

Structural Marxism (draft- not for citation)

Forthcoming in *The Encyclopedia of Critical Political Science* (Edward Elgar, 2023) Edited By Clyde Barrow

Geoff Pfeifer

The term 'structural Marxism' is a bit of a misnomer. It arose at a particular time in relation to a critique of a particular version of Marxist thinking where those elements of Marx's corpus that emphasize the ways in which institutions, practices, traditions, and other larger-than-individual 'structures' are foregrounded as opposed to those other parts of Marx's writings that emphasize the ways that individuals and collectives (or classes) are able to actively intervene in the course of history such that there is a kind of agency in seeking social political, and economic change. The term is a misnomer because there is a sense in which all Marxist theorizing is at least partially structural—and so all Marxists are in some ways structural Marxists—in that one of the key features of Marxism is precisely the recognition of the ways that material social and economic structures are largely durable and exist beyond and before our individual existence such that they come to determine who and what we are inside of them. This durability then is at least partially determinative of both our individual and collective lives in ways that are beyond our control and so dampen our individual agency. There are various places in Marx's writings where he makes exactly this point. Famously for instance, in the Eighteenth Brumaire, he writes that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx 2000, 329)

In the 1867 Preface to volume one of *Capital*, Marx and Engels write:

Individuals are dealt with here only insofar as they are personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and class-interests. (Marx, 1967, 10)

These are examples of what many have pointed out are Marx's commitments to the importance and determining power of economic and social structures and his rejection of what many have called methodological individualism along with a concomitant—for some Marxists anyway—rejection of the concept of agency (at least at the individual, non-structural, level). So here we can begin to see what we mean by a kind of structuralism in Marx—though not quite yet what we mean by 'structural Marxism'—the idea that larger-than-individual structures are what matter, or play an outsized role, in social explanation and social analysis. Things like economic structures, modes of production, and other connected forms of social organization are important determiners here and in understanding such structures, we can understand how things like exploitation and oppression function under certain historical conditions in which certain sets of economic and social structures exist in ways reinforce and reproduce such forms of exploitation. It is this that is, for many, the core of Marxist social critique, and so some account of structure is always at play in Marxism.

This, however, is not the totality of what the concept of 'structural Marxism' means. As noted at the outset, this term was given to a particular subset of Marxist thinking that arose in the middle of the Twentieth Century and is associated with the thought of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and his fellow travelers. As Warren Montag points out, for many, 'structural Marxism' is a thing of the past, a moment in time in which Althusser and others in his circle made use of concepts and ideas circulating in other academic discourse—in linguistics, and anthropology for instance—to help fit Marxism to a particular moment in the French

academy in which 'Structuralism' as a movement across a number of disciplines was on the rise (Montag 2013, 15). While I agree with Montag's criticism of this way of framing the place of Althusser and his work's relation to wider structuralist movements of the time, I will say a little about this view before moving on to say more about the ways that Althusser's work, and the work of his fellow travelers, reaches beyond this rather simplistic periodization.

Structuralism

Structuralism more broadly, emerges in the middle of the 20th century across a number of fields such as literary theory, anthropology, psychoanalysis and psychology, philosophy, and history and applies the insights of Ferdinand De Saussure's structural linguistics to the analysis of social life and literature. Structural linguistics as defined by the work of Saussure and others holds that linguistic signs have no meaning or reference outside of the definition given to them by their relation to other signs in each linguistic system. That is, individual signs are themselves arbitrary outside this system and that there is an arbitrary relation between the signifier—the word—and the signified—the concept the word is referencing. This means that in order to understand the meaning and function of linguistic signs, one has to understand the relations between words and the structures that are created by those relations. It is the structures—as these relations between words—that give meaning to a given sign in the system and so it is the structure that determines a given word's meaning and function in the larger sign system that it is a part of (Saussure 2013, 82-86). In laying out this theory, Saussure rejects diachronic, or historico-evolutionary accounts of linguistic analysis in favor of synchronic, or a static systems approach to such analysis.

Here Saussure distinguishes between what he terms '*la langue*' (language) and what he terms '*parole*' (speech). The former—*la langue*—are the structural relations between signs in a system that animate the meanings of those signs as briefly described above, and the latter—*parole*—is the way individual language users make use of those signs in everyday usage (Saussure 2013, 84-85). Notice here, and this becomes important for the structuralisms that come after and out of Saussure's theory, that *parole* is conditioned and determined by *la langue*. Thus we can say that the speaking subject is determined in their speech acts not solely by their own choice or will, but by the structure of the language system they are using.

Stuart Hall notes the importance of this distinction in helping Claude Levi-Strauss think a structuralist anthropology who, along with Durkhiem and Mauss, Hall rightly cites as helping form the background to developments in Marxist structuralism (Hall, 1983). Hall shows us how it is in Levi-Strauss's adoption of the distinction between *la langue* and *parole* that Levi-Strauss is able to begin to build a 'scientific' cultural anthropology. *La langue* is, according to both Saussure and Levi-Strauss, composed of a finite set of relations and rules that exist between signs and defines their relations to one another whereas *parole*, the usage of those signs and relations in individual speech acts is infinite. As Hall notes here, once we are able to make this distinction, we are able to take a "scientific approach to something whose essential feature is creativity" and he continues that the importance of this is that studying *la langue* scientifically gives us access to the "collective, unconscious matrix" that defines a given culture's understandings of itself and its relation to the world (Hall, 1983 62-63). Here we can, also along with Hall, see how it is that there can be such a distinction between the finite, structural rules and relations between signs in a given linguistic system, and also how those can be unconscious

in their power to determine both the thought of language users, their relations to each other, and their relation to the world. As Hall points out here also:

The important feature of the relationship between *parole* and *la langue* is that we can perform the first without knowing the second. We may not know a single rule about the phonetic, grammatical, and semantic relations of language—rules which allow us to produce intelligible speech—but we still do produce intelligible speech all the time. Equally important, we know when somebody has broken the rule, even though we may not know the rule. These rules, for most of us, are internalized at the unconscious level. (Hall 1983, 62).

Structuralism in Marxism

We can see now how the Marxist structuralism of Althusser and his fellow travelers can take this—in part—as their starting point in combination with the elements of Marx's own corpus that emphasize structural determination in order to build out their reading of Marx in this direction. Again, Hall is helpful:

Levi-Strauss, then, takes the structural method and by analogy, he transfers it from phonology to language in general, from language in general, to primitive systems of classification, to the analysis of how myths work, and from myths to the analysis of how kinship systems work. And that extension of the linguistic paradigm by analogy has been going on ever since, attempting to apply the insights drawn from structural linguistics to any social domain. This is the beginning of structuralism per se. So for Althusser and Balibar, the mode of production functions like a language. (Hall 1983, 65)

In 'functioning like a language' the mode of production, for Althusser and his fellow travelers, in all its complexities and richness does the determining of our collective unconscious. It sets the limits of our relations between one another, to the larger social world, and to the natural world. Change happens, but not necessarily because of the free actions of humans as agents, but through a process of repetition and recombination. Keeping some elements of a given structure, leaving out others, and recombining still others.

As is well known, the concept of the 'mode of production' in Marxist thinking encompasses both 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.). For Althusser and those labeled 'structural Marxists', the mode of production does the determining of the relations between the economic, the political, the social, and ultimately, the ways individuals understand themselves (Althusser 2005; Althusser et al 2009). It functions for these Marxists partially in the same way that the structure of language determines meaning and usage for Saussure, and partially in the same way that Levi-Strauss thinks the structures of myth and kinship as determinative of a culture's understanding of itself.

This reading also, however, also makes use of concepts like that found originally in psychoanalysis of overdetermination, to help make sense of both the complexity and contingency of the ways that the forces and relations of production come together in a given moment in order to produce the concrete historical situation. A thing is overdetermined in that its causes maybe be multiple and so a things existence may not always be the result of the same set of causes. Understanding that things existence means understanding those multiple potential causes and the ways in which those causes come together in a given moment to produce that thing. For Althusser, particular social formations, contradictions, and ruptures are always overdetermined; they are the result of a complex of structural determinations in the mode of production combined with the contingency of historical circumstance (Althusser 2005, 104-106).

The use of this concept of overdetermination is, in part, also a way of avoiding economic determinism and teleology. Even if the economy determines 'in the last instance' as Althusser says, we also have to understand the ways that the economic might be expressed through other means and is articulated in relation to other structures, some of which emerge as a result of other conjunctural historical contingencies and act, themselves, as determiners of other social phenomena (Althusser 2005, 111). Here Althusser argues that though Marx and Engels did not have the concept of overdetermination as a name for it, they also understood that the economic is not the sole force that determines social formations, that it is always structurally intertwined with these other forces. This is what is referred to in Althusser as "structural causality" and we will return to this concept and its importance below.

On such a reading of Marx and Marxist thinking then, one can develop a more scientific understand different social formations as formed by different structuralist—and synchronic—combinations of the forces and relations of production that orient the mode of production and those individuals within it in ways that are overdetermined and reproduce and make durable those social formations at given times, and at others, shift and change social formations as the forces and relations of production enter into different combinations at different points in history and the present. In both instances—that of durability and that of shifts and changes—it the mode of production as it exists at a given time in particular and overdetermined arraignments of the forces and relations of production, that makes possible certain forms of subjectivities and social relations, and make others impossible. This is because the mode of production pre-exists any given individual subjectivity such that individuals are inserted into

those structural determinations and thus are subjected to them—or subjectified by them—in their practices, potential ways of being, and consciousness.

Marx, Early and Late

For Althusser, and those in his circle; in order to read this kind of structural determination in Marx's texts, we have to see the development of his work out of its initial relation to Hegel and his subsequent, as Althusser argues, theoretical break with Hegelianism. There are two main stages in Marx's own thinking according to Althusser. An earlier and more Hegelian/Feuerbachian stage in which Marx still is beholden to a more agent-centered thinking about the movement of history and society and in which there is a theory of alienation from a foundational human nature; and a latter, more structural stage in which, for Althusser anyway, Marx breaks from his more agent centered thinking—thereby fully breaking with his past Hegelian/Feuerbachian roots—and finally begins to build his own philosophical and scientific understanding of society.

It is in the earlier stage according to Althusser that we see an emphasis on concepts like alienation from a foundational human nature, and a reconciliation with that nature in the overcoming of capitalism. In these early texts then, 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 and social organization (from feudalism, to capitalism, and finally beyond capitalism and into communism for instance) is a story of humanity's slow movement toward its own freedom and dis-alienation. This is an agent

centered story insofar as the protagonists here are agents themselves who are alienated from their true human nature in their existence by capital, '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—and ultimately also seeing their connection to one another and so recognizing their class connection and thereby their class power—so as to then work toward remedying that lack 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.

The second stage in Marx's thinking is the one wherein Althusser and his fellow travelers think that Marx truly breaks with this more agent centered, teleological, and Hegelian thinking and becomes both a fully materialist thinker and also a much better critic of social structures and their role in subjective and social determination. Althusser reads this 'break' from Hegel as beginning in the Theses on Feuerbach wherein he argues that Marx recognizes a nascent break with Hegel in Feuerbach's own work as it is in Feuerbach we find not the movement of history conditioned by an idea or 'spirit' as in Hegel, but rather in humanity's own self-alienating activity. Althusser reads one place where we can see the beginning of this break in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and specifically 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" (Marx 2000, 172). In Althusser's reading of this, 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), that we have to see any idea of an 'essence' as arising in and out of a given set of social relations (Althusser 2003, 255). Returning to the structuralist conception of the mode of production as that which determines individual consciousness, we can see here one example of the ways that Althusser reads a kind of structuralism back into Marx in positing a break in Marx's thinking so as to then privilege the ways that larger-than-individual structures that have their existence in the mode of production are that which are the proper object of study for Marxism. We then also get the privileging of other ways of making the same point as those quoted at the outset of this chapter from *Capital* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Continued Importance

We can see here also the importance of the concept of 'structural causality' in helping counter Hegelian and humanist readings of Marx- if the mode of production at a given time is the result of an overdetermined set of relations between the forces and relations of production, then there could be no teleology in history such that there could be no reconciliation of an alienated human nature in process. Further, if this is the case, and Marx himself understood this in his mature work, then we have a method for understanding any given conjuncture: we can look to the mode of production in its complexity at a given time and trace the overdetermined complexity of connections and disconnections between the variety and arraignment of forces and relations of production in order to produce not a theory of the reconciliation of an alienated human subject in the abstract, but rather an understanding of the ways in which individuals and groups are exploited and oppressed in a given place at a given time.

There was—and still is—of course, much debate about the rightness and importance of structuralist readings of Marx like those that emerge in Althusser and his students. And Althusser himself both criticized some of his own work here and also tried to distance himself and his views from other structuralisms of his times. And some of these debates ended in the view, criticized by Montag (and mentioned above) that the structuralist Marxism of folks like Althusser merely represents a moment in time and exists only in relation to the rise of structuralisms in the other fields mentioned above. There are, however, other ongoing currents in Marxism, Marxist theory, and connected post-Marxisms that have taken their leave from Althusser's structuralist reading of Marx and continue to produce new and important critical theoretical interventions based on this work. The work of Althusser and his fellow travelers also continues to influence theoretical and practical work across multiple disciplines from political science, to cultural studies and sociology, philosophy, and global studies (see for instance Silva 2013; Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017; Sotiris, 2020; Rome 2021; Lewis 2021). So we should hardly consider it consigned to the dustbin of history.

References

Althusser, Louis. 2003. *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*. Translated by G.M. Goshgarian. New York and London: Verso.

Althusser, Louis. 2005. *For Marx*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York and London: Verso.

Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 2009. *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York and London: Verso.

Darian-Smith, Eve and Philip McCarty. 2017. *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Design, and Methods for Global Studies*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hall, Stuart. 2016. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Lewis, William. 2021. *Concrete Critical Theory: Althusser's Marxism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1975 *Capital Volume One*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl. 2000. *Theses on Feuerbach* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings 2nd Edition*. Edited by David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marx, Karl. 2000. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings 2nd Edition*. Edited by David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Montag, Warren. 2013. *Althusser and his Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

Rome, Natalia. 2021. *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time*. New York and London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Silva, Jennifer. 2013. *Coming up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sotiris, Panagoitis. 2020. *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*. New York and London: Haymarket Books.