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Althusserian Theory: From Scientific Truth to Institutional History

Abstract

Scholars have emphasized the scientific and the rationalist features of Althusser's work, but few have noted its post-structuralist aspects, especially its Foucauldian accounts of discourse and power. In the early *Pour Marx*, Althusser divides ideological practices from objective science and theoretical norms from empirical facts; however, in several later essays Althusser repudiates his earlier faith in theory's normative force as well as his broad distinction between science and ideology. He argues that every discipline establishes its own relationship between its ideological history and its formal, scientific ideals. This argument, together with Althusser's earlier rejection of totalizing approaches, establishes important parallels with Foucault's archaeological studies. The literary theory of Tony Bennett, who develops a Foucauldian critique of traditional and Marxist aesthetics, illuminates the rich implications of these parallels for cultural analyses.

Keywords

Althusser, post-structuralist, post-structuralism, Foucauldian, discourse, power, Pour Marx, ideology, science, archaeology, cultural analysis, culture, Marxist philosophy

Althusserian Theory: From Scientific Truth to Institutional History

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The spectacular collapse of the USSR and other Communist states has only exacerbated the hostile relationship of Marxism and postmodern theory. On the one hand, Marxists complain that postmodern theorists refuse to see society as a whole or to preserve culture's autonomous ideals (Best and Kellner 220; Jameson, "Regarding Postmodernism" 39). On the other hand, postmodern theorists fear that Marxism cannot overcome its totalitarian nature or answer its poststructuralist opponents (Poster 38-39; Barrett 157-61). Even the innovative theory of Louis Althusser suffers from this debilitating opposition. Scientific realists praise the Althusser who fears that liberal humanist beliefs destroy the objectivity of Marxist theory; theoretical rationalists esteem the Althusser who defends the autonomous norms of formal thought, but postmodern theorists complain that Althusser, along with the Marxist tradition, cannot assimilate the twentieth century world of discourse, media, and high-tech communications. I mean to show that, in addition to the scientific and the rationalist stance, Althusserian theory develops a postmodern stance that resists the totalitarian character of its predecessors and elaborates a Foucauldian account of knowledge. Moreover, the literary theory of Tony Bennett, who criticizes traditional and Marxist aesthetics in these Foucauldian terms, outlines the rich implications of this Althusser for cultural study.

The Scientific Althusser

Objective, scientific, but hardly postmodern, the first Althusser emerges in *Pour Marx*, which brings together his essays on the young Marx, dialectics, theater, science, and humanism. When he wrote these essays in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Marxism-Leninism, the French Communist party, and the French Left enjoyed a high prestige inconceivable in post-Communist America. At the same time, the ongoing revelations of Stalinist dogma and brutality led Althusser to fear that an intrusive, non-scientific humanism was corrupting Marxist theory.

To defend the integrity of a scientific Marxism, he critiques humanist accounts of Karl Marx. He grants 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 called the "cunning of reason" mystified social forces in a similar way; they simply develop the pre-determined rationality of the world spirit, not the potentiality of their own powers. Althusser admits that this secular, humanist critique of religion and Hegel allowed Marx "to think the contradiction between the essence of the state [reason] and its existence [unreason]" (*Pour Marx* 231; my translation). Still, Althusser insists that in *The German Ideology* Marx discovered the fault 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). Marx recognizes that Feuerbach repudiates Hegel's alienated reconstruction of society's essential powers but not Hegel's speculative reconstruction of scientific concepts. Althusser suggests that, unlike Feuerbach, Marx rejects this speculative self-consciousness and goes on to develop a purely scientific Marxism. As Althusser says, the "rupture with . . . all philosophical humanism is not a secondary detail; it is one with the scientific discovery of Marx" (*Pour Marx* 234).

Some critics say that this account of Marx's rupture with Hegelian theory justifies the unjustifiable dogmas of Marxism-Leninism, the French Communist Party, or the Stalinist USSR (Barrett 87-88; Fougeyrollas 20-22; Jay 405, 411). Other critics say that this account of a Marxist science rejects only Stalinist "humanism," not all Hegelian theory (Aronowitz 124-25; Jameson *Political* 27). These contrary views misconstrue Althusser's account of Marx's rupture with Feuerbach and, more generally, Hegelian humanism. Primarily philosophical, this account assumes that Marxist theory is a hermeneutic practice subverting the theoretical self-consciousness of Hegelian theory. In *Reading Capital*, Althusser, whose colleague at the École Normal Supérieure was Jacques Derrida, says that Marxist philosophy is a circular hermeneutic, not a transcendent truth. Marxist philosophy constructs knowledge in a phenomenological manner, as a circular

application of the very beliefs which the traditional humanist expects the external world to betray (34). At the same time, Althusser denies that this metaphysical closure contains scientific theory. Scientific theory does not simply describe what lies outside the circle of western metaphysics; this theory escapes the hermeneutic circle because Marx's rupture with Hegelian humanism opens up a radically new space, the positive space of history (54).

Some critics complain that this account fails to identify the specific point at which Marx breaks with Hegelian humanism and develops this new scientific theory (Steven Smith 506). This objection is well-known but misleading: a hermeneutic practice that deconstructs the metaphysical language of Hegelian theory does not divide Hegelian humanism and scientific theory so neatly. Other critics object that a phenomenological hermeneutics favors indeterminacy, free play, and difference. To retain scientific truth, especially the well-known, economic determination, is to repress the indeterminacy fostered by this hermeneutics (Parker 59-60). This objection is forceful but one-sided: Althusser's hermeneutics is rationalist, not Heideggerian nor Derridean. In a Cartesian manner Althusser allows the skeptical doubt of the phenomenologist but preserves the objective truths of the scientist.

The Rationalist Althusser

The rationalist Althusser does not abandon the scientific objectivity of Marxist theory; he assimilates the science to the rationalist's theoretical norms. That is to say, he defines science in a formal, not in a dogmatic way: 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 anti-humanist conformity is not altogether negative. It is well known that he endowed ideology with a positive role: it constructs ("interpellates") a subject. Ideology does not represent falsehood or misrepresentation; ideology explains the subject's role in a society's socio-economic structure—what Althusser calls the subject's relation to the relations of production. Nonetheless, because theory preserves its own criteria of validity, he claimed that theory resists this ideological interpellation and effectively grasps the nature of reality. As scholars have shown, Althusser believed that precise, scientific theory escapes the corrosive force of discourse and reflects the true nature of the real.

Some critics say that this account of a scientific theory betrays the rationalist's unduly optimistic belief that some preordained harmony brings nature and reason together (Glucksman 289; Aronowitz 180-81). Other scholars object that this notion of theory renders it autonomous, if not neutral. As Dominick LaCapra says, Althusser favors a subtle "positivist" scientism that denies the ideological character of objective science (13, 166; Aronowitz 173; Belsey 62-64). Still other scholars accept Althusser's account of a scientific theory but reject his account of the subject and its ideologies. These scholars complain that this account reduces "virtually any aspect of contemporary society" to "a symptom of 'bourgeois' ideology" (McClellan 82), fragments and fetishizes the subject and inflates and absolutizes language (Anderson *Tracks* 55), or imposes a robotlike, "functionalist" conformity with established discourse (Montag 72; Hirst 43-6).

The Post-Structuralist Althusser

Michèle Barrett suggests that while Foucault's account of discourse answers such objections well enough, they destroy not only Althusser's account of ideology and science but the broad Marxist account as well (157-61; Poster 38-39). I admit that Althusser does not answer them. Still, he does respond to them, and his responses outline a third, poststructuralist self-extending Marxist theory. In *Pour Marx* he clearly defends the rationalist belief that theory possesses formal criteria of validity enabling it to distinguish scientific from ideological claims. Still, in *Reading Capital*, where he distinguishes between philosophy and science, he repudiates the "foundational" rationalism of *Pour Marx*, vehemently insisting that he does not seek any such guarantees of a theory's truth.¹ 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. Indeed, the widespread belief that theory and practice form a harmonious unity he considers a ridiculous myth perpetuated by Hegelian or Sartrean humanists.

Moreover, in his later works he repudiates the autonomous norms enabling theory to subvert ideology. He calls the defense of these norms the error of "theoreticism," and, rejecting the broad distinction between theory and ideology, he argues that economics, history, philosophy, mathematics, science, and other disciplines and practices establish their own "inner" criteria of validity and produce their own

calls a “knowledge effect,” not cognitive truths nor autonomous facts (60-63). He means that an authoritative exponent of a discipline considers a particular theory legitimate knowledge because the theory conforms with the discipline’s conventions, languages, procedures, or protocols, not with an external reality. What Althusser terms a “problematic,” which is this ensemble of a discipline’s conventions and discourses, explains why the exponents of a discipline accept certain theories at one time and other theories at another time. Just as Foucault assumes that the episteme structuring a discipline explains the cognitive force of its discourses, so Althusser argues that the problematics of a discipline explain its “knowledge-effects.”

I do not mean to imply that this Foucauldian account of knowledge resolves the difficulties of Althusser’s scientific or rationalist stances. I mean to say that, even though this stance may not be consistent with the other stances, this Foucauldian stance gives Althusser the poststructuralist self that Barrett and others deny him. My reader may object that these scholars do not simply ignore his Foucauldian theory; they consider Marxism a closed, outmoded doctrine as viable and compelling as Ptolomaic astronomy and Greek divination. I grant this objection. In *Foucault, Marxism and History*, Mark Poster says that Marxism describes past eras, when production, factories, machines, and workers were central, whereas poststructuralists depict the modern era, in which communication, ideology, and discourse are central. Similarly, in *The Politics of Truth* Michèle Barrett, who defends the traditional humanist belief that political movements require agency, intention, and human nature, insists that Karl Marx’s unwavering commitment to scientific truth and class struggle establishes the essentially anti-feminist, totalitarian nature of any and all Marxisms (3-4).

Tony Bennett, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism

The work of Tony Bennett, who rejects the theoretical ideals of the scientists and the rationalists, challenges this belief in an unchanging, outdated Marxism. In literary terms, Bennett denies the aesthetic grounds of textual analyses and emphasizes the historical and institutional contexts of literary reception. In *Outside Literature*, Bennett says that literary theory cannot tell critics what correct readings must look like. Like Stanley Fish, who has argued that theory cannot produce valid interpretations or resolve critical disputes, Bennett insists that theoretical norms cannot regulate interpretive practices (see Fish “Consequences,” 36-40). Moreover, he claims that scholars who make theory

such a criterion of truth accept what he calls bourgeois aesthetics, which requires a critic to show that his or her judgments of value possess universal validity. Bennett argues that this aesthetic theory does not successfully overcome the opposition between universal values and the critic's subjective taste. David Hume admits that different persons, cultures, and eras show a remarkable diversity of taste, but he still insists that humankind shows an equally remarkable uniformity of judgment. He argues that the distinct character of the authoritative critic ensures that his or her judgments are universally valid, yet he grants that even these authoritative critics differ. Bennett also says that in Kant's view, individual judgments of value must employ the universal terms "good" and "bad," even though these judgments are subjective and hypothetical. Critics talk as though everyone must share their taste, but only the hypothetical assumption of a common human nature or a common sense gives these judgments their universality (*Outside Literature* 150-66).

Bennett also suggests that Marxist humanists imitate these "bourgeois" aestheticians. For example, he says that Hegelian Marxists like Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann explain canonical works in profound, socio-historical terms but ignore the canon's origins, reception, and exclusions. Adopting the established canon, these critics assume that the immanent value of canonical works will become clear and plain in the communist era, when a rational subject will finally emerge. Aesthetic judgments can escape the historical relativity of the established canon because Marxist theory ensures that when history ends, the universality of the texts' values will be self-evident. (*Outside Literature* 31-33; "Marxism" 140-41; "Texts" 13).

Bennett says that scientific Althusserians also seek to overcome the traditional uneasiness with arbitrary or subjective judgments. However, the Althusserians argue that a scientific stance exposes the ideological incoherence, distortion, and gaps hidden by a text and, as a result, aesthetic judgments acquire the objectivity of socio-historical truths. Althusserian critics grant literary forms the quasi-scientific ability to expose ideology's incoherence and gaps, but the Althusserian faith in scientific theory preserves the rationalist belief that objective truth lies outside cultural discourse (*Outside Literature* 126-37).

Bennett denies not only that aesthetic norms justify this ideological critique but also that totalizing, theoretical self-consciousness undermines institutions or produces historical change. However, while most postmodern scholars take this repudiation of theory to destroy ideological criticism, Bennett's Althusserian stance preserves it. For example, like Bennett, Richard Rorty insists that theory does not ground knowledge, but Rorty critiques traditional epistemology, not aesthetics. In

The Consequences of Pragmatism, for example, he complains that while Platonists, empiricists, and Kantians fiercely oppose each other's views, they all defend epistemological criteria of truth. The Platonist argues that the unity and autonomy of Being justifies his belief that the rational mind can escape its subjective predispositions and grasp the objective nature of reality. The empiricist argues that sense data, raw feels, distinct impressions or strong intuitions can expose the metaphysical character of nonsense and ground the positive assertions of legitimate theory. The Kantian, who seeks a third way between Platonism and empiricism, argues that the presuppositions of knowledge represent universal rules enabling an individual to escape his or her subjectivity and to establish the universal framework of knowledge. Rorty complains that, despite these epistemological differences, the Platonist, the empiricist, and the Kantian all assume that epistemological criteria enable one to escape one's determinate historical context or "vocabularies" and to grasp certain, objective truth.

Like Bennett, Rorty forcefully debunks this traditional quest for epistemological certainty. However, an unredeemed liberal, he considers postmodern theorists like Derrida and Foucault self-conscious ironists, not public theorists. His argument is that these theorists do not make propositional kinds of argument; they critique our vocabularies, denying that any vocabulary and, hence, any rules or conventions are final. As a consequence, their "ironizing" does not escape their private subjectivity. In his view, "[i]ronist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics" (*Contingency* 83). Moreover, identifying literary criticism with this "ironizing," he claims that criticism too is "largely irrelevant to public life" (*Contingency* 83). Nancy Fraser rightly objects that Rorty would "require us to turn our backs on the last hundred years of social history" (102).

By contrast, Bennett shows that postmodern theory undertakes valuable ideological criticism. In *Bond and Beyond*, he and Janet Woollacott argue that a literary text functions as a passive arena within which the proponents of different "intertextual" strategies make their views prevail. As Bennett and Woollacott say, "[t]exts constitute sites around which the pre-eminently social affair of the struggle for the production of meaning is conducted" (*Bond* 59-60). The intentions of an author or the figures of a text do not reveal the objective truth or constrain the activity of readers. Rather, what Bennett and Woollacott call the "production of meaning" is a "pre-eminently social affair" because readers are situated within and constructed by subjective

institutional structures or, to use his term, "reading formations." To interpret a text is to contest its terrain, to vindicate one's methods and ideologies, and, by implication if not by explicit assertion, to debunk opposed methods and ideologies.

Stanley Fish and Barbara Herrnstein Smith also favor a subjective account of literary criticism. They believe that the beliefs and the values of the reader explain his or her interpretation of a text. Smith argues that the traditional "axiology" of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and other modern aestheticians seeks but fails to impose absolute norms of universal value. She asserts that these aestheticians do not successfully overcome the subjectivity of individual taste and the relativity of individual beliefs. However, Smith emphasizes the individuality of the reader, whose interpretations express his or her personal "economy" of values (13). Fish argues that interpretive communities govern the practices of readers but not of individuals, who circulate among diverse communities. Bennett also says that the reading formations embedded in literary institutions govern the interpretations of individual readers, but, more Foucauldian than either Fish or Smith, Bennett claims that these reading formations enable schools and universities to discipline readers, ensuring that they constitute proper political/ethical subjects (*Outside Literature* 167).

In other words, Bennett assumes that embedded in distinct institutions literary discourse produces its own social relations and does not simply mimic or distort them. In the nineteenth century, when the schools turned literature into what Bennett calls a "moral technology," the ideal teacher and, subsequently, the many-layered text, made the reader's interpretive activity the basis of his or her unending improvement. Bennett says that while traditional "bourgeois" criticism takes this technology to produce ethical improvement, Marxist criticism assumes that it provides ideological correction. However, both the bourgeois and the Marxist critic ignore the technology's power to constitute the subject (*Outside Literature* 175-90).

Some opponents of this view might object that in a postmodern fashion it emphasizes the inescapable present, not theoretical critique, local academic interests, not the underlying social totality. Certainly Fredric Jameson, who dismisses the Foucauldian problematic of power as anti-Marxist, harshly condemns what he calls Bennett's "sinister variant" of a widespread "anti-intellectualism." As Jameson says, Bennett "does not seem to realize how obscene American readers are likely to find his proposals" ("Cultural Studies" 29). In effect, Jameson reduces Bennett's theory to the "obscene" proposal that

cratic party. But Bennett's institutional history also bears on pedagogic issues, including the status of the Anglo-American canon, the place of cultural studies, the neglect of popular culture, the teacher-centered character of the classroom, and the gross inadequacies of state and federal funding. Jameson assumes, as does Theodor Adorno, that the instrumental rationality dominating modern society makes theoretical critique the only revolutionary force. But these pressing issues clearly require not only an engaged, institutional politics, but a historical analysis as well.

I have argued that Bennett's account of literary studies gives Althusserian theory the Foucauldian history that its postmodern opponents deny it, and yet, a skeptic could still refuse to believe that Althusserian theory is Foucauldian or postmodern. After all, without the social totality, theoretical critique, scientific truth, or class conflict very little of this Althusser looks or sounds like the Marxism that we know and love (or hate). Bennett suggests that our trying to answer this objection may not be worth the effort. Still, the objection is misleading. It assumes that we have defined once and for all the "true" nature of Marxism. The many scholars who consign Marxism to the dustbin of history accept this assumption, but Althusser, who insists that Marxism is a scientific field and not a set of doctrines, denies it. Bennett may not definitively establish the postmodern character of Althusserian theory, but he shows us what a poststructuralist Marxism might look like. This outline of the poststructuralist Althusser may be less conventional than the scientific or the rationalist Althusser, but this Althusser is not, on that account, the less important.

Notes

1. See Robert Paul Resch's insightful account of this development in "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory: A Comparison of Althusser and Foucault," *Poetics Today* 10.3 (Fall, 1989): 531.

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