

Uprootedness and Alienation in Simone Weil

MIKLÓS VETÖ

Simone Weil was still a school-girl when she discovered Marx, and in a way through Marx the crisis-stricken Europe of the late twenties and the early thirties. While deeply influenced by Marx in her earlier writings, his doctrine was never a revelation or a religion for her. Her syndicalist experience showed her the inability of orthodox marxism to cope with twentieth century problems. Her enormous knowledge of the history of philosophy prevented her from being satisfied by a relatively poor and fragmentary philosophical system. Her moral and metaphysical aspirations were not met by Marx's answers to eternal human problems. She threw off his influence quickly, long before her religious experiences. She still retained a strong interest in several marxist problems and especially in that of 'estranged labour'. Her early writings describe and question. The works of her maturity answer. No one else has created so rich a synthesis of the problems which might have been raised while attempting to analyse labour. Although Plato and Marx are the most important contributors to this synthesis, its answers are of purely Christian inspiration.

One may say without hesitation that the most original, if not the only original, idea of Marx in the field of philosophy proper was that of the alienation of labour. The whole pathetic richness of his early writings culminates in his description of 'estranged labour'.¹ How the worker is alienated from the product of the work which will be not his own. How he is alienated from his work since it does not serve him, and how he comes to hate it as causing pain and suffering. The worker is no more the subject but the object of the work. The aim of work is only production and the worker becomes a simple means to it. The cure of alienation for Marx, as everyone knows, lies in the establishment of the communist society without private property, the cause of alienation, in which labour will become joyful and free.

Simone Weil wholly appreciates the pertinence and the ardour of

¹Marx: 'Estranged Labour', in *Economic and politic manuscripts*. 'Moscow, 1958. p. 75.

Marx's description, but she considers its analysis, and even more the proposed remedy for it, insufficient. The very word 'alienation' does not occur at all in her writings, but her social thought, her philosophy of labour in a way centre on its problems. She was obsessed by the growing split between man and his work, man and his community, and she considered the marxist conception of it basically mistaken. The marxist approach is inadequate because it tries to reduce the whole sphere of the human to the single sphere of economy; inadequate, for it lacks a thorough analysis of labour as such and of human activity in general; inadequate, since the methods of the proposed solutions do not affect the actual conditions of labour, but only economic and political relationships. While continuing to criticize the deficiencies of marxism, she penetrates beyond to its real problems and describes labour and especially physical labour as being 'the spiritual core' of 'a well ordered society'.²

The years she spent working in factories convinced her that in the life of industrial workers,

'... everything is intermediate . . . everything is a means to something else, finality³ has no room in it'.⁴

There is really nothing new in this sentence. It is the echo of the famous Kantian maxim about means and ends, and at the same time an echo of Marx's teaching concerning the worker's existence, oriented exclusively towards the object, the product of his labour. This absence of 'finality' is the result of a society where labour and labourer are mere means and the product of labour is the only end. But this definition goes further. The absence of finality belongs in a way to the very essence of modern industrial labour. (Marx's concept of 'estranged labour' implies the same). This lack of finality reaches its furthest point in Taylorism and in the assembly line. The man who works on a line and repeats the same gesture, or the same sequence of gestures, restricts his life to the present. He does not think of what he did, nor of what he will do: he is reduced to the pure present. But the essential feature of human existence is the consciousness of its continuity in time:

'Man is only real in his innermost self when he forms the connecting link between the past and the future'.⁵

²*Need for Roots*. London, 1952. p. 256.

³'Finality' stands for the French word 'finalité' meaning endedness towards something.

⁴*La Condition Ouvrière*, p. 262. The translations from S. Weil's writings which were not yet published in English are due to Mr U. P. Burke.

⁵*Notebooks*, London, 1956. vol. I p. III.

The present is only a link between past and future, a step in the preparation of the future. Forecasting, planning, hoping are the characteristics of human existence and these are all categories of the future. So modern industrial labour deprives the worker of an essential factor of human life: its three dimensional unity in time. Modern industrial labour is very different from other known forms of labour activity, but it is still a labour activity. Accordingly, what is an essential feature of it, could not be absolutely unrelated to labour as such. Lack of finality is an essential feature. Its discovery at the very heart of modern industrial labour does not by any means prove that other forms of labour, previous to that we know, would have been surrounded by a halo of finality. Lack of finality is inherently connected with the absence of the consciousness of continuity in the three dimensions of time. We read in one of the last manuscripts of Simone Weil:

‘The human mind dominates time and ceaselessly and rapidly surveys the past and the future, leaping over any sort of interval; but he who labours is subject to time in the same way as the inert matter leaps from one instant to another’.⁶

The emphasis is on the discontinuity. The labourer makes one gesture after another, but his mind does not unite these gestures. The consciousness of the present gesture is not accompanied by the representation of the past gesture and of the whole concatenation of past gestures as conditions of the present gesture. This notion of discontinuity leads us to the metaphysical foundations of Simone Weil’s thought, which, especially in her first important writing, the essay on the causes of oppression and liberty, shows a distinct Cartesian touch. She considered as the first criterion of truly human activity its being dominated by reason, its methodical character:

‘the only mode of production absolutely free would be that in which methodical thought was in operation throughout the course of the work’.⁷

She writes of free production, since freedom is the opposite of alienation. The man who is free is the master of all parts of his being. Alienation means the loss of one or more essential factors of one’s being. Man is free, when he, that is to say his mind, surveys and controls all his acts. So freedom, at least in one of its aspects, is equivalent to rationality. Man is alienated when the acts or some of the acts, executed by his body are not effectively supervised by his mind. So alienation at

⁶*Need for Roots*, pp. 255-256. I have corrected the translation of the last sentence.

⁷*Oppression and Liberty*, London, 1958. p. 95.

least in one of its aspects is equivalent to irrationality.

The above mentioned discontinuity in time is only another expression of the gap between the mental and bodily in labour, one aspect of which is the lack of a continuous mental supervision and direction of bodily acts. It is equivalent to the absence of methodical thought and thereby we come to face the puzzling paradox that labour which is often quoted as the proper characteristic of man as a reasonable being seems deprived of method. Of course it does not mean that there is no method at all in labour. But the truly methodical moments when the 'thought is at work' are relatively infrequent and are mixed up with moments when there is discontinuity between mind and body. The intensity of mental supervision and its awareness are very liable to changes too. However the apparent absurdity of the idea that 'labour lacks method' is cleared up only through the very important distinction between 'methodical' and 'what is in accordance with method':

'The difference is capital; for he who applies a method has no need to conceive it in his mind at the moment he is applying . . .'⁸

Therefore the fact that any sort of labour activity whatsoever could be and has to be in 'accordance with method' does not mean that it becomes methodical. This distinction reveals the fact that there is a split between thought and execution in labour activity as such: one has to realize the theoretical problem and afterwards to apply the solution, but when one applies it, the application is that of a more or less externalized, objectified result of the thinking activity and is not accompanied by the thinking process itself.

Simone Weil's conclusion, 'labour lacks method', in spite of the distinction between 'methodical' and 'what is in accordance with method', remains none the less bewildering. Especially when we come to realize what is implied by it: the more labour activity is in accordance with method, with a more and more perfect method, the less methodical becomes labour. Any sort of labour activity whatsoever except a very primitive one is a mixture of semi-automatic routine and conscious mental supervision. In Simone Weil's terms a composition of the methodical and what is only in accordance with method characterizes labour. But the more complicated is the sequence of gestures, the less its performer's mind can and must survey it, and routine will more and more replace thought. Yes, labour as the proper characteristic of a rational social being lacks rationality and this lack merely gets worse throughout the history of labour.

⁸*ibid.* pp. 91-92.

Still, the growing split between thought and act occurs within the power of the same human being. The ties between the mental elaboration and the physical execution of an action may be completely broken but the gap is always a gap between the acts of the same human being. One might forget how one worked out a technical problem while applying it in given situations but the alienation expressed in this discontinuity is still restricted to a single human being. But in modern industrial labour (and in most other human achievements which require complicated projects and huge working masses) a second split arises; a split between one man and another man. A man will apply methods and techniques which he did not think of, and when he collaborates with other men and women the co-ordination of this collaboration will be assured by another man. Therefore alienation is manifested in social life also in the form of co-ordinated activities when one man thinks and co-ordinates and others execute, without understanding the whole of which their work is a part. Alienation is extended in this way from men as individuals to men as constituting the social organization of labour.

The change from labour of a methodical character to labour 'in accordance with method' is complete in modern industrial labour where this second split (between man and man) is fully realized:

'It would seem as though the method had transferred its abode from the mind into the matter. Automatic machines present the most striking image of it. From the moment when the mind which has worked out a method of action has no need to take part in the job of execution, this can be handed over to pieces of metal just as well as and better than to living members; and one is thus presented with the strange spectacle of machines in which the method has become so perfectly crystallized in the metal that it seems as though it is they who do the thinking, and it is the men who serve them who are reduced to the condition of automata'.⁹

Nevertheless, for Simone Weil the original alienation of labour, the inherent split in it, is not the one between man and man, between the man who executes and the man who thinks, but in man himself; between his thought and the application of it. This alienation is far from being restricted to physical labour and even to labour as such. The split is present even in the realm of pure science:

'To take a simple example; it is absolutely impossible, at the moment when one is working out a difficult division sum, to have the theory

⁹*ibid.* p. 92.

of division present to the mind . . . above all because when carrying out each of the partial operations at the end of which the division is accomplished, one forgets the numbers represent now units, now tens, now hundreds. The signs combine together according to the laws governing the things which they signify, but for want of being able to keep the relationship of sign to thing signified continually present to the mind, one handles them as though they were combined together according to their own laws; and as a result, the combinations become unintelligible, which means to say that they take place automatically. The mechanical nature of arithmetical operations is exemplified by the existence of calculating machines: but an accountant, too, is nothing else but an imperfect and unhappy calculating machine'.¹⁰

So the signs created by the mind, its objectified thoughts, become invariably foreign to the process of thinking: a split arises between mind and its own products. The signs which enable man to deal with more and more facts, events and things, are not only the means to his government of the physical and social universe. They are in a certain sense the symbols, and at the same time the instruments, of his defeat. By helping him to handle an increasing number of parts of his world, what they really achieve is his isolation from this world. The growing power and extension of signs increase the amounts of facts and events which man dominates, but at the same time his awareness of facts and events is lessened.

The accumulation of signs in science weakens the grasp of the scientist's mind on the things which he has to deal with and at the same time the signs replace in a large measure the methodical work of man's mind: instead of a human brain, technical terms and algebraic calculi assure the cohesion of the science. In modern industry machines are placed between man and matter. In the domain of economy money is no longer a simple instrument of exchange and the actual production is subordinated to the fluctuations of financial life.¹¹ The notion of 'property' means no longer an actual owning and running of a business, it does not constitute any longer an existential tie between the possessor and the thing possessed¹² but only the external handling of it: its control.

Man applies the same empty control in all other domains of his social

¹⁰*ibid.* p. 93.

¹¹*ibid.* p. 110.

¹²*ibid.* p. 115.

existence. The real gravity of this phenomenon is shown in the domain of political and administrative life. The growing size and complexity of modern society entails a fantastic increase in the facts, events and problems with which political and administrative leaders have to deal. The statistics, rules and reports which enable these leaders to control men's relationships become entirely uncontrollable to human minds. They will be replaced by the bureaucratic machine, the most perfect manifestation of these 'intermediate things' like signs, machines and money which are a 'new sphere of reality' after those of Man and Nature. The bureaucratic machine means a decisive and annihilating blow to man's freedom and dignity, Since

'the social function most essentially connected with the individual, that which consists in co-ordinating, managing, deciding is beyond any individual capacity and becomes to a certain extent collective, and, as it were, anonymous'.¹³

The circle is completed, the reign of things destroys that of the thinking man. Signs in science, machines in industry, money in economy, separate man from things while assisting his control over them. This separation is a consequence of the second moment of alienation: the appearance of the split between man and man as completing the original split within the powers of the same man. Alienation reaches its most perfect form in the bureaucratic apparatus of the totalitarian state. The co-ordinating function itself, the realm of the few and the cause of alienation for the many, is alienated and becomes 'collective and anonymous'. It leaves man, and will take up its residence in the mechanism of a gigantic machine. The totalitarian leader is no more than a sorcerer's apprentice without knowing it.

Alienation is not the lot of some particular human society but a concomitant of every human community. Its origin lies in the inevitable split between the mental and the bodily in any sort of labour whatsoever, seconded by the co-ordinatory function itself. It does not mean a complete helplessness in the face of alienation. Some aspects of alienation could be restricted, and a more concrete, though it is true more limited, approach might be made to one of its specifically contemporary manifestations: to uprootedness (which is however not entirely limited to contemporary society). One understands better what is meant by 'uprootedness' (*déracinement*) when its opposite, 'rootedness' (*enracinement*) is analysed first.

'A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural

¹³*ibid.* p. 110.

participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future'.¹⁴

Man is surrounded by many communities: a village or a town, the region, the nation, a church, a group of producers. Man's existence is social: that is to say he has to live and to work in these communities. The two, of course over-simplified, patterns of his existence in these collectivities are either an external adjustment or a conscious, active, natural participation. Once more we find continuity in time as the criterion of man's unity since

'the community has to preserve in living shape certain treasures of the past and certain expectations for the future'.

It is through this continuity that the finality of existence is preserved. Labour as such is marked by an irreducible absence of finality because of its one-dimensional character in time; by its being reduced to the naked present. The question is whether the existence of man as a whole can be realized or not with regard to finality, in spite of lack of finality in his labour. Man suffers in his work from discontinuity in time but in his existence as a whole, thinks Simone Weil, discontinuity in time and discontinuity in space could be abolished. I mean discontinuity in its social, human aspect. Discontinuity in time means the breaking of ties with the past. Discontinuity in space means the lack of conscious and natural ties with other human beings who form a community.

So uprootedness is equivalent to isolation: isolation in time from the historical values of the past, and isolation in space from the multiple communities which need man and which are needed by man. There are three major forms of uprootedness: (a) Uprootedness generated by the development of the modern state and nation. (b) Uprootedness of peasants. (c) Uprootedness of industrial workers. The third form of uprootedness is that which Simone Weil knows and analyses the best. Once more she takes as her starting-point the analysis of time. She establishes a comparison between the time of industrial labour and the time of agricultural labour. Her assertion is that the labourer needs a mixture of uniformity and variety in his labour.

In spite of the infinite variety of the events which can occur, it is possible for the peasant to make some forecast. He knows more or less what is going to happen, but the infinite variety of the coming events leave enough room for his personal initiative. On the other hand in a modern factory everything is dominated by uniformity and there is no

¹⁴*Need for Roots*, p. 41.

room for variety. Time in this sort of labour is characterized essentially by repetition.¹⁵ Forecast and thought are seldom required and if they are, it is in a very limited measure. However the absence of forecast goes beyond the working process itself, usually the worker does not know what will happen to the piece of metal on which he was working, and even when he knows that the final stage of this piece of metal is a machine, a needle or a tin, he does not realize, or he realizes very imperfectly, the importance of his part in the manufacturing of these products. Here lies or might lie a real turning point in any working class movement whatsoever.

A great factory is only the external environment of the workers who constitute more an agglomeration than a community, therefore their adjustment to each other and to the whole of the workers is only external. This external adjustment of the workers, together with their lack of interest in their work, make the materials and the place of work indifferent or even an object of hatred.

If a man acts on something external to him, he alienates himself irremediably. If the metal, the wood, remain external to him, he is lost in the object of his work. Man externalizes himself in his work; in order to find himself again, he has to appreciate the matter of his work. Otherwise externalization changes into alienation. Man has to lift up the matter of his work to his own human sphere. He can do it by appropriating in a broader way not only the metal, the wood, the machines, the tools, but in a way the factory itself. The essence of this ownership in a broader sense would be to make the workers feel that the factory belongs to them, is theirs.

To sum up: the uprootedness of industrial workers consists in the split on the one hand between them and their work and their working-places, and on the other hand between worker and worker. It is widened by the unawareness of their personal, individual contribution to the basic needs of the community.

Simone Weil thinks that industrial labour will always contain an element of physical suffering, hardship and monotony, and society will always need co-ordination. Therefore uprootedness cannot be abolished by purely political and economic measures, however important they may be. These measures are external with regard to the actual labour process itself and will never end in internal adjustments of workers to each other and to their work; and this is precisely what is needed. She writes ironically in her Notebooks:

¹⁵*La Condition Ouvrière*, p. 257.

'The great mistake on the part of the Marxists and of the whole of the nineteenth century lay in believing that by walking straight in front of one, one necessarily rises up into the air'.¹⁶

The Need for Roots and several other writings offer a fascinating however utopian-looking approach to the healing of the illness of industrial society. While speaking of her own ideas of a civilization founded on the spirituality of labour, Simone Weil writes:

'If they are presented to the public, it must be solely as the expression of a thought which reaches very far beyond the men and the societies of today, and which one proposes in all humility to keep before the mind as a guide in all things'.¹⁷

What matters above all—according to Simone Weil—is that a new form of education and a humanization of the condition of industrial labour should enable the worker to understand his rôle in the manufacturing of a tin, a sewing machine or a needle. He has to know that however insignificant is his rôle in the manufacturing of an article, he contributes through it to the fulfilment of human needs. Aggressive class consciousness is an artificial product, a substitute for the personal, individual dignity of the worker.

'... if a man who makes bolts were to feel a legitimate and limited pride in making bolts, then he would not force himself to feel an artificial and unlimited pride in thinking that his class is destined to make history and dominate everything'.¹⁸

The worker may be given a knowledge and an understanding of the spiritual values of past and present, a consciousness of his social rôle, a comprehension of the process of labour in which he is a part. The material conditions of his life and work may be improved. He may be given a community feeling in his factory, among his fellow workers, but the inherent alienation of modern industrial labour, and indeed of labour as such, cannot be transcended.

'A certain subordination and a certain uniformity are sufferings built into the very essence of work'.¹⁹

They cannot be suppressed, but they must be penetrated by spiritual values. Simone Weil considers the lack of finality as the sign of the inherent alienation of the labourer and his labour since:

'the hunger for finality constitutes the very being of every man'.²⁰

¹⁶*Notebooks*, vol. II, p. 447.

¹⁷*Need for Roots*, p. 94.

¹⁸*La Condition Ouvrière*, p. 259.

¹⁹*ibid.* p. 271.

²⁰*ibid.* p. 265.

and, as she said,

'... everything is intermediate in this existence . . . everything is a means, finality has no room in it'.²¹

A worker works:

'because of a need and not in order to achieve a good'.²²

Besides the first opposition between 'good' and 'need', there is another between causality ('because') and finality ('in order to. . .').

In labour:

'one makes an effort, at the end of which from every point of view, one has no more than at the beginning . . . But in human nature there is no other source of energy for effort but desire and man does not desire what he has. Desire is a direction, a beginning of movement towards something'.²³

But life is not an end, it is only the substratum of all that is good. When all that is good vanishes, life becomes the only end and all our actions, thoughts and desires will be oriented towards safeguarding life. The worker cannot expect a radical change in his life. He works only in order to assure the material conditions of his and his family's existence. But when one's effort is only to safeguard one's life, one is, as it were, under a continuous threat of death. This is the life of the ancient slave who was spared during the conquest of his city, but who since then has been living with only one hope—that he will not be killed. In spite of the economic and political progress of contemporary society, its growing wealth and its relative freedom, the modern worker's existence is very like that of the ancient slave. The maintenance of life is the sole object of his efforts. Finality is irremediably absent from modern industrial labour. But when there is no hope in the sphere of the natural, Simone Weil seeks help in the sphere of the supernatural, not by evading the natural but by uncovering the supernatural which lies behind and beyond it. The only way of making bearable this absence of finality is to conceive of beauty in a wider sense as the reflection of God in this world:

'There is one unique case when human nature allows the soul's desire to move not towards what might be, but towards what exists. This case is that of beauty. Everything which is beautiful is the object of desire, but one does not desire it to be different, one does not desire to change it, one desires it just as it is. On a clear night one looks

²¹*ibid.* p. 262.

²²*ibid.* p. 261.

²³*ibid.*

with desire on the starry sky and what one desires is exactly the spectacle as one has it'.²⁴

Desire is a 'direction', a 'beginning towards something', so it implies the future. The only case when desire aims at the present is in that of the contemplation of beauty. When the future is not involved in our life, the manifestations of finality or of particular ends are not present either. Particular ends are irremediably absent from the worker's life, but finality itself, a finality without ends, might be present. The finality without ends is God, the end of ends, or the essence of ends. Everything which makes man think of God, find God in his life and in his work, fills his existence with finality. Beauty has a sacramental value by enabling us to enter the path leading to God. Churches, statutes and frescoes, processions and rites are intermediate things, religious symbols in the form of manifestations of beauty. The believer seeks to approach God through them. Although they are very appropriate to places of worship, it does not mean that they could find a place in factories and in the cornfields. Labour activities themselves have to be symbolically understood and indeed they bear profound religious meaning as echoes of Christ's life and illustrations of his teaching.

The decorations of churches reveal beauty in the realm of art; labour reveals the hidden beauty of the Universe inseparable from religion: '... matter ... is a mirror tarnished by our breath. It is only necessary to clean the mirror and to read the symbols which have been written on matter from all eternity'.²⁵

It is quite easy to discover religious symbols in the peasant's works; Christ's parables are full of the scenes of agricultural labour. The great events of the villager's life, sowing time, harvest vintage, should be celebrated by the Church and glorified by the full richness of the liturgy, and ordinary, everyday work, even the most insignificant, should be related symbolically to Christ's life and words as declared in the Gospel...

Religious symbols may have an equal rôle in the industrial worker's existence. Factory work is dominated by the rigid laws of mechanics governing the machines, but

'The laws of mechanics, which derive from geometry and which our machines obey, contain supernatural truths. The oscillation of movement backwards and forwards is the image of life on earth. Everything which belongs to creatures is limited, except the desire in us,

²⁴*ibid.* p. 265.

²⁵*ibid.* p. 266.

which is the mark of our origin . . . It is God who imposes a limit on everything . . . In God only there is an eternal changeless act which curls back on itself and has no other object but itself. In creatures there are only movements directed towards the outside but which are forced by the limit to oscillate; this oscillation is a corrupted form of that orientation towards itself which is exclusively divine. This connection corresponds to the connection between movement backwards and forwards and circular movement in our machines. The circle is also the place of mean proportionals: to find in a perfectly rigorous manner the mean proportional between unity and a number which is not a square, there is no method but tracing a circle. The numbers which are not linked naturally with unity are images of our misery: and the circle which comes from outside (in a transcendent manner with respect to the domain of numbers) to bring its mediation, is the image of the only remedy for that misery. These truths and many others are written in the simple spectacle of a pulley which determines an oscillating movement'.²⁶

This religious symbolism is not limited to particular sorts of labour. It must penetrate the whole existence of workers, peasants and all men whatsoever, and it must be the foundation of a new social organization. Thereby society will be no longer an aggregate of atoms but a hierarchy of orders and

'Just as the religious life is divided into orders each of which corresponds to a special kind of vocation, so in the same way social life will appear like a pyramid of distinct vocations; with Christ as its apex'.²⁷

²⁶*ibid.* p. 268-269.

²⁷*Le Christianisme et la vie des champs*, in '*La Vie Intellectuelle*', 1953. juillet, p. 71.