

Althusser and post-Marxism

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Forthcoming in Portuguese translation in *Althusser's Vocabulaire*. Edited by Pedro Karczmarczyk and Márcio Naves. (forthcoming in Portuguese and Spanish 2023)

Draft. Not for Citation.

Any attempt to elucidate connections between strands of Marxist thinking and what has become known as 'post-Marxism' such as the present essay does in exploring the relation between Louis Althusser's work and the broader field of post-Marxism, must pass through what has become known as the quintessential post-Marxist intervention, namely that of Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*. This text, subjected to much critique over the years remains central to the post-Marxist project. It also, for the purposes of this essay, offers a window into the ways that Althusser's project is taken up, transformed, and redeployed in post-Marxist thinking. Laclau and Mouffe take up portions of Althusser's work and redeploy it alongside intersecting non-Marxist, or not centrally Marxist, critical theories that fit broadly under the category of post-structuralist thinking such as more recent developments like those found in intellectual movements classed under the moniker "New Materialism" and the like.

As there has been so much discussion and debate around and about Laclau and Mouffe's text over the years, I will not dwell too much on its details, nor will I comment on its merits (see Geras 1987 and Mouzelis 1988 for some of this debate). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, however, can help provide the connective tissue between post-Marxism, post-structuralism, and some of the emerging movements mentioned above in a way that is helpful for us in seeing the importance of Althusser's thought which is at the bottom of much of these linked movements. Further, Laclau and Mouffe's book served as a point from which other thinkers began to develop their own versions of post-Marxist thinking through engagement with this text and its authors. Here we can think of the early work of thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler whose early intellectual trajectories were marked by consistent engagement with Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism (Butler et al 2000).

We can return to these later thinkers and movements below, but to begin with Laclau and Mouffe, in their 2000 preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe both accept that their text is post-Marxist as many have deemed it, and offer an attempt at defining the limits of that term as, "the process of reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it" (ix). They also see this as connected to the rise of poststructuralist movements as it those intellectual movements that Laclau and Mouffe also describe as the main source of their ability to push beyond classical Marxism (xi). This definition of post-Marxism, and connection to poststructuralist movements is repeated with minor differences by many writing about post-Marxism in the wake of Laclau and Mouffe. For instance, for Stuart Sim (2000) it is a term that names late twentieth century movements in theory that recognize the limits of a classical Marxist theories in the face of the

rise of other theoretical 'posts' such as "post-structuralism, post-modernism, and second-wave feminism" (Sim, 1). Another linked way of defining post-Marxism is to see it as a theoretical movement that "pursues questions inherited from Marxism but seeks to go decisively beyond it" (Callinicos et al, 2021). These definitions all converge around the view that, for post-Marxists, classical Marxist analysis is not enough on its own, that we must break with it in particular ways so as to both save what is worth saving in Marxist analysis (i.e. in order to reappropriate it) and also, use resources found in other movements in order to enrich our understanding of oppressive and exploitive social, political, and economic structures and to begin to imagine and enact their demise. But what are the reasons to go beyond classical Marxism? How do post-Marxists, and the linked movements like those named post-structuralism, second wave feminism, and newer intellectual movements both incorporate some key Marxist insights and move beyond Marxism?

Post-Marxist and Post-Structuralist Concerns

The main thrust of such critics of the classical Marxism is two-fold. First, that Marxism's emphasis on class as the primary means of oppression under capitalism misses the ways that other intersecting identities (that are not themselves solely marked by class in a classical Marxist sense) are constructed as oppressed and exploited in the social, political, and economic structures we find ourselves in. We see this criticism arise in feminism's second wave as it emphasizes the ways gender norms are oppressive regardless of social class position with the recognition still by many that such position influences to some degree the extent to which that oppression is experienced (and how those norms are, or can be, oppressive even inside of Marxist movements), in anti-imperialist, civil rights, and post-colonial struggles that recognized the role of class domination but also the ways that oppression based on racialization and ethnic identity does not simply end in class hierarchies. The second concern raised in the literatures that emerge in these movements is to be found in poststructuralism's—and by extension, some post-Marxism's—various criticisms of linear historical narratives offered by Marxist thinking that remains tied to a Hegelian conception of historical progress (and other attempts at a linear theoretical frameworks) alongside a concomitant critique of the simplification of historical phenomena and movements by such narratives.

To return to Laclau and Mouffe as the exemplar of such concerns, we can see all of this at play in the original (1985) introduction to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* when they talk about the existence in the conjuncture in which they wrote this book of 'new forms of social conflict' and social struggle (such as rise of feminism's second wave, anti-racist/imperialist struggles, the emerging gay rights movement, ecological struggles, etc). Here they argue that:

...new forms of social conflict have also thrown into crisis theoretical and political frameworks closer to ones that we shall seek to engage in the major part of this book. These correspond to the classical discourses of the left, and the characteristic modes in which it has conceived the agents of social change, the structuring of political spaces, and the privileged points for the unleashing of historical transformation. What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will, that will render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social

struggles has finally dissolved the last foundations for that political imaginary. Peopled with universal subjects, and conceptually built around History in the singular, it has postulated 'society' as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions and reconstituted as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of political character. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 2-3)

We can see in this, all of the main concerns that come to define many post-Marxist theoretics and the ways that they intersect with, take up, and also push back on post-structuralist theoretical movements. We can also here see why certain elements of Althusser's reading of Marx become important for post-Marxist project(s) that take on board these criticisms of classical Marxist positions but seek to remain connected to that tradition in various ways and so not to completely break with Marxism.

Althusser on Marx's Intellectual Development

Althusser's work becomes important for thinkers like Laclau and Mouffe and the others mentioned above as he too, albeit from within the Marxist tradition, is concerned about a particular way of understanding Marx as offering a sweeping singular view of history with an origin and an end that is in the process of unfolding throughout time as well as the idea that there are such 'universal subjects' whose task it is to push forward that unfolding history toward its determined end. As is well known, for Althusser, there are two main stages in Marx's own thinking which correspond to different ways of thinking about history, agency, and causality and matter for understanding Marx's mature views on these subjects. The first stage is a more Hegelian-Feuerbachian stage in which Marx still is beholden to a more agent-centered thinking about the movement of history and society and a latter, more 'mature' stage, in which for Althusser anyway, Marx builds his own philosophical and scientific understanding of society by, in part, breaking with the concepts and philosophical commitments that defined his earlier thinking.

According to Althusser, it is in the earlier stage that we see in Marx an emphasis on concepts like alienation from a foundational human nature, and a reconciliation with that nature in the overcoming of capitalism. As Althusser explains, in these early texts there is still a definitive 'end' or 'goal' in history that is characterized by the alienation-reconciliation process through which humans—and human society—become what they are (in some sense anyway) meant to be. The story of the movement through various forms of society, social organizations, and sets of social relations (from feudalism, to capitalism, and finally beyond capitalism and into communism for instance) is one of humanity's movement toward its own freedom and dis-alienation through its work and labor. This is an agent centered story insofar as the protagonists here are the laboring agents themselves who are estranged from their true human nature by capitalism, 'alienating' themselves in their labor and their working to transform the world and then viewing themselves in that transformed world in ways that make visible continued lack of freedom—ultimately, those protagonists, seeing their connection to one another and so recognizing their class connection and thereby their class power will work toward remedying their estrangement in ways that bring about the full and free power of human life. On this narrative, there is a kind of historical teleology to human development which runs through feudalism, into capitalism, and then finally into communism as the overcoming of human

alienation. There is also a notion of the proletariat as the 'universal subject' who will push history to this definitive end.

The second main stage in Marx's thinking is the one wherein, according to Althusser, Marx breaks with this more agent centered, teleological, and Hegelian story and becomes, in Althusser's view, a fully materialist thinker. It is also here that, in Althusser's view, Marx becomes a much better critic of social relations, their attendant material structures, and the role those play in subjective and social determination. Althusser shows us this break as beginning in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. It is in this text, argues Althusser, that Marx recognizes a nascent break with Hegel in Feuerbach's own work. In the *Theses* we find not the movement of history conditioned by an idea or 'spirit' as in Hegel, but rather its inversion. Feuerbach argues it is not 'spirit' that drives development, but rather humanity's own self-alienating activity (Marx, 2000, 172). Specifically, Althusser argues that, we can see this in the sixth thesis, where Marx writes that in his critique of religion, "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations" (Althusser 2003, 253-254). According to Althusser, Marx's point here is that even Feuerbach does not go far enough in criticism of the idea of a human 'essence' (which then can be alienated in certain sets of social relations): we have to see any idea of a human 'essence' as itself arising in and out of a given set of social relations and so not essential in the traditional sense, nor something as something that has been lost and must be recovered (Althusser 2003, 255).

There are two major features of the Althusserian understanding of Marx that begin to emerge here, and a third major feature that is connected to these: we get here 1. the foundations for Althusser's re-reading of the concept of ideology, 2. The basis for what has been called—for better or worse—Althusser's 'structuralist' reading of Marx, and 3. the rejection of the teleological and simplified understanding of history and its movement in favor of the idea of a kind of non-linear 'structural causality.' We should also note here, along with Panagiotis Sotiris (2020) that these features, and especially Althusser's reading of the sixth *Thesis* not only pushes back on teleological understandings of Marx but also Marxisms that are articulated with phenomenology and other philosophies of consciousness existing in his time (Sotiris 2020 77-78). Each of these three innovations are connected to the others as we will see, and each of these is picked up by post-Marxist theorists like Laclau and Mouffe and other post-Marxist thinkers as they allow openings to the kinds of concerns that occupy those thinkers moving beyond the classical Marxist problematics and also viable connections between their more Marxist roots and the other types of emerging social movements they are trying to reckon with and to think alongside. It is worth exploring each of these in a little further detail.

Ideology, Structure, Causality

One way of entering into this is to begin by thinking further about what Althusser took to be the standard way of taking Marx's meaning in the quoted portion of the sixth thesis in *The Theses on Feuerbach*. Here, even without Althusser's gloss, we can see a break with the idea that subjective agents and their freedom are responsible for the movement of history- subjects are always constructed within social-relations and their freedom is always constrained by those relations, which, for most Marxists, means that they are constrained by existing social,

economic, political, and legal regimes that pre-exist individuals and are that through which those individuals come to be what and who they are. Those regimes define possibilities and limit choices as they are the historical circumstances of our existence. In the dominant Marxist narrative, it is changes in the material 'base' of a given society, or the 'mode of production'—a term that encompasses the productive forces (labor power, technologies, raw materials, and so on) and the relations of production (the social and political conditions of production at a given time that include legal and political structures that govern the mode of production, relations between individuals and their work, property rights, etc.), which drives changes in the larger social structure, or the 'superstructure'—i.e. extra-labor/economic social relations such as how schools function, familial structures, religious institutions, sets of moral beliefs, marriage structures, and so forth. On this reading of things, all of the ways we understand ourselves and our relations to the world and each other are largely determined by the existing mode of production and the superstructural relations that exist at a given time are all geared toward stabilizing and reproducing a given mode of production.

To continue with the dominant Marxist conception here, many of those things we come to believe about ourselves and the world—that is, our subjective awareness itself—are largely under the control of and determined by the mode of production in which we find ourselves—and we tend to think (falsely) that those beliefs we find ourselves with and those structures under which we live are both natural and necessary. That belief is named by many Marxists including Althusser, "ideology"—we are trapped in ideology insofar as we believe that the economic and social structures under which we live are natural and necessary and it is ideology that allows the continuance of a given mode of production. But being trapped in ideology is not our fault— it is induced in us by the economic and social structure in which we live and that is determined by the relation between the mode of production and its attendant superstructural edifice.

For many Marxists, the way out of the trap of ideology is through a proper reorientation of the understanding— to be able to see that the mode of production and its attendant superstructures as not ahistorical, not natural, and not necessary so as to then be able to recognize exploitation and oppression as just that, and to be able to also then see that exploitation as happening not just to one individually, but also to others in the same or similar class positions and to build networks of solidarity and struggle against such forces. There is a narrative here of 'setting things right' in this reading of Marx and Marxism that connects to the teleological narrative mentioned above— coming to see ideology as false—or, the parlance of this Marxism, 'False Consciousness'—brings one closer to the goal of full human freedom and a recovery of the true, non-alienated self.

In the Althusserian reading of Marx, while it is true that ideology still traps us in much the same way as described above, the notion of a 'false consciousness' disappears, and as we have already seen above, so does the teleological orientation to Marx's texts. For Althusser, there is simply no such thing as a 'false consciousness'— our subjective awareness is nothing more than the result of the structurally determined world in which we find ourselves— we take those structures to be natural because for us, they are. The mode of production determines not only our social position but also our subjective awareness in ways that 'fit' us to its existing structures just as we saw above, the difference here is that there is no non-false consciousness to get back to, no alienated subjectivity to be re-united with. To be sure, those structures in

which we find ourselves are historical, but they are not deviations from some origin point. They just are what they are. Ideology, under this reading is not something to be—or even that can be, wholly gotten rid of. It is ever-present and so only can be shifted and changed in the movement from one mode of production to another, as Althusser tells us that, “even socialism will have its ideology” (Althusser 2005, 2014).

To be sure, the science of historical materialism, developed by Marx, can help us understand the function of ideology in a given conjuncture, and it can also help us see the cracks in that ideology and the possible orientations for overcoming it, but ideology is neither false consciousness, nor unreal (See Althusser 2005, and Lewis 2022, 29-33). Further, ideology is also not something found in our understanding alone- it is produced and reproduced by those material structures that exist as a part of the mode of production and its superstructural attendants. So we find ideology materially existing in social practices, institutions, and traditions. And those material structures are the primary place in which ideology resides and it is induced in us by our insertion into and participation in those structures. This of course is what is meant by Althusser when he describes our ideological subjectivation as being ‘interpellated’ by those material forces that surround us and make us who and what we are (Althusser 2014).

This is also what many have called Althusser’s ‘structuralist’ reading of Marx- he emphasizes Marx’s recognition of the ways in which larger social structures are what determine subjects to be what they are and act as the means through which a given mode of production and its social relations are produced and reproduced by and through subjective interpellation in ways that conform to that given mode of production. Here Althusser is drawing partially on the larger structuralist movements of his time coming out of other intellectuals such as Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Claude Levi-Strauss who are all working in different ways using Ferdinand De Saussure’s structuralist model in linguistics in their own work, and also partially drawing on Baruch Spinoza’s understanding of the ways individuals are parts of a larger whole (for more on this see Hall 2016, Pfeifer 2015, Sotiris 2020).

Related to this, and in thinking through the lack of teleology in the mature Marx, according to Althusser, along with the structural determination of subjective positionality, Althusser develops a further conception of a kind of ‘structural causality’ as a method for thinking the ways that institutions, traditions, practices and various other attendant phenomena, emerge in history, determine social structures and individual consciousness, and also shift and change (Althusser et al 2015, 342). He does this by importing the psychoanalytic concept of ‘overdetermination’ into his reading of the late Marx (ibid; Althusser 2005). A thing or event is overdetermined in that it may have multiple causes that contribute to its existence. And those causes are themselves conditioned on the particular ways in which they are brought together in a given social formation and conjunctural moment. The particular ways that a given set of practices, traditions, institutions are expressed and articulated together at a given moment is what produces the conjuncture and its effects both at the larger social level and at the lower level of class and individual consciousness.

The introduction of the concept of overdetermination here troubles the standard reading given above about the relations between the base and the superstructure. What are typically seen by many Marxists as superstructural effects of a given mode of production in the base can themselves be determinants of various phenomena and types of conscious awareness in ways that need not point directly back to the mode of production in the base. To be sure, the

mode of production is still at the bottom of this for Althusser as the economic determinant “in the last instance”—i.e. it is still capital, after all—but as he points out in multiple places, “that instance may never arrive” (Althusser 2005, 111-113). Meaning here that in the end, the particular phenomena under investigation may be best explained by more proximate causes and their connections in a given conjuncture than by the mode of production itself. Thinking in terms of overdetermination and structural causality also contributes significantly, in this way, to the blunting of any idea of teleology in Marx as the particular ways in which a given conjuncture is structured, the ways in which the variety of practices, institutions, and traditions are arraigned in any given moment, and their relation to the mode of production are at least partially contingent and shifting. So this de-privileges any idea of a linear, or even a quasi-linear movement through history to a given end as well as the view that the economic in the form of the mode of production is directly determinative of everything else in the social formation.

From Marxism to Post-Marxism

As we can see, it is these three innovations that, even though Althusser remains firmly within the Marxist tradition, are appealing in a variety of ways to post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe. The concept of overdetermination, when paired with the re-reading of the idea of ideology for instance, allows the kind of things emergent social movements centered around race, gender, and colonialism to interface with Marxism as one can analyze the ways that oppressive social norms, practices, and institutions produce various forms of racism and sexism without necessary reference to class positions or economic categories—but it also allows one to see the ways that economic categories and structures interact with those other norms to further racism and sexism as social determinants so one can bring Marx and Marxism into dialogue with these other forms of social critique and left-wing activism in ways that open the space for thinking with, but also outside, the traditional Marxist categories and social analysis relying simply on class (See for instance Stuart Hall et al 2013, and more recently Asad Haider 2018).

Althusser’s reading appeals additionally as we have seen to others who remain within Marxism’s orbit but also put Marxism into dialogue with other intellectual and philosophical movements such as figures like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou whose work remains Marx adjacent but with heavy doses of Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and other philosophical movements. Žižek, for instance, reads the Althusserian conception of ideology as in line with the Lacanian idea of the ways that the subject is captured by the symbolic (Žižek, 1989; 2000; Badiou 2009). This is true also of post-structuralism more generally—as with many of those who make up the ‘new materialist’ movement and others like Deleuze for whom desire is interpellated and overdetermined in much the same way as Althusser understands subjective determination (for more on these movements, see for instance Coole and Frost 2010, Pfeifer 2022). Indeed, Althusser’s work proves generative for a host of movements that retain portions of Marx’s project but also move beyond it and so can be called ‘post-Marxist’ in multiple ways.

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