierarchy. If successful, the strategy allows the students to insert themselves better in a labour market that does not fundamentally change, where others will be in lower rungs, and where they'll likely experience the same disaffection. In this way, education conceived as training, by not changing the systemic structure, merely reproduces it further. The proposed solution to inequality perpetuates alienation.

To escape this problem we need to consider explicitly the intertwined nature of exploitation and alienation. Marx gives us an inkling of the dialectical way this can be conceived in the following quote:

“[t]he worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general. This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor’s product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*” (Marx, (1988), p.71).

The human being, whose labor is supposed to produce objects that satisfy needs, finds himself producing things that become more important than himself from the perspective of capital and its criteria of profitability, i.e. he finds himself opposed by the products of his labor, he finds himself negated by his own activity. Conceiving the worker as a consumer and increasing his purchasing power does not negate this fact. This inversion of the subject and object, this *quid pro quo*, is a fundamental characteristic of capitalism as a system of generalized commodity production that creates and propagates experiences like meaninglessness, dissociation, isolation, indifference, emptiness, loneliness, insecurity dissatisfaction, and drifting.

Marx observes that there is a *fetichisation* that comes out of this negation of the worker through his own practical activity, as objects are given properties that they do not possess, and it constitutes an important part of his critique of not only capitalism, but also modernity, wherein he proceeds to question the terrestrial gods produced by the alienation of labor in capitalist society. Specifically, he analyzes how human beings and their interactions through objects in a market (buying and selling) potentially create a world that appears to be beyond those same humans. This analysis, which permeates the theoretical development and deployment of Marx’s

categories throughout the three volumes of *Das Capital*, is crowned by the analysis of interest-bearing capital, where “the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishized form” because “[c]apital appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest, of its own increase“ (Marx, 1991 pp. 515-516).¹

All these elements are then integrated in a set of social relations that make up capitalism. Beyond the technical relations wherein workers use machines to produce commodities, the organisation of the labour process comes into play, notably relations of power through the nature of the class structure and the social relations of production (Bowles and Gintis, 1975). Social relations of production in turn shape the satisfaction workers get from their jobs and influence how they see themselves in their everyday lives.² Therefore, to isolate productivity considerations on the one hand and distributive dynamics on the other misses not only the point that they are jointly determined, which is underlined by theories such as the efficient wage hypothesis, but also that it is perfectly conceivable that more productivity and more equitable distribution could bring about more misery, depending on the social relations underlying the production process.

Briefly put, using Marx’s analysis, we elaborate a framework that links inequality and alienation explicitly. We then apply this framework to various representations of alienation in popular culture, in an analysis that culminates in the questioning of the bases of the system itself. It is to that exercise that we now turn.

4. Teaching Alienation Through Popular Culture

The Simpsons television show, a caricatural yet uncomfortably on point representation of a middle class family in the US, provides a nice entry point to a discussion about alienation. In *Brother Can You Spare Two Dimes?*, there is a scene where Homer, the father of the family, is walking on the street feeling downtrodden after receiving an award at his job for “outstanding achievement in the field of excellence.” The meaningless award came with a \$2000, a concoction from lawyers hired by Homer’s workplace, the nuclear power plant. After it is discovered that the work at the plant destroyed his sperm, he gets the award in exchange for signing away the firm’s responsibility. At the same time, Homer also feels depressed because his children have broken the couch in the living room that stands in front of the television. Muttering to himself “I feel alone, I feel empty, I feel couchless...” he suddenly sees a vibrating chair in a store window,

¹ In a sense, it can be said that the theoretical development of the categories in the three volumes suffers a “progressive fetishism” (Dussel, 20014) as more and more determinants are introduced in the analysis, a process that increases the gap/distance between the value creating source, i.e. living labor, and the value-form (commodity values, prices of production, market prices, etc.). The infamous “transformation problem” debate is probably the best example of this issue in the movement from the abstract to the concrete in Marx’s methodology.

² On a related note concerning how “needs” shape and are shaped by social relations, and their importance for understanding alienation, see brief debate between Bowles and Gintis (1975) and Wolff (1976).

for \$2000, and becomes enthralled with it. Coming back the next day with his family to try it, he tells the following to his wife who finds the chair expensive: “Marge, there is an empty spot I have always had inside me. I have tried to fill it with family, religion, community service, but those were dead ends. I think this chair is the answer.”

Almost everybody in the classroom knows *The Simpsons*, which allow us to show that portion of the program with only a summary introduction. Students are typically amused, recognising the archetypal middle class American representation. The discussion soon takes a more analytical turn as we question them further on the ways in which a chair may be seen as a substitute for social institutions like family or the church, sending them back to their own experience in the process. Most of our students are poor and feel a certain deprivation in terms of their consumption possibilities, as well as some envy of what is available to more affluent individuals. The clip allows for a deeper discussion of the reasons they feel that deprivation. Of course, some students have trouble meeting basic needs, but many start to recognise that the feeling may have something to do with the need to make up for something else through consumption.

We then move on to a second set of clips, this time linked with the workplace, to explore one possible source of alienation. We show a lengthy segment from the silent black and white *Modern Times* (1936), in which Charlie Chaplin’s character is on the assembly line, having his humanity stripped away by the mechanical setup. Charlie Chaplin has to repeat simple tasks over and over again, quickly, and under the constant supervision of his boss. Even the bathroom break is timed and supervised. There is no space for imagination or autonomous thought and action. At some point, the company goes so far as to test a feeding machine on him that would allow for reduced lunch breaks and higher productivity, reducing further his humanity to labor power. In essence, Chaplin has been put under control of the assembly line on which he works. In fact, there is also a scene later on where Chaplin is swallowed whole by the machine. This is clearly a representation of earlier times, as the black and white finish of the movie illustrates... or is it? The vast majority of our students have extensive work experience and many associate aspects of what they see in the movie with the drudgery of their own tasks, especially when they are working in manual positions such as restaurant cooks. Class discussion focuses on how that type of work does not appeal much to their creativity and human potential, and how that generates frustration and alienation.

Strangely, many students who view the film also mention the fear that the next step from making the worker into a machine is dispensing with her altogether and replacing her with a robot. But why would we want to keep such work, which a few minutes before had been said to be stultifying by our students, in human hands? The short answer, usually quickly given by our students, is that more than having a bad job, people fear not having a paycheck. This brings a deeper issue of the distribution of the social product in a capitalist economy and how paid work is the main source of revenue for a majority of people, which allows a discussion about the

inequality of access to the means of production and the seeming inability we have as a society to reduce overall work while sharing it more equally. So while some jobs are indeed whisked away by technology, despite attempts to preserve them, they don't lead to an overall reduction of work, but rather an increase in other types of jobs. What is more, the people remaining on the job are expected to work harder and be more productive, thereby reinforcing the idea that workers have to adapt to the machines, not the reverse.

At this stage, we take a step back to have a broader discussion with our students about the role of technology in capitalist dynamics and how it is linked with inequality. In our view, recent discussions about technology are tributary to a fallacious understanding of the relationship between people and tools. To fear that machines take work away from humans fetishises machines, gives them an agency that they do not possess (Noble, 1984). The organisation of labour in society and the division of the social products are social institutions, they are the results of human actions. Who works doing and receiving what is at its core an issue of collective action. In that sense, technological change is not an autonomous factor, but one that can be reclaimed by human beings. Instead of celebrating the preservation of certain types of jobs in a capitalist setting, or their reinvention in a white collar setting, technological change could conceivably be used as means to free ourselves from work. We thus do a thought experiment with our students and have them try to imagine how technology could be used in various ways in different work settings, with different outcomes in terms of distribution, workload, etc. One setup that works great for this is to divide them in small teams and have the teams discuss independently, perhaps with different scenarios in terms of technology or workplaces, for example. Doing this thought experiment with students inevitably brings up a fundamental question: do capitalist dynamics actually allow for such a possibility ?

This is a good lead up to a third set of clips, this time from a more recent movie: *Office Space* (1999), starring Jennifer Aniston. In that movie, Peter Gibbons, who works in an office as a software analyst, is unhappy with his work, which he finds utterly meaningless, and his lazy and incompetent boss. The disaffection is compounded by the fact that the boss just hired two consultants, in an effort to downsize the company. Gibbons goes to see a hypnotist, whose hypnotic suggestion suddenly makes him very happy. The hypnotist dies right after giving the suggestion, though, leaving Gibbons in an altered state. His attitude at the job changes drastically as he simply stops caring. Ironically, this show of independence has him singled-out as management material by the consultants and he gets a promotion.

There are many useful elements in that movie, such as the lack of meaning and control Gibbons experiences on the job and the resultant feeling of disaffection. The whole setup of the firm also feels like work is simply created for the sake of it, which sends us back to the general discussion about distributive processes within the system. The more modern setting of the movie makes it easier than *Modern Times* for students to relate to and their conclusions remain broadly the same,

that beyond the caricature, the movie is representative of a certain reality. In fact, most of the students with work experience in a cubicle environment say they spend their time longing to be out - so dreaming about vacation or off time - or moving upwards in the hierarchy. At that point, there are typically some students present who did achieve low-level managerial rank who chime in and say that going up may not be much of a solution. Managing other people to do work they fled, while still not providing much control over the general functioning of the company, produces its own brand of alienation.

Moving away from the workplace and into broader systemic dynamics, a fourth set of clips adds another layer to the picture. We use *Fight Club* (1999), starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, to talk about the alienation stemming from the debt obligations besetting most American households. The main character exhibits a split personality, which in a sense can be said to be an illustration of that alienation - alienation from oneself and the surrounding world - and so is a motley crew of individuals assembled within the fold of a “fight club”, who simply cannot fit in society as it is organised. The response they cook up is a general scheme of debt relief, which is implemented by the end of the movie. One interesting aspect of the film is that while alienation induces “craziness”, by normal standards, it is the “crazier” personality that dreams of the escape. It is on this yearning for escape that we focus the discussion.

By and large, our students are hopeful for the future. They feel the American dream exists and that their path through college is a way in which they can partake in it. We take this issue head on elsewhere with a careful study of the conditions and materiality of class and income mobility. Here we want to confront the fact that they have to participate in certain ways in the economic system in order to be successful in society and that this is in part enforced by relations of indebtedness. We discuss ways in which the credit structure contributes in maintaining the current distributive setup, both in the ways in which certain groups are advantaged over others and the way in which some people have to accept jobs they might otherwise spurn. Student loans are a classic example on both counts: many students from the lower rungs of the income scale have to take loans in order to be able to make it through college, which then creates an obligation to work upon graduation.

Thinking it would be a familiar situation to our students we used student loans as examples the first time we got to that part of the course, only to realise that many or even most of our students did not have to borrow to go to college. We teach in a public school with very low tuition fees and many students qualify for government grants to help cover the costs of college. They can certainly understand in theory the problem posed by student loans, but by and large, it is not part of their reality. We thus resort to a discussion of other types of debt, such as credit cards or payday loans. This has greater resonance and if they don't suffer directly from the shackles of that type of debt, they typically know somebody who does. They can thus see ways in which debt can push participation in the economic system and generate concurrent desires to escape

from debt obligation or the system itself.

This takes us to the fifth example: *Assembly Line* by B. Traven (1993). *Assembly Line* is a short story, written almost as a tale, which recounts the trip of E. L. Winthrop, a New Yorker, to Mexico. During his trip, Winthrop meets an “Indian”, who is busy making small baskets on the side of the road. The Mexican man is primarily a peasant, but he makes those baskets when he has free time and once he has enough, goes in town to the market to sell them. Winthrop finds them beautiful and upon asking for their price, figures that they are very cheap by New York standards. He then goes back home and finds a confectioner who would be ready to buy a batch of baskets at a much higher unit price to use them as packaging, provided that Winthrop can guarantee a delivery of 10,000.

Winthrop travels back to Mexico and finds the man once more. Winthrop asks him whether he would be able to make 10,000 baskets and if so, how much would the price be. The “indian” initially says yes regarding his ability to make 10,000, but then hesitates about the price and takes the night to think about it. Upon meeting again the next day, the Mexican quotes a price per basket that is much higher than what he was asking for one basket, going against the previous pattern whereby he would sell a higher quantity of baskets for less money per unit. In the ensuing conversation, the “indian” responds to Winthrop’s bewilderment by explaining the different determinants of such a high price : (1) that producing so many baskets would mean abandoning his main source of livelihood as a farmer and perhaps more importantly, his food security, as even with a higher income he is not certain to be able to secure enough corn and beans; (2) that it would put much pressure on the natural environment from which he draws the raw material (bast, fiber, sources of dyes, etc.); (3) that it is too many baskets for him to make and while he could always get some help from the people in his village, but then they would also have to forego the work in their own fields; and finally (4) that making so many baskets would deprive them of their originality as outlets for the “indian’s” creativity and artistic proclivities. This puts an end to the negotiations and Winthrop goes back to NYC empty-handed.

While the Mexican does quote a price to Winthrop, what runs throughout is a basic refusal of the proposal as such, a refusal to change his current way of living as an independent peasant to a capitalist setup of mass production. At the core of this refusal is a basic appreciation of the satisfaction he gets from the current process of production and a realisation that mass production would deprive him of that satisfaction. In a sense, the “indian” refuses to be alienated. A similar interpretation could be given of his resistance to the idea of hiring other people in the village to work for him. He thus refuses a fundamental change in the relationship with his fellow villagers, one that would fundamentally be based on interest.

Rather than simply assign the short story as reading material, we ask the students to write a short essay after they read it in which they have to reflect on one question: Is the Mexican’s refusal

reasonable? This brings notions of alienation, distribution of the gains between Winthrop and the “indian”, notions of unequal development, etc. We then discuss it in class once the papers are in. While some students come out in favour of the development of capitalist relations of production, the vast majority of students typically find the Mexican’s decision entirely reasonable on the basis of the alienation the alternative would generate. Some even dream a bit of the simplicity of the setting... Though that is evidently easier to do while it remains idle thought. After all, there are important constraints in the life of the “indian”, notably in terms of consumption possibilities. And this brings us back full circle to the first clips from *The Simpsons* about the role of consumption in a capitalist society.

Throughout the years, we have used different parts of this series of props, exercises and discussion. We started with the B. Traven piece and have gradually added the others to give an overall picture that is more complete. We sometimes employ them in a row, other times we sprinkle them over a few classes, all with an eye to have this discussion of alienation in the context of a broader analysis of the dynamics of the capitalist system, notably processes linked to inequality. We thus analyse alienation in and of itself, but also in relation to the rest of the system, so as to delineate the dialectical relationship between the different components of that system. In this way, we can question the broader impact that this system has on us as human beings, how phenomena like inequality mould social relations at the same time as they shape the development of the system itself. We also find it important to contrast different economic systems in terms of the alienation they generate, to say that what is experienced under capitalism is not inevitable and that we can imagine emancipatory alternatives, though we have to be careful not to romanticise those alternatives either.

5. Conclusion

Economic inequality is one of the central features of our times, receiving a lot of attention inside and outside academia. Many students taking economics courses come to class with a desire to understand that phenomenon better, if not to figure out how to mitigate or combat it. As professors, we feel it is incumbent on us to address the issue head on. In fact, we see it both as a responsibility and an opportunity to teach our students about broader systemic dynamics and the ways in which inequality fits in the overall picture. To this end, we enrich the discussion about inequality with other concepts that are helpful to analyse the capitalist system.

In this paper, we outline a strategy we developed to teach one of these concepts, alienation, which we adopt from the Marxian tradition. For us, alienation and distributive dynamics are intertwined and teaching about alienation contributes to an understanding of the determinants and consequences of inequality. Alienation as such is not an oft-discussed concept outside of academic circles, even though it is present in popular discourse in various forms. As a strategy to teach about the concept, we thus elected to make use of various well-known representations of

alienation in popular culture to lead a conversation in which we gradually highlight its different facets and the way they relate to inequality and broader capitalist dynamics.

We refined this exercise over the years, adding some representations and changing the ways in which we approach them, and by now we feel that it really gives us a good point of entry for a study of alienation. This use of popular culture helps us bring the concept to life for students who recognize that, unbeknownst to them, they more or less understood it already and simply needed a set of analytical tools for its systematic study. This exercise is thus liberating in more ways than one. Now only do the students learn about the functioning of the system in which they live, they do so using narratives they encounter every day, seeing in the process how popular culture, as a reflection of people's experiences, can be used to understand better the world that surrounds them. And they also discover that much of what there is to learn, they already know; they simply need to apply themselves carefully and systematically to the task of uncovering it.

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