

Economics and Theory

Althusserian Post-Marxism

In the popular autobiography *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser says that, during the fatal weekend in which he murdered his wife H el ene Rytman, they argued very violently. On Sunday morning he awoke to find her lying dead, her neck broken, and he ran through the courtyard yelling “I’ve strangled H el ene.” To explain why, he confesses that, born in Algeria, raised Catholic and celibate, and living in Paris, he studied philosophy, married H el ene, joined the Communist Party, and acquired high academic status. At the same time, he engaged in real and imagined sexual affairs with which he tormented H el ene and suffered from bleak depressions that often sent him to a mental hospital.

Before the murder his reputation and influence were waning, but after the murder his reputation suffered a serious decline. Several reviewers suggested that the scandalous murder, not the Marxist theory, sums up his work’s meaning. In George Steiner’s words, “what subsists” of Althusser’s “influential” thought is “the piteous scandal of the life” (118). His work has, nonetheless, influenced many contemporary theorists, who include Tony Bennett, Judith Butler, John Frow, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Pierre Macherey, Toby Miller, Chantal Mouffe, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff.¹

Despite the decline of his reputation and the “piteous scandal of the life,” his work remains influential but in

different ways. It is well known that in his structuralist phase Althusser defends the scientific character of Marxism and undermines the humanist import of the traditional and the Hegelian schools. The faults of his defense are also well known: as scholars have shown, Althusser's Marxism preserves the traditional belief that the economy determines social life, at least in the last instance, as well as the rationalist faith that the world conforms with the systematic mind (see Montag 72 and Hirst, *Law* 43–46). Less familiar, Althusser's critique of Marxism's foundational ideals has fostered poststructuralist or post-Marxist approaches which expose a discourse's figural or subjective import, including its racial, sexual, class, gendered, or political character.

The Structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser

Althusser's structuralist approach first emerges in *For Marx*, which brings together his essays on the young Marx, dialectics, theater, science, and humanism. In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when he wrote these essays, Marxism-Leninism, the French Communist Party, and the French Left enjoyed an unusual prestige. At the same time, the ongoing revelations of Stalinist dogma and brutality or totalitarian oppression led Marxists to revive the early, humanist works of Karl Marx.

Althusser grants that that Feuerbach's humanism influenced the young Marx, but he argues that Marx repudiated this speculative humanism and adopted a scientific outlook. A critic of established religion, Feuerbach argued that, by attributing society's powers to God, religion alienates human kind from its essential powers or "species-being." Even though a society's art, science, industry, government, or education produced impressive works, the established religion attributed these achievements to God's will, divine providence, or some equally mystical figure, not to humanity's social powers. A critic of Hegel, Feuerbach also argued that what Hegel calls the "cunning of reason" mystifies social forces in a similar way; they simply develop the predeter-

mined rationality of the world spirit, not the inherent potentiality of their own powers.

Althusser admits that this secular, humanist critique of religion and Hegel allowed Marx “to think” the contradiction between the state’s “essence (reason) and its existence (unreason)” (*Marx* 225). Still, Althusser insists that in *The German Ideology* Marx discovered the faults of Feuerbach’s theory: it remains speculative. Like Hegel, Feuerbach does not abstract the theoretical concepts of the mind from the nature of empirical reality; he idly deduces empirical reality from the mind’s concepts and, denies, as a result, the authenticating force of what Marx calls “sensuous human activity” (*German* 197). Althusser suggests that, unlike Feuerbach, Marx rejects Hegel’s speculative self-consciousness and goes on to develop a purely scientific Marxism; as Althusser says, the “rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx’s scientific discovery” (*Marx* 227).

To justify this rupture with “all philosophical humanism,” Althusser develops a rationalist view of science. He argues that it can grasp reality only if it rigorously develops its concepts and its terms, not if it conforms with practice, fact, or truth. In these formal terms, scientific theory establishes its own criteria of truth; by contrast, what Althusser calls ideology imposes the familiar conformity of theory and practice or ideas and facts. This conformity is not altogether negative. It is well known that Althusser endowed ideology with a positive role: like the Foucauldian notion of discourse, which I discuss in the next chapter, it constructs or “interpellates” a subject. Ideology does not represent falsehood or misrepresentation; ideology explains the subject’s role in a society’s socioeconomic structure, what Althusser calls the subject’s relation to the relations of production. Because theory preserves its own criteria of validity, he claimed, nonetheless, that theory resists this ideological interpellation and effectively grasps the nature of reality.

Since Althusser both defended this theoretical realism and supported the French Communist Party, some critics say that his antihumanist account of Marx’s development

defends communist dogma and oppression (See Aronowitz 180–81; Barrett 87–88; Fougeyrollas 20–22; Glucksman, “Marxism” 289; Jay 405, 411; and Marty 134–36). It is true that he remained a party member for his whole life, yet his account consistently opposes Stalinist and totalitarian views of communism. The reason is that in his account the scientific method presupposed by Marx’s critique of Hegel divorces the object of experience from the object of knowledge. Scientific theory preserves the relative autonomy of its field and methods, while ideology imposes the traditional “dialectical unity” of principles (“theory”) and practice or ideas and facts. Totalitarian theorists, who consider the dialectical unity of scientific truth and political practice a profoundly irrational and dogmatic “groupthink,” argue that this unity enables a “disciplined party” to ensure the “revolutionary fulfillment” of its doctrines and the “violent” elimination of all dissent and resistance (see Brzezinski and Friedrich 87, and Krancberg 56). Althusser, by contrast, considers all versions of this unity a humanist myth. For this reason, Carl Freedman says, “no other theoretical approach could so stubbornly resist both official” Stalinism and its humanist “inversions” (Freedman 1990, 322).

Other critics rightly object that Althusser’s account of Marx’s development fails to identify the specific point at which Marx’s new science breaks with Hegelian humanism and that the account betrays the rationalist’s unduly optimistic belief that some preordained harmony brings nature and reason together (see Aronowitz 180–81; Glucksman, “Marxism” 289; and Smith, *Althusser* 97). Still other critics accept Althusser’s rationalist account of science but fear that his account of ideological interpellation imposes a robotlike, “functionalist” conformity with established discourse (Montag, “Marxism” 72; Hirst, *Law*, 43–46). In an influential formulation, Paul Hirst says that the ideological apparatus can only reproduce the social relations of capitalist society if this apparatus ensures the unity of ruling class ideology. The unity of the ruling class, in turn, preserves the unity of its ideology and of the ideological apparatus. As a consequence, the ideological apparatus reduces

intellectuals to structural supports of ruling-class ideology (*Law* 50–51).

An objection to this critique is that, following Gramsci, Althusser divides the power of the state from the state apparatus. State power is what a distinct class exercises, whereas state apparatuses, which include repressive structures (courts, legislatures, prisons, police, army) and ideological structures (political parties, schools, media, churches, families) are what intellectuals run. State power is a political matter bearing on who does or does not rule a country, while ideological state apparatuses are a structural matter reproducing social relations. Hirst admits that Althusser preserves the formal autonomy of the ideological state apparatus, but Hirst still argues that Althusser's persistent "economism" requires the ideological state apparatuses to function as agents ensuring ruling class unity (*Law* 43–44). This argument assumes that, as agents, the state apparatuses realize a unifying intention imposed by the ruling class. However, as I show in the next chapter, Althusser's account of the ideological apparatuses approximates Foucault's anti-intentionalist view, which maintains that the disciplinary technologies governing the body reproduce themselves or their institutions but do not enforce ruling-class ends and aims.

Moreover, in the later *Reading Capital*, where he distinguishes between philosophy and science, he goes on to repudiate the "foundational" rationalism of *For Marx*. Like Foucault, who rejects the humanist grounds of a discourse's truth, he says that he does not seek any such guarantees. He does not give up the idea that theory grasps reality, but he denies that theory reduces practice to a slavish instrument of an autonomous mind. He argues that theory follows its own practices, and practice presupposes its own theory.

To an extent, this criticism of foundational truths simply denies the dogmatic Stalinist belief that philosophical truth ensures political success. To a larger extent, this self-criticism suggests that epistemological norms do not enable philosophy to establish the scientific status of any or all theories. As Althusser says, Marx rejected "every philosophical

ideology of the subject” because it “gave classical bourgeois philosophy the means of *guaranteeing* its ideas, practices, and goals” (Althusser, *Essays* 178). Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff rightly suggest that this criticism of traditional epistemology parallels Richard Rorty’s antifoundational account of them (Resnick and Wolff, *Knowledge* 17–19, 94–95). That is, Rorty rejects the traditional epistemological norms defended by classical philosophy and accepts the diverse discourses engaged in the philosophical “conversation”; Althusser too rejects science’s unifying truth on transcendent grounds and acknowledges a discourse’s diverse epistemologies. As Resnick and Wolff say, “[T]ruths, then, vary with the theories in and by which they are produced. There is no inter-theoretic standard of truth” (“Althusser’s Liberation” 65).

Althusser claims, in addition, that in philosophical realms theory adopts partisan stances representing a subjective or “relativist” commitment to the class struggle. As he explains,

[I]f the philosophy of philosophers is this perpetual war (to which Kant wanted to put an end by introducing the everlasting peace of his own philosophy), then no philosophy can exist within this theoretical relation of force except in so far as it marks itself off from its opponents and lays siege to that part of the positions which they have had to occupy in order to guarantee their power. (*Essays* 166)

Unlike Kant, who believed that reason overcomes the “antinomies” of the mind and imposes peace on warring philosophical schools, Althusser does not reduce philosophical schools to mere antinomies or demand that the schools accept a “rational” consensus opposing relativism or nominalism; rather, he maintains that,

if philosophy is in the last instance class struggle at the level of theory, the politics which constitute philosophy bear on . . . a quite different question: *that of*

the ideological hegemony of the ruling class, whether it is a question of organizing it, strengthening it, defending it, or fighting against it. (Essays 167)

Balibar rightly says that Althusser's notion of class struggle in theory does not preserve the realism of the early theory, but the notion also does not justify liberal views or express hostility to Marxism; rather, this notion opens the "relativist" conventions of the social sciences or the humanities to political critique. Consider a difficult case: *The Post-modern Condition*, in which Jean-François Lyotard says that the "grand narratives" in which God, the class struggle, or social progress explain historical change can no longer justify the technocracy (60). Many scholars call this work anti-theoretical to Marxism because it considers modern discourses relativist or incommensurable;² however, this work clearly has post-Marxist import. In "La Place de l'alienation dans le retournement Marxiste" ("The Place of Alienation in the Marxist Transformation" ([1969]), an early essay that responds to the 1960s political upheavals, Lyotard grants Althusser's claim that the scientific theory discovered by Karl Marx establishes its formal independence of its sociohistorical context. Lyotard also accepts Althusser's belief that the scientific theory of Marx discovers, undermines, and opposes Hegelian theory. Lyotard argues, however, that Marx rejects Feuerbach's Hegelian negation or destruction of particular spaces or realities because, close to the Frankfurt School, Lyotard considers alienated labor an oppositional force, rather than a vestige of Hegelian humanism, as Althusser claimed.

In other words, Lyotard admits that the capitalist economy and its state bureaucracy grant science the formal autonomy defended by Althusser; however, while Althusser examines how the "ideological apparatus of the state" reproduces itself, Lyotard argues that in Marx's account the state and the economy work together to circulate and reproduce capital. He maintains that science does not resist ideology; science fosters and defends the reproduction of capital and the exploitation of workers, teachers, and students. In the former USSR and in the Western world the

growth of economic exploitation and of the technocratic state bureaucracy has given the sciences, including Marxism, a conservative function: they justify the capitalist economic enterprises and the state bureaucracy and alienate both workers and students.

While Althusser considers alienation a vestige of Hegelian humanism, Lyotard emphasizes the traditional alienation of students and workers and opposes the capitalist and communist state bureaucracy and the Communist Party's dogmatic views and conservative functions. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard still grants Althusser's belief that the various sciences establish and preserve their formal autonomy, but he goes on to reject Hegelian Marxism, which he now identifies with the technocracy. Construing this identification as a feature of a new or "postmodern" era, he argues that the technocracy faces a legitimation crisis: the "grand narratives" in which God, the class struggle, or social progress explain historical change can no longer justify the technocracy (60). In Wittgenstein's positivist or analytic terms, he says that the cognitive, prescriptive and evaluative "forms of life" or "language games" of the sciences expect their performance or competence, not the grand narratives, to legitimate them. In other words, Lyotard takes the specialized sciences or disciplines to provide their own legitimating "ideological" rationales because the traditional grand narratives can no longer justify them ("le <petit récit> reste la forme par excellence que prend l'invention imaginative, et tout d'abord dans la science" [98]). Althusser also says that, to establish formal autonomy, science denies that the grand teleological histories of the humanist tradition or the universal norms of human reason explain a science's importance or ground the specialized disciplines; however, Lyotard critiques the sciences on broad humanist grounds—formally incommensurate, the cognitive, prescriptive, and evaluative language games of the disciplines fail to comprehend such horrifying evils as the Holocaust; Althusser, who claims that the sciences face unending conflicts with their enabling ideologies, adopts the partisan stance that the disciplines' divisions represent class or political differences.

Althusserian Post-Marxism: From Étienne Balibar to Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff

Balibar acknowledges this postmodern import of Althusser's later views but condemns their relativist or partisan character. He grants that Althusser faulted his initial science/ideology opposition and his foundational "theoreticism" and redefined philosophy as "class struggle in theory." In an ad hominem manner, Balibar argues, however, that, since Althusserian concepts such as "antihumanism" or "reproduction" contain their oppositions within them, Althusser's self-criticism shows a suicidal, self-destructive drive, as his subsequent murder of his wife H el ene indicates (* crit* 68–73). For example, Balibar reduces Althusser's political dilemmas to a "schizophrenic situation, in which, although criticizing almost every aspect of . . . the [French] Communist organization and of . . . the bourgeois academic institution, he would consider it as an absolute necessity to remain a member of the organization and to work in the institution" ("Structural" 113). Balibar claims that, as a result, Althusser blurred his "decisive break with epistemological relativism" and reintroduced a "'class determination' of the 'lines of demarcation in theory.'"³ In other words, to preserve the conceptual truth and scientific objectivity of the still "rational" Althusser, Balibar says that "genuine" Althusserian theory "takes its distance from any form of 'constructivism' or relativism, even in the sophisticated form given it by Foucault" (Balibar, "Object" 163; see also Nelson 166–67; Resch, *Althusser* 166; Smith, *Reading* 81–82 and 215; Sprinker, "Current Conjuncture" 829–31).

Resnick and Wolff, who, along with Anthony Callari, David Ruccio, and others, organized the Rethinking Marxism collective, also defend the conceptual truth of Marxism, but they maintain that, far from suicidal or schizophrenic, Althusser successfully critiques his earlier rationalist science and adopts a justified partisan stance, which establishes what they call the "Althusserian standpoint" and I term post-Marxist theory: "[I]t is possible and, from an Althusserian standpoint, necessary to interrogate every theory in terms of its social conditions and its social consequences.

Indeed, what a Marxian epistemology does is to erect those conditions and consequences as its criteria of the acceptability of all existing theories, i.e., its partisan attitude toward them (“Althusser’s Liberation” 67). Although Resnick and Wolff grant that, as Balibar charges, Althusser’s partisan account of philosophical schools or movements has the relativist import that also characterizes Foucault’s histories or Lyotard’s language games, Resnick and Wolff still argue that Althusserian theory goes beyond relativism: its “‘relativist’ commitment to the plurality of theories and their truths is merely the prelude for the specification of their partisan positions” (*Knowledge* 36).

Resnick and Wolff forcefully demonstrate, moreover, that Althusser’s account of Marx’s theories undermines traditional empiricist and rationalist epistemologies, especially their reductive insistence that the plain economic facts or the underlying historical realities ground legitimate theory (82–89). Plain fact or an absolute historical ground does not overcome the multiplicity or diversity of discourse because the conceptual processes of diverse discourses are influenced or “overdetermined” by social life’s many facets. As a result, Althusser’s account undermines not only empiricist and rationalist epistemologies but also all essentialist theories, including the traditional opposition between materialism and idealism as well as reductive notions of cause and effect or appearance and reality.

Resnick and Wolff grant that Althusser inconsistently preserved economic determinism in the famous “last instance”; they argue, however, that, since he considered the whole an overdetermined structure in which each part, event, or process influences every other, he effectively repudiated such economic and epistemological essentialism and initiated a post-Marxist or Marxian epistemology (*Knowledge* 93–95). They still claim, however, that Marxian theory “is motivated by, focused upon, and aims at an ever-deeper knowledge of” society’s “economic aspects and, in particular, the class processes and their interrelationships” (*Knowledge* 96–97). Since, like Balibar, they redefine class processes in terms of the production and distribution of surplus value, not one’s

position in a social hierarchy, the overdetermined character of social processes allows them many subjects or “subsumed classes”; at the same time, this traditional focus on the economy denies that these processes have many subjects—economic, cultural, political, theological—and, as a result, a unified or central subject. Instead, they assimilate to class position the racial, sexual, or ethnic identities which other post-Marxists consider independent of class orientation. Class position admits questions of identity or issues of race and gender only insofar as different groups suffer different kinds of appropriation or exploitation (see *Class and its others*).

In addition, in *Class Theory and History*, Resnick and Wolff say that central to communism are class processes, which are a question of who produces and distributes surplus value, not who owns property or exercises power. They say that in a communist society, the producers of surplus value also distribute it; in a capitalist society, those who appropriate and distribute surplus value are different from those who produce it (14). As a result, a communist society can be based on private ownership of property, decentralized state powers, and competitive markets, just as a capitalist society can be run by the state and based on centralized state powers and a planned economy (51–79). Indeed, Resnick and Wolff argue that, despite some early, agricultural communism, the USSR developed state capitalism, not communism:

The USSR . . . changed the form of the capitalist class organization from a private to a state capitalism. For example, in place of private boards of directors appropriating the surplus produced by industrial workers, the USSR substituted state officials as the appropriators. The mass of industrial workers . . . produced a surplus appropriated by others and distributed by the latter to still others. (xii)

Even though the USSR provided industrial and other workers the freedoms and benefits of a socialist society, these workers “produced a surplus appropriated” and distributed by others, so the USSR developed and maintained state capitalism.

While this account is sound, Resnick and Wolff conclude that, if the USSR had not ignored these class processes, it would not have suffered such disasters: “The costs of conceptual blindness toward the organization of surplus labor proved extremely heavy” (13). Doesn’t this conclusion overstate the import of conceptual analysis? Would clarifying what communist class processes entailed for industry or the household have mitigated the “costs” of the Stalinist dictatorship, whose roots lie, as I indicated in the introduction, in the Russia’s czarist bureaucracy, Lenin’s elitist party, collectivization of agriculture, and so on?

Certainly Resnick and Wolff know very well that the Stalinist dictatorship had such different causes; still, what their emphasis on class processes suggests is that, even though they forcefully defend Althusser’s critique of his earlier rationalism and his partisan account of philosophical movements, they preserve a rationalist style of conceptual elaboration. Like Descartes, who finds his key notions within himself, they reformulate Marxist theory as a matter of the “production, deployment, and organization of concepts” (*Knowledge* 2) and thereby preserve the rationalist opposition between philosophy and rhetoric, concepts and figural devices, truth and history.⁴ While Resnick and Wolff grant that Althusser faults the theoreticism presupposed by the science/ideology distinction, they reduce the distinction to mere pejorative labeling (*Knowledge* 94) and ignore the historical evolution whereby distinct discourses develop a science or a formal method from their equally distinct ideological contexts.

As I will argue in the next chapter, Althusser’s account of a science’s or discourse’s evolution parallels that of Foucault, who rejects the distinction of science/ideology but traces the historical evolution of particular discourses in great detail. Moreover, post-Marxist theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe and Judith Butler move beyond not only rationalism and empiricism but also the Platonic opposition of concepts and rhetoric. In sum, while Althusser’s defense of a scientific Marxism effectively undermines the Hegelian and/or totalitarian import of traditional Marxism and pro-

duces a partisan critique of philosophy's schools or movements, he too did not pursue such rhetorical analyses not only because he preserved the traditional notion of economic determination in the last instance but also because he shared the traditional contempt of academia. In the autobiography he admits that he considered his life as a teacher and a scholar nothing more than "endless artifice and deceit . . . totally inauthentic" (277; see also Rancière, "La Scène" 65). He even imagined that, since his wife fervently believed in him, his murdering her would show the world his true inauthenticity; as he says, "The best way of proving you do not exist is to destroy yourself by destroying the person who loves you and above all believes in your *existence*" (283; see also 276).