The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism

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The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism

Althusser and his influence

Ted Benton

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Preface

Louis Althusser was born in 1918, near Algiers. He went to school there and at Marseilles. Most of the war was spent in a prisoner-of-war camp, and after it Althusser went on to complete his studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, under the supervision of Gaston Bachelard. He subsequently became a distinguished philosophy teacher at the same institution. Though briefly a member of the Catholic student movement before the war, he has been a member of the French Communist Party since 1948.

Althusser's political activity has been described as naive and sporadic,¹ and it was no surprise, apparently, to find him quite absent from the scene during the 'events' of May 1968, perhaps the most significant political moment of post-war France. In so far, then, as Althusser has had political influence, it is principally through his writings and those of his associates. There has always been, indeed, a political intent in these writings, despite their frequently abstract and technical character. This is especially true of the series of essays and seminar papers, dating from the early and mid-1960s, and collected together in *For Marx* (trans. Ben Brewster, London, 1969) and *Reading Capital* (trans. Ben Brewster, London, 1970, and including in this edition, essays by both Althusser and Etienne Balibar). Althusser describes these contributions as 'interventions',² but, as we shall see, they can be seen as political interventions only in a way far removed from the more overt and explicit attacks on the Communist Party leadership which Althusser published in the 1970s.

In 1980 Althusser was admitted to St Anne's Psychiatric Hospital in Paris, after confessing to the killing of his wife. This confession, and confusion surrounding his wife's death, stunned both friends and colleagues, and the event was, of course, widely reported in the international press. Althusser had suffered from deep, recurrent depressions for more than thirty years.

This book started out as a projected introductory text on Louis Althusser and that tradition in Marxist thought associated with his

name. My qualifications for undertaking such a project were no greater than those of many other English-speaking intellectuals and activists on the Left. Like them, I too had struggled to make sense of Althusser's ideas, to establish a critical position in relation to them, but at the same time to consider what use they might have in my own trades-union and political activity in Britain. Beyond this, I make no claim to any special expertise in French intellectual or political life. I have never met Althusser, and had only a brief acquaintanceship with the late Nicos Poulantzas.

These facts about the situation and perspective of the author, rather than any large questions of principle, serve to explain many of the decisions as to inclusion, exclusion, emphasis and parenthesis in the treatment of topics in this book. I have decided, for example, to say very little of a biographical nature about the leading contributors to the tradition of structural Marxism. This is not because I apply to them some of their own more unqualified dismissals of the role of conscious 'subjects' in the production of theoretical innovations. It is, rather, that by training and by disposition I am better fitted to write a book of theoretical analysis and criticism than one of biography. I do, indeed, think that the personal life-histories of 'subjects' are of great pertinence to their intellectual formation, though I am a long way from those colleagues for whom the terrible personal tragedies both of Louis Althusser and his wife and of Nicos Poulantzas³ have been taken as a final justification for an ill-informed and unthinking dismissal of their intellectual contribution.

I have also decided to say relatively little about a body of work, stemming, like Althusser's work itself from both structuralist and Marxist origins, which has had an important and influential contribution to make in the fields of literary and dramatic criticism, and, more broadly, in aesthetic and cultural analysis. Among this body of work, the contributions of the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies deserve special mention. This, again, reflects no judgement on my part about the relative importance of these fields of inquiry, compared with such fields as contemporary political analysis, philosophy of science, anthropology and historical materialism, which I do try to deal with. Rather, it is simply that with my 'given' personal and scholarly limitations, a book which dealt at all adequately with these matters would have been even longer in gestation, and may, indeed, never have been delivered.

Finally, I want to say something about the way my idea of what this book should be about has changed in the course of writing it. As I have already said, it *began* as a projected introductory text. I thought such an introductory text was probably of value, given the extreme difficulty of some of the work of Althusser, Poulantzas and their associates for readers unfamiliar with the intellectual and political context in which those texts were produced. A second reason for such an introductory text was that I felt that the internal disarray of the Althusserian 'camp', and the emergence of influential 'post-Althusserian' and 'post-structuralist' writers had provided an opportunity for some unjustifiably harsh and often malevolent retrospective judgements on Althusser's work to gain quite undeserved credibility.

The pervasive judgement that Althusser's work simply re-enacts Stalinism in modern dress, for example, seems to me to be outrageous.⁴ Althusser himself once characterised his aim in these terms: 'to make a start on the first *left-wing* critique of Stalinism, a critique that would make it possible to reflect not only on Khrushchev and Stalin but also on Prague and Lin Piao: that would above all help to put some substance back into the revolutionary project here in the West'.⁵ True enough, the claim to have embarked on the *first* left-wing critique of Stalinism is stunning in the narrowness of its historical scope, but the seriousness of the opposition to 'Stalinism' and the commitment to a development of Marxist analysis to the point where this convenient term of political abuse can be replaced by adequate means of thought and action are surely beyond question. In a parallel philosophical assessment Alasdair MacIntyre has written of 'the profound gratitude that we all owe to Althusser for having brought French Marxism back into dialogue with the rest of French philosophy'. He goes on to say that: 'So far as French philosophy was concerned, he de-Stalinised Marxism more thoroughly than any other Marxist did'.⁶ I share MacIntyre's view, and, with some reservations, Althusser's self-assessment, and I have devoted a good deal of this book to arguing the point.

The work of writing this book, which I had at first thought of as little more than the labour of setting down on paper a more or less well-defined view of the value and limitations of Althusserian Marxism, opposing, at the same time, some of the current misrepresentations of it, turned out to be a more complex and engaging effort of personal 'settling of accounts'. In the course of this 'settling of accounts' I have both shifted my own intellectual and political

perspective, and come to see much more clearly the implications of moves I had already partly made. Undoubtedly the wider context of a crisis of Marxism itself as well as the fundamental alteration in the terms of British political debate and action induced by the success of 'Thatcherism' are relevant to these shifts in perspective.

Attempting a systematic re-evaluation of structural Marxism in this new context has made me aware in a way that I was not before of the importance of issues and areas of debate effectively foreclosed by that tradition. I have in mind here some important questions which *do* have a place in other traditions of Marxism. One such area has to do with the recognition that human beings, however distinctive their historical and cultural activity, are nevertheless products of nature and continue to be dependent on nature for their physical and spiritual well-being. Though not without its own problems, the philosophical materialism of Marx and Engels at least provided a perspective within which these broad prospects of human survival and historical advancement could be thought about. This is almost (though not *entirely*) lost in Althusser's Marxism through the unstable importation of ideas from French 'conventionalist' philosophy of science, and the effective abandonment of ontological speculation in favour of epistemology and a rather narrowly circumscribed 'science' of historical materialism. This loss has been doubly disastrous, in that it deprived an influential current of Marxism of the intellectual means for coming to terms with two fundamental aspects of our contemporary world. These are, on the one hand, the practical threat posed by the growing and systematic destruction of the human environment, and, on the other, a growing movement of radical (though generally non-Marxist) opposition within the 'advanced' societies which sees our relation to our environment as the central issue confronting us. I remain convinced that there is much in the 'classics' of Marxism that is enormously illuminating on these questions, and find myself returning again and again to the 'pre-scientific' early works of Marx and Engels for help in thinking about them.

But there are other issues with which the classics of Marxism offer little help. Questions including, for example, the nature of 'non-class' forms of social oppression such as those based on gender and race, or the nature of those 'mechanisms' by which the loyalty of the oppressed and exploited to their oppressors and exploiters is secured. The old explanations in terms of 'fetishism' of commodities

and control over the means of production and distribution of ideas now look hopelessly limited and threadbare (though not, I think, wholly mistaken). It is precisely here (and especially where Gramsci's work was used) that structural Marxism made real advances over the Marxist classics. Ideas such as 'interpellation', and the 'relative autonomy' of ideology, as well as the attempt to link psychoanalysis with Marxism (not, of course, the first time this had been tried!) did provide means with which 'class-reductionism' and 'economism' could be opposed within Marxism.

Here, though, it seems to me that the 'opening up' of Marxism has subsequently been combined with the more general crisis of Marxism in such a way that some of the more valuable ideas and priorities of classical Marxism are in danger of being lost. It is, for example, very important indeed, theoretically and politically, to recognise and understand the specificity, the distinctiveness, of the forms of oppression faced by women. Comparable considerations apply to the position of ethnic minorities, and to individuals whose sexuality is socially stigmatised. What also has to be recognised is that the resistance of such individuals and groups will employ symbolic forms, will establish priorities, and will develop organisational forms which cut across and sometimes conflict with those of the 'traditional' class-based Left. This much the post-Althusserian (and post-Marxist) Left insists upon, and, I think, rightly so. But it is one thing to recognise these realities, to take them seriously, and to begin the work of dialogue which may take us closer to a practically realisable vision of a future to which all these diverse currents of opposition make their distinctive contribution. It is quite another to revel in the discovery of the impossibility of the project of the class-based 'traditional' organisations and discourses of the Left as if this negative task of demolition were the whole of our task, and as if the achievements of the traditional Left amounted to nothing.

This is not the place to repeat those historical achievements – they should be apparent to anyone with the least grasp of historical reality. But for the present, it is important to temper a justified opposition to 'class-reductionism' with the realisation that however *specific* the forms of racial and sexual oppression, they are none the less clearly marked and shaped by their co-presence in a society characterised by class domination. Though these forms of oppression cannot be *reduced* to class, they cannot be wholly understood in abstraction from it, either. And in political practice, too, it has been

a disastrous failure, still not really recognised, on the part of the 'traditional' Left that it has never found adequate means of dialogue with those whose experience of exclusion, oppression or lack of fulfilment in society somehow did not articulate with the symbols of class oppression and economic exploitation. But to see this is not the same thing as to deny the immense and pervasive presence of class oppression both as a reality and as a part of the lived experience out of which practical political opposition is constituted. The belated 'discovery' of the significance of other forms of oppression is a spring-board from which the culture and politics of the Left may be enriched, and its popular appeal widened. But this will not happen if these 'discoveries' are made at the cost of 'forgetting' (either in theory or practice) the traditional role of the Left in interpreting, articulating and turning into effective practical struggle the experiences of class exploitation and oppression.

Well, these few paragraphs sketch out a position – of course, only a provisional one – that my thinking and writing have brought me to over the last four years. I say a little bit more – but not nearly enough – in the final chapter of this book. In the rest of the book these ideas are implicit, but not often explicitly. This is in part a reflection of the fact that serious writing is a process in which you are hardly ever sure where you are going until you get there, and, assuming you *do* arrive, it is only then that it is possible to see that you should have chosen a better place from which to begin. That we do not, after all, choose our own starting-point is one thing, at least, that Althusser was right about.

It is conventional and, of course, proper, to preface such works as this with 'acknowledgements'. This is a task which I find particularly difficult. It is not that I am loath to admit to having been influenced by others. The problem is almost the reverse. I have always pursued the ideal of 'thinking for myself' but in doing so I have always been aware that even the most independent thinker cannot avoid using means of thought provided by others. More than this, I have often come to see that a thought which I had experienced as 'my own' was already present in the writing or conversation of another. It is in the nature of the situation that the listing of such influences is bound to be incomplete and uncertain. That much said, I do want to acknowledge the help of Linda George and Mary Girling for devoting many hours to making sense of large parts of my handwritten draft and converting it into a readable typescript. My mother, Hilda Benton,

also worked on the rest of the typescript and for this as for so much else I am immensely indebted to her. Shelley, Rowan and Jay deserve my apologies for all the times when I failed to reconcile my commitment to them with my commitment to finishing this book. All three of them both contributed to and obstructed the writing of this book in ways that are much too complicated for me to be able to understand at the moment. Several members of staff, especially, but not exclusively, in the Sociology Department at Essex University have given time to discussing the topics of this book with me. I would particularly like to mention Tony Woodiwiss, Harold Wolpe, David Rose, Mike Weston, Mike Freeman, Alison Scott, Michael Harloe, Maxine Molyneux, Penny Rickman, Bob Jessop, Bob Little, Joan Busfield, Joe Foweraker, Ernesto Laclau, Cutz Venn and Ian Craib for their intellectual help and/or personal support. David Lee and David Rose, especially, spent hours with me in coffee bars and elsewhere talking through my problems in writing this book. Their help is especially appreciated because of the very difference of their perspectives from my own. Anthony Giddens, a very patient editor, has also been exemplary in his combination of incisive and pertinent criticism with personal encouragement. In this respect, thanks are also due to John Winckler and Steven Kennedy. In the longer term, too, I know I owe an enormous debt to successive 'cohorts' of students, both graduate and undergraduate, whose sustained criticism has been indispensable to me. Especially important have been a series of seminars, in the early 1970s, in the Essex Sociology MA. Those seminars were very important for me in initially getting to grips with Marxist ideas, and with Althusser's work in particular. Through their published work and unbeknown to them, Norman Geras and Alex Callinicos were also of great help in this. The help of my colleagues Roy Enfield and Andrew McCulloch at that time was also a very important formative influence on me. More recently, my colleague Ian Craib and students taking part in the 'Sociology of Knowledge' course in this Department have provided me with the kind of creative intellectual stimulus that I find it hard to imagine would have been given elsewhere.

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