

# Rancière & Althusser

Rancière's critique of Althusser and Ted Benton's comments [RP7 RP9 respectively] raise fundamental problems about the nature of theoretical debate in addition to fundamental problems at the level of theory itself. I take Benton to be presenting a defence of a more or less orthodox Althusserian position and the following points attempt to do three things: firstly defend some of Rancière's positions against Benton's criticisms; secondly to bring out one aspect of Rancière's implicit theoretical position - that concerned with the relationship between concepts in the theory; thirdly to show that despite his criticisms of Althusser, Rancière reproduces in a different form a fundamental consequence of the Althusserian position - an inability to understand what theoretical debate involves.

## 1 Ideology in general and social cohesion

Rancière criticises Althusser for introducing into Marxism a notion of social cohesion and the social totality in general, reproducing the problematic of bourgeois sociology. Benton defends the Althusserian position as follows:

*You don't need a 'theory of the social totality in general' ... in order to argue that there is an ideological level in all modes of production and that this level has certain universal characteristics.* [RP9 27]

Yet for Benton and Althusser ideology is defined as supplying a system of representations which enable the agents of the social totality to accomplish the tasks determined by the structure of the totality (or rather the structure of the mode of production). In other words we cannot have any concept of ideology without some reference to the social totality in which that ideology is placed. Thus to argue that there is an ideological level in all modes of production is to argue that all social totalities need an ideology i.e. that there are functions belonging to all social totalities in general, i.e. that there is implicitly such a thing as a 'social totality in general'.

By contrast, a conception of 'production in general' suggested by Benton as a parallel to that of 'ideology in general' makes no assumptions about the role of production in the social totality as a whole but rather offers a few truisms about production - that, for example, it involves instruments, labour and raw materials. To talk about social cohesion as such is not necessarily to enter the realms of bourgeois sociology. But to posit, through a conception of ideology in general, a necessity for social cohesion prior to any conception of contradiction or conflict is, of course there must be some form of unity in all societies, but if there is unity there can also be disunity - the notions imply each other and there are no grounds for placing one prior to the other. The term 'contradictory unity' reveals this mutual implication very clearly, for if there were no unity then there could be no contradiction - only difference and separation.

## 2 Social and Technical Division of Labour

Rancière does not by and large articulate his own theoretical position, but one important element of it is the relationships between his concepts - which are closer to the dialectical relations of

Hegelian Marxism than to the relations that exist in Althusser's thought. He attacks the latter as 'philosophy's police mentality' but no more.

The difference is that between a clear and rigorous analytic distinction between the concepts that combine into a theory - a distinction that Althusser tries to maintain - and a relationship of 'fluidity' between concepts, an interpenetration and mutual implication - such as that between unity and contradiction. We can find this interpenetration again in Rancière's discussion of the technical and social division of labour which are, he says, aspects of the same division of labour, we cannot, therefore, divide institutions and functions clearly into one or the other.

It is interesting that Ted Benton accepts Rancière's point that they are aspects of the same division of labour, but only accepts it, without following it through to its conclusions; and, when he discusses the state and ideology, he tries to draw precisely the clear distinction that Rancière disputes, but the only way he can do this is by placing his argument on a level of almost meaningless generality. The state, for example, fulfils the functions of co-ordination/supervision/administration (technical division of labour) and, in a class society, at the same time the function of class domination (social division of labour); in a socialist society it would still perform the former functions but - eventually at any rate - not the latter [RP9 p27]. But to say that any society will involve a co-ordinating and administering state is not very informative, and when we look at the precise organs of co-ordination, administration and supervision, we can see the way in which the technical and social divisions of labour interpenetrate: the institutions and positions involved in, say, co-ordinating production, 'economic planning' under capitalism, can bear little or no resemblance to those involved in a socialist state - the relationships of the institutions and positions to each other and to those co-ordinated, supervised and administered will have changed radically, as will the power of the institution and the way in which positions are filled. To imply, with Althusser, that some institutions belong clearly to the technical division of labour is to open the way for misrepresentation and technological determinism; to say, with Benton, that some functions are a product solely of the technical division of labour is to miss the point, since it is the way in which these functions are fulfilled which is important. There is no way in which the technical and social divisions of labour can be safely or usefully distinguished (although this is not necessarily to say that both are of equal importance).

Rancière's failure to theorise his position in the way suggested above is the major lack in his critique, which turns eventually into an attack on theory itself - as Ted Benton recognises.

## 3 Scientific Knowledge

The same interpenetration of concepts is implied in Rancière's discussion of the science/ideology couple. Althusser, of course, recognises no interpenetrations: as Rancière points out, ideology is other than science, the separate opposite. Ted Benton adopts this duality, and the result is his characterisation of Rancière's position as a 'concession to relativism and a-rationalism', but it is in fact quite possible to claim the cognitive superiority of Marxism over bourgeois forms of knowledge without relying on some absolute criteria of scientificity (unless one is also going to claim that Althusser is the only Marxist since Marx, which is another argument) and without becoming relativist and a-rationalist.

Benton's comments on Rancière seem to put forward a rather different view of science than Althusser does, so we are in fact dealing with three positions, and we can discover the implications of Rancière's argument by working through them.

Ted Benton provides a useful example in his argument that it is possible to separate the contents of scientific knowledge from the form of their appropriation:

*That such a separation can be achieved is a pre-supposition of any adequate history of the sciences - consider, for instance, the different ideological currents and social relationships with which Darwin's theory of evolution has been articulated: the classical 'laissez-faire' liberalism of late Victorian England, the petit-bourgeois radicalism of sections of German intelligentsia (Haeckel), the reformist socialism of Wallace in England and the Leninism of Lenin himself... [Benton p28]*

This formulation sets up the idea of some 'true' Darwin's theory of evolution which can be separated from its interpretation in a similar way in which positivism sets up a 'real' world which can be separated from interpretations of the world (theory) and against which those interpretations can be tested. Yet where is this 'true' theory of evolution? It cannot be in Darwin's work itself in a clear and manifest way, otherwise it could not be taken up into ideological (i.e. wrong) currents and social relationships, since these must inevitably change the meaning of the theory of evolution, and that change would be apparent. Darwin's theory cannot exist apart from the systems (ideological or scientific) in which it is articulated.

This leads us on to Althusser's position; which seems to be not that there is some 'true' theory of evolution separate from its interpretations, but rather that one interpretation - one reading amongst others is scientific; the scientific as opposed to the ideological reading either meets the criteria of scientificity or reveals the existence of those criteria in Darwin's work, and once we know what those criteria are, we can write the history of science. To discover the contents of scientific knowledge we have to read the text in which that knowledge is contained in the right way - i.e. articulate it into another system.

In relation to Althusser's position, Rancière argues - it seems to me - that 'reading' must be extended to take account of the social and institutional relationships within which reading takes place - not only can we not separate Darwin's theory of evolution from its interpretation on the theoretical level, we cannot separate it from the social and institutional framework in which it is presented since this framework too is an interpretation.

The 'surface' effect of Rancière's position is to 'neutralise' scientific knowledge; thus, for example, Marxism may be taught as scientific knowledge of society without threatening, perhaps even reinforcing the bourgeois education system. But there is a deeper effect: if our argument above was correct - that scientific knowledge does not exist apart from its reading, and if social relationships enter into that reading - then the criteria for scientificity that Althusser presents, or discovers in the proofs of the scientific discourse itself, are inadequate; in fact the distinction between ideology and science collapses since scientific knowledge can be ideological and ideology can be scientific. The fact that Rancière continues to talk as if there were a clear distinction between science and ideology is an indication of his own theoretical confusion.

What we are left with is a number of different

types of knowledge, each defined by its mode of appropriation of its object, its own internal features, its relationship to other forms or bodies of knowledge, and the social framework in which it is articulated; in other words we move to a way of viewing knowledge that is closer to Lukacs than to Althusser.

#### 4 Theoretical struggle

Rancière, however, does not theorise his position in this way: rather he uses it as a base to attack theory and theoretical struggle in favour of 'practice'. Ted Benton is, I think, quite right to defend theory against such an attack, but if Rancière's position is a degradation of theoretical struggle then the orthodox Althusserian position is a denegation. The confrontation of bourgeois ideology with criteria of scientificity is a confrontation only, in which there is no debate, no struggle, no argument; there is only the presentation of an alternative and a judgement.

Both positions remove the power of theory as weapon, as revolutionary practice in its own right, in the latter case whilst still recognising theory as a guide to revolutionary practice outside of theory. The power of theory is its ability to transform consciousness, to change people not necessarily by intellectual conviction but by enabling them to grasp their own world and their own experience in a radically new way and to become aware of ways of changing the world. If Marxist theory is to do this, then it must be able to live inside everyday representations of the world, to take them as the starting point of its argument, and it must be able to transform those representations into an adequate understanding of the world. 'Criteria of scientificity' do not only not enable theory to fulfil this role but they actively prohibit it from doing so; the epistemological break between ideology and science is also a chasm between the Marxist and those to whom he talks.

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## Old & new left

'Tens of thousands of socialist intellectuals, radical philosophers, uneasily unattached' - or should we say, uneasily attached - this broad description is probably true, and would include me. I was certainly as disturbed as Jonathan Rée to read Edward Thompson's Open Letter to Kolakowski, and I was glad to read his opening discussion upon it (RP9). The Letter was very pessimistic, and so is Jonathan Rée's commentary. In those far off days of the fifties, he says, the socialist intellectuals gave their allegiance to the British Labour movement, though they might criticize it, but he suggests that this is now no longer possible and our scope is more limited.

To my mind the central fact that alleviates pessimism is that these discussions are opened up, and hence I make my own contribution. The things at issue are not those between Thompson and Kolakowski: the argument there is not worth breath, and I am surprised at Thompson engaging himself in it. As an elderly socialist I see Kolakowski taking the course that always is wide open to such people once they establish some prestige as socialists - the establishment welcome for the apostate, the pat on the back, and the spoils that go with it. I have observed it all my life.

The real issue is between Thompson and the *New Left Review*, and here I am profoundly reluctant to take sides, in the light of the contribution that both are making to socialist thought and