

The Legacy of Louis Althusser, 1918-1990: An Introduction

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Althusser's death in October of 1990 provided the occasion for these essays, which re-examine his work, its influence, and its reception. Although his tragic insanity ended his career, his reputation has grown steadily: many Anglo-American literary and social theorists employ his concepts of "overdetermination" and "interpellation"; several volumes examine his life, politics, and ideas; a number of anthologies reproduce his essays; numerous surveys of recent literary theory devote a chapter to his work; and quite a few distinguished theorists, including Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Catherine Belsey, and Tony Bennett, have considered themselves "Althusserians" or have elaborated his views.¹

This impressive influence warrants the re-examination provided by the essays collected here. In addition, the growing recognition of Althusser's importance has led many scholars to claim that Althusserian theory is antipathetic to postmodernism.² This collection, which emphasizes the postmodern aspects of Althusserian theory, seeks to correct this misapprehension. With a few important exceptions, the essays in this collection examine the conflicted relationship between Althusserian theory and Jacques Lacan and/or Michel Foucault. A few essays deny or reject this relationship, but most of them demonstrate important parallels between Althusserian and postmodern theory.

For instance, In "Althusserian Theory: From Scientific Truth to Institutional History," I survey the divided reception of Althusserian theory. My argument is that scholars have emphasized the scientific and the rationalist features of Althusser's work, but few have noted its poststructuralist aspects, especially its Foucauldian accounts of discourse and power. Both realists and postmodernists construe his work as scientific and/or rationalist, but they deny any rapprochement between his work and postmodern theory. I grant that in the rationalist *Pour Marx* Althusser defends the autonomous norms of "theoretical practice" and draws a general distinction between science and ideology. 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 estab-

lishes its own relationship between its ideological history and its scientific practices. This argument may not be consistent with his scientific or his rationalist theories, but, together with Althusser's earlier rejection of totalizing approaches, the argument establishes important parallels with Foucault's archaeological studies of "power/knowledge." The literary criticism of Tony Bennett illuminates the rich implications of these parallels. Not only does Bennett repudiate the autonomous aesthetics shared by traditional and Marxist scholars; he also examines the ideological import of literary study's institutional history.

In "Literature in the Abstract: Althusser and English Studies in England," David Margolies also examines the reception of Althusserian theory, but he adopts a traditional, socio-historical approach in which, along with hippies, the Beatles, and miniskirts, Althusserian theory exemplifies the cultural and political rebellion of the sixties. Moreover, he interprets the theory as a science that provided an exciting new totalization in which life had meaning, and intellectuals a vital role. In literary studies, the theory led students and lecturers to assume that works of literature preserved the status quo and lacked genuine knowledge. Condemning Literature as an institution, the Althusserians rejected empirical experience and defended general principles and abstract structures. Before the advent of Althusserian theory, scholars assumed that literary study was a matter of factual analysis or aesthetic appreciation. The Althusserians demonstrated that literature was really ideological and political, but the dogmatic arrogance of the Althusserians ultimately restored the mystical elitism of previous literary study.

In "Ideology Takes a Day Off: Althusser and Mass Culture," Chip Rhodes repudiates such reception studies as mere consumerism and defends Althusser's scientific account of ideological analysis. Critics who reject Althusser's scientific outlook ignore Althusser's epistemological rupture with humanism or substitute apolitical consumption for the whole complex process of production. Such critics fail to understand his theory, whose anti-humanist stance requires a symptomatic reading in which texts and subjects are the bearers of structures. However Rhodes claims that Althusser was wrong to say that ideology produces a working subject that reproduces its institutional apparatus. Contemporary mass culture, in particular, fosters a non-productive, "free," consuming subject aware of its aesthetic status. To illustrate this updated account of ideological interpellation, Rhodes suggests that the popular film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* reveals its own aesthetic practices, but still constructs the viewer as a consuming, bourgeois subject.

In "Althusser and Mass Culture," Janet Staiger points out that Chip Rhodes defends Althusser's scientific belief that the subject is a bearer of structures and opposes the humanist claim that the subject functions independently of its contexts. However, recent work in cultural studies examines how identity is constructed and, as a result, allows us to reconcile the scientific and the humanist view. Ideological interpellation may define our subject positions, but we are still able to refuse them. For instance, Rhodes' account of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* assumes that the subject is a fully interpellated, adolescent, Anglo, middle or upper class heterosexual male. However, the film also offers various oppositional subject positions, including adolescent female or Hispanic, working class youth.

While Margolies, Rhodes, and Staiger dispute the value of Althusserian science, Carsten Strathausen, Antony Easthope, and Toby Miller repudiate this science and develop a revised, poststructuralist Althusser. In "Althusser's Mirror," Carsten Strathausen, who elaborates the Lacanian aspects of Althusser's theory, argues that while rationalist accounts of Althusser's theory reduce ideology to falsehood, Althusser's account of ideology construes individual subjectivity in a positive, Lacanian manner. Althusser's belief that science is a discourse without a subject parallels Lacan's belief that in the Symbolic Order the Subject and the Other are alienated. Althusser's account of interpellation, which explains how ideology recognizes individuals as subjects, takes for granted Lacan's notion of the mirror stage. Althusser repudiates the plenitude of the subject, whose interpellation conceals its lack; Lacan shows that the subject's failure to express itself in language makes the subject a void. However, Althusser, whose subject is too much like Lacan's ego, fails to distinguish between the "I" of the split subject and the "ego" of the subject's imaginary self-identity. What is more, Althusser rejects the self-consciousness implied by the subject's lack of plenitude and its suturing interpellation. To preserve critique, a Lacanian version of the Althusserian subject would have to overcome these limitations.

In "Father Knows Best," Judith Roof complains that Strathausen "stretches" the parallels between Lacan's mirror stage and Althusser's interpellated subject. More precisely, she exposes the familial politics behind such parallels. She argues that, since Althusserian science justifies itself in terms of its ruptures with traditional theory, it cannot logically claim Jacques Lacan as a legitimizing figure. Demonstrated by Strathausen and by Althusser, this inconsistency reveals the paternal politics whereby the influence of the father legitimates the son despite the son's rebellions.

In "Text and Subject Position after Althusser," Easthope defends Althusser's poststructuralist notion of totality, knowledge, and subjectivity, but not his notion of ideology. Easthope fears that Althusser's "functionalist" view of ideology implies that ideological interpellation maintains the status quo. To preserve resistance, Easthope, like Strathausen, elaborates the Lacanian aspects of Althusser's theories. Since the Lacanian subject always misrecognizes itself, a Lacanian revision of Althusserian theory effectively oils "the wheels of change." Moreover, to foster the close textual analyses uncongenial to Foucauldians, Easthope argues that a text constructs multiple positions for its readers. For example, in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" Easthope discovers multiple positions, including the devotee of high culture and the national canon, the lover of the verbal signifier and its play, the consumer of confessional discourse, and the masculine worshiper of the laboring, singing woman.

Toby Miller argues that a Foucauldian version of the Althusserian subject explains what makes individuals docile, obedient citizens, rather than subjective, desiring individuals. Miller admits that many Althusserians have confessed their errors and converted to Foucault, but Miller claims that these confessions unfairly denigrate Althusser's work. Moreover, Althusser and Foucault, students of each other, provide compatible accounts of this subject and its construction. Both of them speak of a "cite" or "social surface" rather than a totality. Althusser examines the broad, social force of an ideological apparatus, while Foucault describes the disciplinary effects of diverse micropowers. Both of them, however, consider the constitutive import of established discourses, ideologies, or "power/ knowledge" more important than the state power of the ruling elites. Althusser treats the real as "knowable and actionable," whereas Foucault stresses the archival roots of the real. But both of them repudiate the universal subject of Enlightenment thought. In postmodern fashion, they both consider the historical narratives that explain how the subject becomes a loyal citizen local, particular, and Western, not the world's divine ideal.

In sum, these essays effectively situate Althusserian theory in a postmodern context. They do not establish a consensus about Althusser's postmodern import, but they do show that Althusserian theory remains vital and influential.

Notes

1. Studies of his life and works include Ted Benton's *The Rise and Fall of Structuralist Marxism* (1984); Gregory Elliot's *Althusser: The Detour of*
- <https://newprairiepress.org/stcl/vol18/iss1/22>
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Theory (1987), and Stephen B. Smith's *Reading Althusser* (1984); anthologies that reproduce his essays include Hazard Adam's *Critical Theory since 1965* (1986), Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan's *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (1992), and Dan Lattimer's *Contemporary Critical Theory* (1989); surveys that examine Althusser's work include Michèle Barrett's *The Politics of Truth* (1991) Art Berman's *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* (1988), Antony Easthope's *British Post-structuralism* (1988), John Frow's *Marxism and Literary History* (1986), my *The Politics of Literary Theory* (1990), Richard Harland's *Superstructuralism*, Diane MacDowell's *Theories of Discourse* (1986), and Michael Sprinker's *Imaginary Relations* (1987).

2. See, for example, Mark Poster's *Foucault, Marxism, & History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984) or Michèle Barrett's *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1991).