
Benton’s book is an introductory text on Althusser that has two intentions. First, to make Althusser’s work, and that of other Althusserians, more accessible. Second, to assess some of the malevolent retrospective judgements on the work of Althusser.

Central to this reassessment is the view that Althusser simply ‘re-enacts Stalinism in a modern dress’, despite Althusser’s own explicit characterisation of his work as an initial left wing critique of Stalinism. Benton agrees with Alasdair MacIntyre that Althusser de-Stalinised Marxism more thoroughly than did any other Marxist. Benton devotes a large part of the book to arguing this point.

However, Benton considers that structural Marxism has effectively foreclosed on areas of debate germane to a broader Marxism, notably the problem of the nature dependence of human beings. Althusserian structuralism, Benton argues, through its importation of conventionalist philosophy of science, has abandoned all considerations of the reliance of humans on their natural environment for their ‘physical and spiritual well-being’. Ontological considerations are entirely subverted to epistemological ones leading to a restricted ‘science’ of historical materialism. From a practical point of view this excludes Althusserian Marxism from conservationist/environmentalist problems of the late twentieth century. Benton sees classical Marxism, unlike Althusserian Marxism, as having a role to play in this area.

In other areas such as the analysis of non-class forms of social oppression, and the nature of the legitimating ‘mechanisms’ of oppressive structures, Benton concedes that Althusserian Marxism has made significant advances over classical Marxism, through the concept of ‘interpellation’ and the ‘relative autonomy of ideology’. Yet, Benton warns that a post-Althusserian or indeed a post-Marxist critique should not become so embroiled in an assessment of the specific forms of oppression experienced by women, ethnic minorities or groups adopting an unconventional sexuality. Though these forms of oppression cannot be reduced to class they cannot be wholly understood in abstraction from it as they are located in a society characterised by class domination.

In dealing with Althusser’s work, Benton thinks it fair to assess Althusser’s theoretical position on the basis of the ideas and methodological devices utilised by the theorist and not on the basis of its political content.

Nonetheless the wider social-political context cannot be ignored and Benton prefaxes his discussion of Althusser’s recasting of Marxism with an introductory section that attempts to locate Althusser’s contribution to both a wider debate and a related historical context. Benton, then, briefly outlines the humanist Marxist opposition to Stalinism, through reference to the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. They were opposed to Stalinist Marxism, specifically the reliance on ‘naturalism’ and ‘scientism’ (in the casting of dialectical materialism), the associated economic and technological determinist accounts of historical process and the conception of historical materialism as a science. In particular they were opposed to what they saw as the abandonment of a role for creative human action.
For these humanists, the orthodox formulation of Marxism becomes a science tolerating no opposition rather than a theory of revolutionary self-emancipation. They argued that opposition to Stalinist Marxism involved not just a break in the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin lineage but a re-reading of Marx based upon phenomenological and existential categories.

While humanist Marxism contains within it, (via its locating of theory directly within the historical process) the solution to the ‘orthodox Marxist’ problem of ‘how can the science of Marxism make contact with the lived experience of the working masses?’, Benton argues that it does so at a cost. The radical non-determinist concept of human freedom means that theory is incapable of guiding practice when it comes to strategies and tactics.

An alternative approach to existentialist Marxism in France was that embodied in structuralism in its various guises. Structuralism sees the subject not as the bestower of meaning but as the prisoner of meaning.

French Structuralism, Benton argues is rooted in a French tradition of thought ‘which stands opposed to subject centred history and subject constituted knowledge’. This goes back as far as Comte and is clearly expressed in Durkheim. For these, human subjects are constituted by their social milieu. Benton briefly examines the work of the linguistic structuralists and semioticians, of Levi-Strauss and of Lacan as a preliminary to considering Althusser’s Marxist Structuralist opposition to Stalinism.

Benton argues that, while not starting from a structuralist position, Althusser’s reworking of Marx systematically refutes historicism and adopts a structuralist inspired position (although he denies what he calls the structuralist ideology).

For Althusser, Marxism was the result of Marx’s rejection of the philosophical humanism of his early years, which was threatened in the development of Marxism by the retreat to humanism in the face of Stalinism. While humanist approaches were right to attack the inhumanity of Stalinism, the construction of a non-Stalinist socialism requires a political strategy (not derivable from humanist Marxism), which in turn requires a scientific analysis of Stalinism and the conditions by which it came into existence. Such a scientific analysis is not possible via humanist philosophy.

In attempting to construct a scientific Marxism, Althusser, too, attacked Stalinism for its economism and technical determinism. First, the Marxist thesis of the superstructure-base relationship, which presumes the ‘determination in the last instance’ of the base (economic relations), is reinterpreted by Althusser as a thesis about the causal relations between the elements in a society, considered in abstraction from their historical movement rather than as an historical law. For Althusser, then, the determination in the last resort of the economic base is a structural (synchronic) relation not an historical one. The corollary of this is the relative autonomy of the superstructure. This implies that simply changing the economic base is insufficient for a thoroughgoing revolution.

The second line of argument Althusser projects against Stalinism is that Stalinism
misappropriates Marxism, in a way that mirrors humanist misappropriation. The teleological thesis of the humanists (the progress of human subject through self-alienation to final self-consciousness and self-emancipation) is re-presented as the progress of productive processes without a human subject.

For both, history is a succession of phases in which ‘original inner potentials are successively realised through historical time’.

Althusser sets a ‘proper’ Marxist conception of history (as history without a subject) against this. This means that no social form has any necessary transcendence embedded in its origins. Historical change can occur in any direction and its outcome is contingent. There is no ineluctable historical tendency towards socialism embodied in contradictions.

Benton suggests that while this clearly sets Althusser against Stalinist conceptions it is not so clearly opposed to historicist humanism; Sartre saw the possibility of the imposition of meaning on history as a ‘fragile, contingent and partial achievement’.

Benton points out that Althusser drew not only on structuralism but also on conventionalism in developing his reconstruction of Marxism. Conventionalism argued that the body of established scientific knowledge is established by convention. While the classical approaches, especially empiricism, see science as a progressively and continuously accumulating body of knowledge, conventionalism argues that scientific theory is not underpinned by adequate empirical evidence and formal reasoning, i.e. the prevailing accounts are but one of a set of theoretical alternatives.

This view is further helped by arguing that observation is not theory neutral, and thus empirical evidence is not the final arbiter that empiricist approaches would want. Science is thus not a simple (internal) logical account. Conventionalists thus allow science to be taken seriously as an historical process subject to transformation and locked into relationships with other social practices. Any account of science from this conventional point of view requires an engagement with concrete episodes. Althusser draws heavily on the work of Bachelard in this context and Benton provides a succinct account of the Bachelardian influence.

The rest of the book addresses the questions ‘What is the nature of Althusser’s alternative to Stalinism and humanist Marxism and is it viable? While Althusser’s intention was to oppose Stalinism, does his theoretical contribution escape the intentions of their author?

The key problem, for Benton, is the problem of the relation of theory to socialist practice (tactics etc.). If this is unresolved then theory has no role in socialist practice. Resolve it through the mediation of a coercive party or state apparatus and you have Stalinism.

Althusser set out to re-examine the orthodox lineage Marx to Stalin, not simply by discarding everything after Marx and selectively reading Marx (as the humanists do) but by, first, dislocating Stalin from Lenin, second including Mao, third selectively appropriating from Gramsci and then reconstructing, retrospectively, a whole tradition. This leads Althusser to a search for a series of discontinuities, dislocations and differences within and between texts, thereby establishing a principle of selection (to provide some kind of authority to his
restructuring). Further, by discarding humanism, the cognitive value of historical materialism has to be engaged as a question of epistemology.

It is here that the two problems of Althusser’s theoretical programme converge: how is the authenticity of Althusser’s restructuring of the Marxist tradition to be established? Answer: by recourse to epistemology and philosophy of science. A criterion of ‘scientificity’ is required to distinguish the acceptable, and to reconstitute the tradition as a scientific one. And the second problem—what role is left for philosophy with the abandonment of phenomenological philosophies of history?—has the same answer. Marxist philosophy is to be an epistemological theory through which concepts and propositions are authenticated as ‘scientific’ or assigned the status ‘ideology’, non-knowledge. (Benton, 1984, pp. 21–22)

Benton examines Althusser’s thesis of the epistemological break in Marx’s work in some detail. Benton is curiously ambivalent about the credibility of Althusser’s argument when he discusses it in the text, yet he comes out on Althusser’s side on the last page of the book, although one feels this is a rather reluctant conclusion.

Althusser’s aim, simply put, is to locate an ‘epistemological break’ in Marx’s intellectual career such that ‘those texts produced before the break can be designated works of theoretical ideology, whilst those after it are governed by the newly founded scientific problematic’.

Reconstructing Althusser’s approach, Benton notes that, while Marx, in the 1844 Manuscripts, adopts the Feuerbachian materialist inversion of Hegel, he takes it further in works from 1845 onwards, and thus critiques Feuerbach as well.

In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx applies Feuerbach’s approach to the field of political economy. Feuerbach had applied his materialist critique of Hegel to religious and philosophical ideology, inverting Hegel’s view that the Absolute Spirit (or consciousness) is the subject of historical processes and material life a mere ‘predicate’ or appearance. The inversion Feuerbach proposed was that humans are the historical subject whilst conscious life (or the spiritual) is itself the historical evolution of matter.

In 1845, in the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx (and Engels) reject the essentialism of Feuerbach’s approach. In the sixth thesis they argue that Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. Marx and Engels reject this as it implies a historically transcendent essence of humanity that is not historically specific. For Marx and Engels, the subject of history is the ‘historically fleeting ‘ensemble of social relations’ in any phase of history’. In the German Ideology, Marx and Engels repeatedly establish their distance from any notion of an essence of ‘man’ as subject of historical transformations. Althusser quotes the German Ideology to argue that they are based on premises quite incompatible with the ‘problematic’ of the 1844 Manuscripts, which is to say, that of Feuerbach’s ‘inversion’ of Hegel. According to Benton, Althusser argues that from the ‘self-clarifying works’ of the German Ideology onwards, Marx rejects any idea of historical materialism as being a general philosophical theory. Specifically, Marx opposes the idea of history as a ‘developmental process of ‘man’, or as a process whose outcome is pre-given, independently of concrete historical circumstances.’
Benton prefers not to directly address the question of the ‘break’, instead suggests that Althusser is caught up in a vicious circle of his own making.

Althusser seeks to validate his reading of Marx as scientific. For this he needs to found a Marxist philosophy (epistemology) adequate to the task. But the founding of a Marxist philosophy itself requires that the authentically ‘scientific’ and authentically ‘Marxist’ texts can already be identified. (Benton, 1984, p.30)

Benton goes on to say that Althusser, on the one hand, breaks the circle by importing structuralist and historical epistemological elements but that these are non-Marxist sources. This leads Althusser, on the other hand, to reclose the circle by claiming that such devises only aid the clarification of already present concepts. How, Benton asks, does such an application in any way have any superiority over humanist or Stalinist readings. The only way out, he suggests, is a root not taken by Althusser, namely to detach what is authentically scientific from what is authentically Marxist.

Benton’s assessment of Althusser’s Marxist structuralism is rounded off with an examination of the work of later exponents and critiques, notably Hindess and Hirst. The book as a whole is well prepared and written. Its tendency to ‘oversignpost’ the argument may be somewhat annoying to readers, although it will probably be perceived as an advantage for those with little knowledge of the area. In general, a very useful account of Althusser’s contribution, although in no way attempting to foreclose the debate on the efficacy of structural Marxism as a tool of Left intellectualism.

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