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Book review

Jaeggi, R. (2005): *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems.* (Alienation. On the current relevance of a socio-philosophical problem). Frankfurt a.M.: Campus. – Price 24.90 €.

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Why would a philosophical essay on alienation find relevance for theory and practice of social work? The thematical bridge for this book into social work is formulated within the socio-spatial paradigm of social work, formulated by Ulrich Deinet, Christian Reutlinger or Richard Krisch. Here, the term of acquirement (Aneignung) is described as a key process of social work. To become fully capable as a subject, individuals have to acquire the world through processes of *Bildung* and social development. In her book, Rahel Jaeggi regards alienation as a symptom of failed or missed acquirement: Individuals experience to be no longer in contact with themselves and the environmental world; in that sense, she describes a “distorted world- and self-acquirement” as the core problem of alienation. From this perspective, Rahel Jaeggi can describe core mechanisms of the processes of becoming a subject within social environments. And therefore she can shed some light on one of the key processes that social workers are dealing with.

In the first part, Jaeggi traces the term of alienation back to its roots in the history of philosophy and social thought. Here, she especially rediscovers the concepts of Marx (alienation through inhuman conditions of production) and Heidegger (alienation through objectivating world relations and not actively lived existences). In a summary of the first part, Jaeggi concludes that only a world that one can make his “own” in the sense of an acquiring world identification can be a world within one can act self determined (Jaeggi 2005: 41). The term of alienation refers to the actual possibility to understand oneself as subject, as a master of his or her own actions (ibd.). She closes the first part with further considerations on Ernst Tugendhats idea that alienation means not to be able to find command with oneself and closes with further reflections on the key processes and mechanisms of acquirement. Here, she also formulates the interesting difference that there are liberal (loss of liberty and factual possibility to lead one’s life) as well as conservative concepts (loss of traditional values and community contexts) of alienation.

In the second part, she describes four bigger case-examples about the common types and phenomena of alienation. Here, the reader can learn about the difficult life conditions of a young father that does no longer feel to have control and choice of his new life situation, an un-authentic TV-presenter who seems to be completely tied to precast roles, a feminist who is confronted with the unpleasant situation to realise that she behaves and wishes in ways that do not match to her own ideals as well as a formerly passionate man who has lost contact with his own genuine wishes and desires that he clearly remembers from former situations. All the portraits are accompanied with analytical descriptions of the different types of alienation.

In the third part, Jaeggi develops her own concept of an “acquiring model of the self”. This model is organised around the core ideas of identification, relationality, fluidity, world-relation and articulation. To sharpen her model, she formulates further terminological

comparisons on the relation between alienation, liberty, self-determination, self-fulfilment and authenticity. She closes the book with some final considerations of the sociality of the self. Here, she develops the key idea, that a working relation to oneself always needs a working relation to the world as important prerequisite.

What can be gained from this book? First of all, it is an encompassing and enlightening work that describes the mechanisms of becoming a subject in modern contemporary societies. Leaving essentialistic and normative models behind, Jaeggi develops a strictly relational model of subjectivation. With this approach, she looks beyond the idea of fixed “container models” of the subject (Jaeggi 2005, 191 ff.). Here, one can find interesting parallels to the relational model of the development of social spaces (Löw 2001; Bourdieu/Wacquant 2006).

Secondly, derived from Hegel, the book describes an interesting contradiction: To concretise his own personal freedom, one has to tie and identify oneself to concrete things (Jaeggi 2005, 180 or 244). Especially in counselling and other relationship-based social work settings, it could be interesting for social workers to find orientation within this dialectic between individuals and their concrete access and relation to resources.

Thirdly, the idea of the relational development of individuals reminds social workers of their task to let the client develop his or her “own story of life-acquirement” (Jaeggi 2005, 203). Rather than a passive object, clients must be regarded as active producers of their own subjectivity. This refers to an often neglected key concept of social work: To start with the subject, its current condition and its individual developmental interests instead of bringing the subject towards where external or hegemonial interests would like it to be seen in the future. Jaeggi clearly elaborates that to lead one’s own life means to work on projects that are followed self-determinedly and that are acquired and tied to affective identification. In this sense, subjectivation means to experience a world-relation and the congruent impression to be the master of one’s own interests and affairs.

Of course, the strictly relational approach of Jaeggi also leads to critique about her limits. Staying relational means to loose fixed objective values as well as clear normative standards. The problem of adaptive preferences of marginalized groups could not be challenged with a purely relational approach. Here, normative concepts of individual and social development (e.g. Nussbaum 2011 or Staub-Bernasconi 2007) could deliver interesting contrasts.

References

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