

THE MATRIX Trilogy as Critical Theory of Alienation: Communicating a Message of Radical Transformation¹

Harry F. Dahms
University of Tennessee

Since the release of the first MATRIX movie in 1999, and especially after THE MATRIX RELOADED and THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS in 2003, a continuous flow of articles and books ensued, addressing how the movies are tied into philosophical, religious, and existential traditions of thought. What is most peculiar about the related literature to date is the absence of a sustained attempt to determine the nature of the *specific* relevance the movies might have for us, *today – from a social-theoretical perspective*. Attempts abound to relate the movies to long-running debates in analytical philosophy, theology, and postmodernism. Interpreters have pointed out the affinity of the perspective the movies open up – especially the first one – with Plato’s allegory of the cave, Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*,” and Kierkegaard’s “*philosophy of faith*.”² Early in the first movie, the Wachowski Brothers pay homage to Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). In THE MATRIX RELOADED, Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* ([1819] 1966) serves as the means to open a secret doorway hidden behind a book shelf. In the same movie, Princeton religion professor Cornel West appears as “*Councillor West*.” In the final installment, revealingly titled THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS, the Upanishads serve as a major reference point (see Barton 2005). As Slavoj Žižek (2003) pointed out, the multiplicity of possible interpretations highlights a major difference between THE MATRIX and what we have been conditioned to expect on television and big screen—with immediate implications for *new, or renewed, practices of seeing*:

THE MATRIX is one of those films that function as a kind of Rorschach test, setting in motion the universalized process of recognition, like the proverbial painting of God that seems always to stare directly at you from wherever you look at it-- practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in it.

My Lacanian friends are telling me that the authors must have read Lacan. The Frankfurt School partisans see in THE MATRIX the extrapolated embodiment of Kulturindustrie, directly taking over, colonizing our inner life itself, using us as the source of energy. New Agers see how our world is just a mirage generated by a global Mind embodied in the World Wide Web. Or the series is a baroque illustration of Plato’s cave, in which ordinary humans are prisoners, tied firmly to their seats and compelled to watch the shadowy performance of (what they falsely consider to be) reality--in short, the position of the cinema-spectators themselves.

¹ I thank Patricia Y. Martin and Randy Earnest for helpful comments on an earlier manuscript.

² See especially Lawrence (2004), Introduction, and chapter 2 and 11.

Yet despite the attention interpreters have been paying to how the movies are saturated with cultural, religious, spiritual and philosophical content, in at least six books and on thousands of web-sites, little has been said about the affinity of THE MATRIX Trilogy with the history of social theory in general, and with *critical* social theory, in particular.³ My thesis is that it is not possible to fully appreciate the relevance of, and the messages encoded in, the movies, independently of social theory. As a result, it will become apparent that there is a close link between the central message the movies were meant to convey, and both the goal and purpose of critical social theory, as far as illuminating the *paradox of modern society* is concerned.

“As Long as the Matrix Exists, the Human Race Will Never Be Free”: On the Continued Prevalence of Alienation

The central theme of THE MATRIX is the all-pervasive yet increasingly invisible prevalence of *alienation* in the world today, and difficulties that accompany attempts to overcome it.⁴ When Morpheus first explains the Matrix to Neo, he describes it as a computer-generated, “neural-interactive simulation . . . a dream world built to keep us under control.”⁵ As it is my objective to demonstrate, Morpheus explains to Neo that the Matrix was engineered to conceal the omnipresence of alienation from human beings. Yet how is alienation an issue, in this day and age, after two centuries of enlightenment in what feels like every conceivable direction?

Classical social theory, as it developed in Europe, started out from the experience of alienation⁶, and its development accompanied successive transpositions of alienation to higher levels of mediation shaping cultural, social, political, economic, legal and educational processes and institutions.⁷ While it is not possible to

³ In addition to Lawrence (2004), see Kapell and Doty (2004), Faller (2004), Haber (2003), Yeffeth (2003), and Irwin (2002), as well as Grau (2002/3). See also Horsley (2003).

⁴ Since alienation is the experience that precipitated the rise of sociology (see, e.g., Mazlish 1989, Dahms 2005 and 2005a), the related literature is vast. “In the most general terms, this concept describes the estrangement of individuals from one another, or from a specific situation or process” (Marshall, ed., 1994: 9).

⁵ Note that “THE MATRIX” refers to the first movie, while “the Matrix” refers to the simulation in the movies.

⁶ In Hegel’s dialectical philosophy, the concept of “alienation” (*Entfremdung*) made its first “systematic” appearance. Marx’s theory started out from the attempt to determine the impact of alienation on “bourgeois society,” and its entwinement with bourgeois social relations—the class antagonism between capitalists and workers. There also are definite affinities with Durkheim’s concept of “anomie”, and Weber’s “Protestant ethic” thesis. See Ludz (1973).

⁷ These transpositions have amplified and transformed alienation. In the related literature, they have been theorized in terms of commodity fetishism, reification,

conceive of the beginning of social theory, and of sociology as a social science, independently of alienation – along with the transformation of traditional cultural patterns into those we identify with the *modern age* – developments in theoretical sociology have tended to go in two different directions, since the 19th century. As we will see, moreover, in the history of sociology in America, concerns related to alienation have their own unique history, revealing the patterning force of alienation in American culture and society.

One tradition evolved directly from the experience of alienation, and the assumption that alienation is the downside of the “modern condition” – the price modern men and women pay for the benefits that come with *purportedly* efficient, self-regulating market economies, effective administrative state apparatuses, and continuous expansion of individual liberty. To use the language of THE MATRIX, the first tradition of social analysis started out from, and tried to explain, the intensifying feeling during the early nineteenth century, that despite all the progress, “there’s something wrong with the world” (as Morpheus puts it). During the early twentieth century, social theorists and scholars whose work foreshadowed the rise of cultural studies, refined further the modern theory of alienation developed by Hegel and Marx. While the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were most prominent, scholars like the utopian Marxist Ernst Bloch, and the playwright Bertolt Brecht, were equally concerned with issues related to alienation at the core of modern society.⁸

Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933 forced many of these “cultural critics” – i.e., critics of modern culture as fraught with problems that were concealed behind the veil of “progress” – to relocate to the United States. Thus, tools that had been developed in Europe to scrutinize modern culture as both alienated and amplifying alienation, made their way across the Atlantic. As it drew on the modern dialectical tradition initiated by Hegel in philosophy, and continued with a more socio-analytical and practical bent by Marx, combined with elements of Freud’s psychoanalysis, Weber’s theory of bureaucracy and the Protestant ethic, and Lukàcs’s critique of false consciousness, the work of the critical theorists, in particular, became more focused after their arrival in America, and four decades later, inspired a generation of scholars and researchers in the social sciences and the humanities, to apply the category of alienation in and to the United States, not just as a psychological category, but especially in sociology and political theory – to illuminate increasingly problematic, contradictory and paradoxical aspects of culture, politics and society that had been ignored.⁹

By contrast, well into the twentieth century, the view that modern culture, including American culture, may be fraught with alienation, remained “alien” to mainstream American sociology and social theory. Representatives of this tradition – or rather, set of traditions, including structural functionalism and most versions of symbolic

instrumental reason, and functionalist reason. See Dahms (1998).

⁸ The literature on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School has become a true “industry.” See especially Jay (1973) and Wiggershaus (1994).

⁹ The experience of life in America was key to the development and direction of this theoretical tradition. See especially Claussen (1999).

interactionism, pragmatism, exchange theory, and approaches to ethnography – rejected the notion that forms of social life might be shaped by non-social processes in a manner that would qualitatively distort the nature of social relations, the role of the family, and the construction of the self. Rather than considering that modern economies might reshape social life, these theorists tended to view economic life as an extension of social life. Accordingly, social scientists were inclined to interpret the feeling “that there’s something wrong with the world,” to the extent that they were willing to acknowledge it as a legitimate response to key patterns of modern social, political and cultural life, as a deficiency of the individual, which he or she must work to overcome. The organizing assumption is that what we can observe in cultural, social, political, and economic life, is indicative of “underlying logics” – social, political, economic and cultural forms are manifestations of “human nature” as it culminates in aggregate form, and determines how institutions and processes in different areas of societal life evolve, and generate “reality.” Thus, the very notion that something could be wrong with “the world” is viewed as the consequence of a categorical misunderstanding. These approaches, therefore, while conceding that modern societies are organized around different centers of power, and that power impacts on how people “do things,” implicitly or explicitly rejected the notion that systems of power reconstituting themselves over extended periods of time, and often competing with each other, could qualitatively *transform* how we “do things”–practices, institutions, modes of coexistence, and above all, the nature of social relations. Indeed, such a perspective would have been alien to dominant traditions of theorizing and analyzing cultural and societal life in America.¹⁰

The suspicion that in the modern world, systems of power, increasingly seen and experienced as “quasi-natural,”¹¹ may shape practices, processes, and institutions in a manner that transforms the nature and quality of cultural life, is exactly what inspired critiques of social life as constituted through alienation. While the first tradition regarded the consequences of alienation as systemic “pathologies” that are the necessary starting point for analyzing modern culture, approaches that belong to the second “tradition” tend to make determined efforts to interpret what the first tradition regards as pathologies, as revealing the standard and non-problematic pattern of modern culture, independently of alienation as an underlying, formative force.

“The Time Has Come to Make a Choice, Mr. Anderson”: Work Society as a System of Alienation . . . and Beyond

In the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx had identified human alienation as occurring on four levels: as alienation from nature, alienation from oneself,

¹⁰ With regard to the nexus between gender and work as the basis for an instructive type of “practices,” see Martin (2003).

¹¹ Esp. Postone (1993); Hazelrigg(1995).

alienation from species-being, and alienation from other human beings.¹² The first installment of the Trilogy, *THE MATRIX*, presents four modes of alienation as well: (1) the simulation of the Matrix as "reality"; (2) human beings thinking that they live "normal lives," while in fact they vegetate in transparent incubators; (3) the "real world" of Morpheus and his comrades inhabiting a hovercraft, with is presented as a world of work – of industrial labor; and (4) the world "as it was at the end of the twentieth century" – our world.

During much of the twentieth century, social scientists and psychologists understood alienation as a philosophical or existential category relating to the *individual's* experience of isolation, and of not truly *belonging* – to society, or to any social group. The idea of alienation originated in the early 19th century, when the rise of capitalism transformed traditional social ties, and generated conditions that were characterized by increasing distance between individuals, replacing the proximity that had been characteristic of social life before industrialization. This trend was amplified with the combination of capitalism and bureaucracy, during the early twentieth century, and engendered social relations whose "coldness" was truly unprecedented. Well into the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists presumed that without close social ties, the construction of meaningful life histories is all but impossible. They also recognized that social, political and economic transformations kept eroding opportunities to maintain and enter into traditional social ties, in the interest of constructing a meaningful life – both due to the fact that societal conditions are in constant flux, and to the direction of transformations. There was a widespread reluctance, though, to contemplate that the proliferation of newly emerging social ties that would have been compatible with the changing circumstances after World War II, did not keep pace with the erosion of traditional ties. Rather than facilitating the emergence of new forms of close ties, western societies reconstituted after World War II to adapt to the erosion of traditional ties by supplying mechanisms to *simulate* new, close personal ties. With the expansion of the film and television industries, the socialization process in early childhood began to involve the "downloading" of images and patterns that children, and especially adolescents, came to see as representations of "healthy" and "normal" social relations. Increasingly, teenagers modeled personal relationships according to what was being displayed in the mass media, and individuals began to compare their personal experiences and relations to what they had seen "on television" – usually without being aware that this was happening. Still, many social scientists were sufficiently aware of the distance between social reality and the representations of social reality propagated by the groups and institutions benefiting most from the actually existing social, political and economic order, reinforced and amplified through movies and television, to concede that individuals are only partly to blame for not being able to enter meaningful and genuine social ties.¹³

If viewed through the lens of social theory, the Matrix is a representation of modern

¹² See, e.g., Mészáros (1970), pp. 14-5.

¹³ Esp. Fromm (1941; 1955; 1962), and Riesman (1950).

“work society,” as it compels the majority of human beings to organize their lives around work. While during most of the twentieth century, the quality and value of a person’s life increasingly came to be seen in terms of the kind of work a person did, in recent years, the quantity of life-time spent at work has been growing as well, especially in the United States.¹⁴ Thus, alienation keeps congealing into onion-like layers that transfigure individual experiences and social practices – generating a regime of interlocking control mechanisms that maintain the existing social and political structure, while enabling the underlying economic change to accelerate.

“The World as It was at the End of the Twentieth Century”: Levels of Alienation

The first level of alienation is the most obvious, with alienation being both *objective* and *concrete*: seemingly, in a world that resembles our own, “[b]illions of people [are] just living out their lives, oblivious” (as Agent Smith puts it). The second level of alienation is directly related, as the humans slumber in their separate incubators, their “conscious” selves being physically detached from their bodies and from other humans. These humans, who seem to inhabit the world of the Matrix, but are located in the “real world,” exist in a dreamlike state, embedded in a liquid substance warmed by their own body heat. In the Matrix, their simulated representations interact with the simulated representations of others, without being aware that they interact *as* simulations, within a hyper-complex computer program. Yet, by default, an unrecognized residual of individual autonomy appears to remain. At one point in the first movie, on the way to the Oracle, Neo points out, “I used to eat there. Really good noodles. I have these memories from my life. None of them happened. What does that mean?” “That the Matrix cannot tell you who you are,” Trinity responds.

The third level of alienation, the “real world,” however, is inhabited not only by the humans who are hooked into the Matrix – without knowing that this is so – but also by the machines that care for them, and by those whose minds – and bodies – have been “freed,” who labor to free humanity from the machines. This third level of alienation also is quite apparent: even the lives of Morpheus and his comrades, including the entire city of Zion, are organized around the struggle against the machines, whose control depends on their ability to perpetually regenerate the alienated condition of human existence, without those who only know the reality of the Matrix, being able to notice. The only liberated humans we encounter in the first MATRIX spend their lives inside a machine, the hovercraft Nebuchadnezzar, interrupted only by occasional forays into the Matrix. Zion, too, has more in common with a gigantic machine than with a human city. As we learn in THE MATRIX RELOADED, the social structure of Zion too is a function of the war – military organization evidently is the central institution of the “liberated” humans. Since the latter are dedicated to fighting the source of alienation, their lives are also determined by, and an extension of, alienation. The conditions under which

¹⁴ See Schorr (1993), De Graaf (2003).

those who have been freed struggle against the machines, resemble the conditions of labor in industrial capitalism. Their clothes are worn out and filthy, their food is highly nutritious but tasteless, and to our knowledge, the male members of the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, the first movie suggests, have only one form of entertainment at their disposal – for Mouse to "arrange a much more personalized meeting" with "the woman in the red dress . . . [who] doesn't talk very much." Which incites Switch to comment, sarcastically, "Digital pimp, hard at work." However, as a group the freed humans would not be able to "work" together without the conviction that life beyond alienation is possible.

The fourth level, finally, appears to be the least most conspicuous representation of alienation, but turns out to be the most conspicuous, for our purposes: the reality depicted in the Matrix, which is our own, modern, industrialized, post-industrial capitalist society at the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, fraught as it is with variants of alienation that are highly mediated, abstract, and submerged to the point of invisibility – alienation as it is characteristic of life in work society. To scrutinize the specific, highly abstract form of alienation prevalent in our societies today, one needs to be familiar with traditions in social theory and sociology that, since the nineteenth century, have been directed at illuminating to "real humans" how the world they – and we – live in, keeps reconstituting itself to cloak the signs of alienation. These signs remain inaccessible to us unless we employ – and continue to develop further – the theoretical tools designed specifically for this purpose.¹⁵

Combining four representations of alienated life-forms, THE MATRIX Trilogy thus is a cipher about our world, our place and sense of self, the skewed nature of social relations, and the paradoxes of modern social life. Yet *knowing* that our selves have internalized, and are constituted through, alienated conditions, *as such*, does not enable us to realize exactly what this might mean, nor does it empower us to overcome how we have been compelled to construct our identities through and around mechanisms to cope with, and suppress, the experience of alienation. In THE MATRIX Trilogy, the most effective strategy to conceal from humans the fact of

¹⁵ John Carpenter's 1988 movie, *They Live*, is a precursor to THE MATRIX in several regards. Most memorable may be the scene where Nada, the movie's anti-hero hero (who is white), is trying to convince his African-American co-worker Frank to put on the sunglasses that will reveal to him that Los Angeles (along with the rest of Earth) is inhabited by free-marketeer aliens that "influence our decisions without us knowing it . . . numb our senses without us feeling it . . . control our lives without us realizing it . . . [and] lull the public into submission through subliminal advertising messages" (as the movie's web-site has it). To avoid seeing what the world is really like, Frank puts up what looks like the fight of his life, seems to last forever, and comes to an end only when both lie in the back alley, too badly bruised to make another move. At that point, Nada manages to put the sunglasses on Frank's face, who is horrified by what he sees. *They Live* clearly is a departure from the tradition of anti-Communist Cold War movies, exemplified by another master of B-movies—Don Siegel (his 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* may have been the most successful such anti-Communist movie ever) as *They live* it includes not only an openly – if ironizing – anti-capitalist message, but also numerous jokes about anti-Communist paranoia.

their alienation, is to thwart opportunities to feel the actual discomfort of concrete circumstances. In turn, at the current stage of historical "development," we might explain the appeal of addictive practices – from consumption of licit or illicit drugs, to getting hooked on television, to living vicarious lives via movies, etc. – as an expression of the desire to avoid the experience of discomfort. According to this reading of THE MATRIX, whatever we do and are in modern society relates more to how what we do, and who we are, *appears* under conditions of alienation, than with what we would do and who we would be, in a world without (the present degree of) alienation. Alienation shapes everything we encounter, think, do, desire, suppress – as well as what we do, who we are, and especially, how we relate to each other.

Morpheus: The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

In different ways, then, the Matrix, the "real world," and the link between them, illustrate the omnipresence of alienation, to a point where it is impossible to determine whether and where reality as constituted through alienation ends, and reality independently of alienation begins, or rather, would begin. The humans whose reality appears to be the Matrix, are alienated not only because they are being contained to extract energy, but also because the specific reality they seem to live, is permeated by alienation – as is our own. Although they do not labor physically, they neither have the opportunity to enjoy the fact that they do not have to labor to survive, nor to notice that they do not have a choice in the matter. Evidently, whenever humans are being "liberated," in the world of the future – they realize that they have been lingering in an objective state of absolute horror.¹⁶ The simulated reality of the Matrix resembles our own work society in a multiplicity of ways. Considering the level of technological development and computerization portrayed in the Matrix, which corresponds to our own, the work that most of us do, *in fact*, is "horribly" boring and mind-numbing.¹⁷ The reason why we don't conceive of our own world as alienated is how and where we learned, and were trained, to "think" – to paraphrase Morpheus – when we watched television, went to church, school, and work, and when we were among friends, who, in turn, underwent and embody the same processes of "socialization" and "education" as we did and do. Our "thinking," thus, tends to *reflect* the specific features of the time and space we inhabit, rather than enabling us to *critically reflect on those features*.

¹⁶ See Pryor (2003), for a discussion of whether it is possible at all to distinguish between how we live our lives, and how the humans living their lives in the Matrix. My point relates to the fact that this issue has been a major challenge in the social sciences: how to theorize that modern society maintains stability by compelling individuals to interpret the social, political, economic and cultural conditions under which they exist more favorably than is warranted.

¹⁷ See Rifkin (1994), Aronowitz (2001).

It is for this reason that it is neither sufficient for Morpheus to *explain* the Matrix to Neo, nor for us today to be told that we are alienated. "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself," as Morpheus puts it, before Neo takes the red pill, to find out "how far the rabbit hole goes."

"You Look a Little Whiter than Usual": Visualizing Alienation

Neo is a socially unattached computer hacker driven by the desire to find the Truth about the Matrix. At the beginning of the first installment, THE MATRIX, Neo is so alienated, he does not even indulge in the most commonly used practice, in his age group, to blanket the experience of isolation, social detachment, and alienation – by hanging out in a nightclub, where blasting music makes it impossible for "patrons" to engage in actual conversations. He has to be lured to accompany Choi, Dujour and their friends, with the instruction on his computer screen, "Follow the white rabbit." Almost until the end of the film, Neo is very much out of touch with himself and his emotions. Though he is being coaxed into acquiring a less alienated sense of self, into becoming aware of the extent of his being alienated, his alienation goes so far that he does not seem to be aware why he reacts to Trinity the way he does.

The Oracle makes fun of him: "I can see why she likes you," she admits to Neo, referring to Trinity, and responds to Neo's dumb-founded reaction, with the verdict, "Not too bright." Evidently, Neo is not in the habit of "hanging out" with others, nor does he have a personal relationship with anyone, as far as we know. "Night after night," he spends his time at the computer, trying to find out what the Matrix is, and how to get in touch with Morpheus. His social skills, and ability to care for others, are so underdeveloped, he remains insensitive to Trinity's (somewhat ambivalent) feelings toward and for him, until the very end. Despite his eagerness to *face the facts of his world*, he would not be able to do so without the help of the Oracle, "who told [him] exactly what he needed to hear," as well Morpheus – "a known terrorist" (as Agent Smith refers to him) – and his comrades, who struggle to coax Neo into *discovering* his true self, so that he can "free his mind" and understand his calling, which is to alter the Matrix by the force of his will. When the agents appear at his place of work, he mutters to himself, "Why is this happening to me? What did I do? I'm nobody . . ."

THE MATRIX infers that human beings should be weary of claims suggesting that we have an unalienated, human core, no matter what, that we are being guided by a moral compass that compels us to "do the right thing," irrespective of the specific circumstances under which we act – and that both the human core and moral compass are accessible to each of us.¹⁸ The obstacles built into Neo's identity

¹⁸ A similar perspective comes across in Spike Lee's movie, *Do the Right Thing*. On the one hand, individuals must strive to do the right thing. On the other hand, even if they do, they effectively try to overcome the consequences resulting from decades, or centuries, of inequalities and injustices shaping societies at the cultural and organization level, as well as the prevailing pattern of structuration (see Giddens 1984). The preservation of those inequalities is integral to the structure of affected societies. Especially race, class and gender impact on the development of individual identities, frame how social groups define

Morpheus and his comrades must overcome to enable him to face that, in fact, he is *the One*, illustrate how much he lacks a sense of his real self – which involves “neural-kinetics [that] are way above normal,” as Mouse points out. We do not find out whether his neural-kinetics are a gift or the result of a mutation; in any case, Tank observes that Neo is “a machine,” after having downloaded into Neo’s brain ten hours of martial arts training programs. In addition, Neo is willing to admit “that there’s something wrong with the world,” as Morpheus informs him during their first encounter, “You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad.” We may have a human core and a moral compass, but if we take that fact for granted and act accordingly, without scrutinizing “our selves,” we might as well not have either. Most of the billions who “live” out their lives in ignorance, in their respective incubators, however smart they may be, won’t allow that there might be cause for a “splinter.”

In addition to the contained existence, which in itself is a compelling representation of alienated “life,” THE MATRIX also provides one of the most impressive visualizations of an encounter with alienation. As Morpheus and his comrades try to determine the actual location of Neo’s incubator (transposed to our reality, his actual – rather than perceived – position in the overall class structure?), he explains that the red pill is “part of a trace program . . . designed to disrupt your input/output carrier signal so we can pinpoint your location.” Soon after taking the red pill, Neo gets the first inkling of reality, and his actual physical self. After taking the seat surrounded by high-tech equipment, Neo notices a broken mirror to his right. His curiosity peaked, he takes a closer look. The cracks disappear. Neo touches the mirror with his fingers. Within seconds, his hand, arm, and neck are being covered with a metallic-looking, liquid substance. “It’s cold. It’s cold,” Neo wails. As he is about to go into arrest, Morpheus and the others barely manage to get a lock on his actual location, the camera drives into his wide-open mouth, down what is his simulated throat. Next, we see him wake up in his incubator, discovering in a state of utter shock and disbelief that he is part of vast power plant consisting of several towers, with thousands of incubators likes “his” attached on the outside. How should we interpret this scene?

When Neo gets seated next to the mirror, he for the first time “sees” his actual self reflected; though he does not realize that this is the case, the mirror reflects his self on the surface of the real world – the liquid that surrounds him. The image reflecting off the *surface of the real* reveals him to be a broken, alienated self. Yet as he keeps looking at what is the surface of the liquid in which he is embedded, the mirror congeals, the cracks disappear, to reveal his actual self–hidden inside the mirror. As Neo touches the mirror, he for the first time makes physical contact

themselves and their identity against other groups, and shape the nature of intergroup relations. In most instances, members of a social groups do not have the opportunity to understand this process, how it shapes their selves, and how they are both “representations” and “representatives” of their group, without having a choice in the matter. For this reason, in most situations, “doing the right thing” is a practical impossibility, because it is conceived within mutually exclusive, group-based definitions of reality, without awareness that this is happening. Even if some individuals are determined to do the right things in a particular social situation, the likelihood that are others, too, are willing and able to jump over their own shadow, is minute.

with the substance in which he is submerged—and his physical self. Since it is not just his fingers and hand that are covered by the liquid, his entire body is overtaken—and revealed to be covered by the substance. His reaction to the substance as being *cold* exposes the fact that his own body has been warming the liquid, enabling the machines to extract his body heat, without making him die from hypothermia. The significance of this coldness, however, is that he has been “living” his previous life in a state of absolute physical isolation. Interestingly, there is a vast literature in the social sciences, dating back to the 1920s, that described social relations, including friendship, family relations, relations between lovers – as becoming too cold, under conditions of amplifying alienation, for most humans to have the capacity to confront the actuality of relations between human beings in bureaucratic capitalism, *especially between human beings that belong to different social, racial, ethnic, religious, political, and economic groups*. Indeed, modern societies reconstitute themselves through the reinforcement of alienated relations between members of different groups in society. Even those who think that they “live” lives of comfort and luxury, in truth exist for the machines (i.e., for industrialized, post-industrial capitalism), and are as alienated from their actual selves as those who, in the Matrix, do the kind of physical labor that makes our own world work. After all, how many of us have any sense of what it would mean to experience true comfort?

Theodor W. Adorno was the most sophisticated analyst of alienation and its manifestations in every aspect of modern life. He would have reached his 100th birthday in 2003 – the “year of THE MATRIX” (as commercials for THE MATRIX RELOADED proclaimed) – on 9-11, no less. Almost 60 years ago, he wrote,

It is the signature of our age that no-one, without exception, can now determine his own life within even a moderately comprehensible framework, as was possible earlier in the assessment of market relationships. In principle everyone, however powerful, is an object. . . . It follows directly from this that anyone who attempts to come out alive—and survival itself has something nonsensical about it, like dreams in which, having experienced the end of the world, one afterwards crawls from a basement—ought to be prepared at each moment to end his life. . . . Freedom has contracted to pure negativity, and what in the days of art nouveau was known as beautiful death has shrunk to the wish to curtail the infinite abasement of living and the infinite torment of dying, in a world where there are far worse things to fear than death. – The objective end of humanism is only another expression for the same thing. It signifies that the individual as individual, in representing the species of man, has lost the autonomy through which he might realize the species (Adorno ([1951] 1974, pp. 37f).

Adorno observed that the notions, aspirations, and practices we internalize regenerate the mechanisms that maintain and amplify the conditions of alienation turning who we are and what we do into “functions” of the specific, material features and perimeter that circumscribe our actions, in politics, economy, culture and society. Like others in his generation, Adorno regarded Freudian psychoanalysis as the model for engendering enlightenment processes that force

individuals to recognize how their selves are playing out a “programming” whose sources remain elusive to them, without a sustained effort to “get to the bottom of it” – whether the programming is the function of inadequately understood neuroses or psychoses, or of social and cultural pathologies that call for a transposition of the model of psychoanalysis, to the level of “socio-analysis.” Instead of expanding the perimeter of self-enlightenment to include the social construction of experiential and cognitive deformities that manifest themselves at the “mental” (cognitive and emotional) level, for decades, psychoanalysis has been in retreat, and psychotherapy has morphed into the ultimate control discipline – while the individualistic diagnosing of pathological mental conditions tends to be met with the kind of socially and economically condoned recognition that, until recently, was reserved only for the natural sciences, including standard medicine.

“Temet Nosce”: No Knowledge of Self Without Knowledge of Social Reality

The message contained in THE MATRIX thus is a sustained attempt to get across the meaning of “Temet nosce” (in the Oracle’s kitchen, above the door): “Know thyself.” We are not capable of recognizing who we are, what we are truly capable of, if we allow the constraints and controls that delimit societal practices, to define “our selves.” We cannot “free our minds,” and our selves, on our own, independently of others – but, in fact, are dependent on the help of others, to lead, or “trick,” us along the path of “self”-discovery. Following this path may be the most subversive activity to engage in, today – but only as long as we do so with sincerity, avoiding self-discovery as a function and manifestation of defensive posturing. The latter would be little more than a projection of practices that the social system in western societies – fraught as it is by inequalities and injustices that are built into its basic design, and patterned to replicate those inequalities and injustices – imposes upon the “individual.” Others, however, are not able to free themselves either, but need our help to do so. Individual freedom, independently of the freedom of others, is not freedom—just the illusion of freedom clothing a highly refined form of captivity.

The main difference between humans in the “real world” and humans in the Matrix/incubators, is that the humans whose minds have been liberated know that they are suffering from alienation, and that they will not be able to overcome their alienated condition unless they destroy the machines, which continually regenerate objective conditions of alienation, via the Matrix.¹⁹ Their mere knowledge, that they themselves and all others were born (and programmed) into a profoundly alienated reality, is not sufficient for them to overcome their own alienated selves. Enlightenment about alienation as such does not empower. All they can do is try to create an opening, by finding “the One” who, with the help of the others, may be

¹⁹ Keeping in mind that THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS does not end with the victory of the humans, but merely a truce between liberated humans and machines. Interspersed throughout the movies are pointers suggesting that destroying the machines is not a viable option, and that real peace will be exceedingly difficult to attain.

able to overcome alienation, at least to the point where human action becomes possible without replicating the pattern set by alienation. For un-alienated conditions of personal experience and social relations to emerge, the domination by the machines first must be broken. Yet breaking their domination will not be sufficient to overcome alienation, since *the effects* of the domination by the machines have shaped both the identities of, and the relations between, the humans. But breaking the power of the machines, and destroying – or rather, disrupting (since it is not clear what would happen if countless humans suddenly would wake up in their respective incubators) – the Matrix may create conditions that will increase the possibility that determined efforts to overcome alienation will lead to success, later on – meaning that humans will be able to engage in practices beyond alienation, reshaping the reality inside the Matrix in the process. Modern societies continue to hover in a state of *suspended animation*—allowing for economic and cultural changes, while protecting the social structure and political and organizational systems of power against the implications and consequences that ought to result from those economic and cultural changes. In the absence of socially momentous opportunities to make explicit the costs of suspended animation, the modern condition has become synonymous with the need to interpret as quintessentially social, political, economic and cultural – in short, “human” – what in fact results in industrialized societies, from the disseminating of tensions between economic and cultural change, on the one hand, and social and political fortification, on the other, to every corner of the globe, thus permeating the nature of matter itself – to the degree to which it is accessible to us.²⁰ It would not be possible to identify (and criticize) the underlying patterns shaping this ongoing dissemination in terms of one or several general principles. Concepts like *capitalism*, *democracy*, *freedom*, and *modernity*, have become labels that highlight what is to be explained and understood, rather than involving *explanatory value*. Without determined efforts to maintain a process of reflection upon the historical origins of such concepts, their original meaning in relation to concrete socio-historical conditions *and* their subsequent, successive transmutations alongside concrete, nationally specific, social, political, economic and cultural changes until the mid-twentieth century, these concepts are barriers against, rather than tools for, explaining and understanding societal realities in their contingent specificity.

²⁰ As Lawrence E. Hazelrigg (1995, p. 124) put it, “[N]ot only nature today but also original nature, whether as in the analytic of an underlying substrate of all human being or as in the genetic formation of a time or a state before the primordial human, is an effect of human production, a product of human labor.” Add to this the impact resulting from the specificity of human production, as it reflects and is a manifestation of concrete societal conditions, the challenge is especially daunting. To the extent that societal conditions inevitably distort our access to any level of “reality”—even if it is not possible to conceive of what “non-distortion” would be—what matters most, in this context, is how exactly the link between concrete societal conditions provides as well as closes off access to reality, in ways that sustain those conditions. Categorically, there is just one approach to discerning related matters: comparative-historical analysis of how concrete conditions tailor access to certain dimensions of reality, be it natural reality, or, especially, social reality.

The stability of modern societies, and their ability to function, depends on institutions, norms, and values compelling us to *think* that we are more enlightened than earlier generations were. Yet there are plenty of indications that we may be less enlightened than our ancestors – most definitely in certain regards. Clearly, there have been times throughout history when the willingness to face unpleasant patterns and contradictions – rather than superimposing an interpretive framework that conceals the facts, or that they have unpleasant aspects – seems to have been more pronounced. Indeed, modern society is a social system that compels us to assume that reality functions according to principles we impute, without allowing us to determine whether those principles in fact do elucidate the nature of modern reality. Societies remain stable and function only if its members subscribe to a sufficient degree to dominant interpretations of the defining features of the society.

Deviation is possible, within certain limits. Yet a society cannot allow any (or many) of its members – us – to question whether the categories that are being provided, indeed enable us to understand the conditions that shape our existence, "our very lives." The possibility of social and political stability appears to depend directly on the facility of a social order to delimit the perimeter for interpreting the social order, and to prevent its "subjects" from questioning the adequacy of the resulting interpretations. Due to democratic validity claims, modern societies are under greater pressure to legitimate themselves. We should assume that for this reason, modern institutions have devised more sophisticated mechanisms to protect themselves against scrutiny.

In terms of how modern societies legitimate themselves, they are qualitatively different from, and *superior* to, pre-modern societies, especially as far as the relationship between individual and society is concerned. Yet what has become exceedingly apparent, as we try to understand *globalization* (Dahms 2002), is that the leap into the modern industrial age one century ago, which was supposed to benefit all members of society, has remained half-hearted, and has not significantly altered the underlying social structure and distribution of wealth.²¹ As far as the imperative of maintaining social and political order is concerned, and how this imperative generates a relationship between individual and society, the defining features of modern societies resemble pre-modern societies.²² The prize that comes with simulations of individual freedom and self-determination, in the interest of maintaining order, where freedom in fact is extremely limited, and always compliant with confining social norms, is tied directly to the prevalence of *alienation as the mode of "solving problems" in societies organized around dynamic economic systems*. With regard to *social* problems, this mode of "solving" problems involves

²¹ At present, however, the US is experiencing the most sustained attempt since the end of World War II to tilt the distribution of wealth and income in favor of the most wealthy faction of the population. Each tax proposed constituted a further throw-back behind the incremental achievements that were made during the 1950s and 1960s. See Krugman (2002).

²²To a far greater extent than we would like to admit, western societies continue to reproduce according to the pattern of early 19th-century "bourgeois society" (see Dahms 2005).

the continuous reconfiguration of problems, in the interest of concealing that there are problems at all – by definition, a process that can never quite succeed, as long as the problems, "objectively," remain key features of modern societies. Accordingly, encrypted in the plot of THE MATRIX Trilogy is a message audiences have been "programmed" not to receive. Both realities depicted in the Trilogy illustrate different aspects of the destructive impact of alienation on the ability of human beings, as individuals and as members of society, to understand who they/we are, what they/we might be capable of, what might be their/our calling, and what kind of effort will be required for them/us to free their/our selves from the effects of alienation. THE MATRIX Trilogy thus is a model for movies whose creators endeavor to relay insights which, under everyday circumstances, viewers never would dare to contemplate. To the extent that we regard work society as a "natural" mode of social, political and economic organization, and allow ourselves to experience it thus, we are its extensions, and implicitly accept the limitations it imposes on our minds and our lives.

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